

ABORIGINAL MEDIA ART ... AND THE ... POSTMODERN CONUNDRUM: *A* COYOTE PERSPECTIVE

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PART ONE The Conundrum

In his critique of the symbolic universe, Jean Baudrillard iterates the commonality of object-oriented cultures as seeking, "the anthropological dream: the dream of the object as existing beyond and above exchange and use, above and beyond equivalence; the dream of sacrificial logic, of gift, expenditure, potlatch, devil's share consumption, symbolic exchange."¹

Was he positing a view of object/subject that embraces non-material cultures such as those found among many pre-contact Indigenous cultures? Perhaps, but even though he uses obvious Native symbology, it is interesting to note that in the same essay Baudrillard also states (in discussing consumption analysis of the 1960s and 1970s) that "no more was known about the relation of people to their objects than about the reality of primitive societies."² Here, he falls into the same ideological traps as other theorists (and certainly anthropologists) in attempting to incorporate, and in my view, appropriate, symbolic structures without understanding their more complex cultural meanings. And it is the nature of meaning that is important here. Art, in this context, is much more a function of remembering, the creation and articulation of cultural memory. Memory, as a function of cultural formation, does not reside in written history, as is the norm in "Western cultures." In defining what he describes as

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, originally published in French as *L'Autre par lui-même*, by Editions Gallimé (Paris), translation Bernard Schutze and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotexte, 1988), 11.

² Ibid., 15.

an “idealized act of remembering,”³ Paul Antick attempts to read works of memory as “the relationship between the terms ideology, emotion, and conflict, with a view to providing some kind of insight into ways of thinking about the connections between the production of an ideological (or cultural) self and an emotional (or internal) one.”⁴ Although not directly addressing an ethno-cultural context, Antick raises an interesting point. We cannot and do not separate the work of Aboriginal artists from their Indigeneity, but we also do not define them by it.

So what then are we to make of work that does, and sometimes does not fit within a particularized cultural aesthetic? I refer here to categorizations such as articulate resistance, cultural sovereignty, and identity politic. It seems to me that artists residing within and outside these paradigms must also be considered in an Aboriginal aesthetic context. Not because the work looks, or “feels” Aboriginal, but because they are part of an ever-changing cultural dynamic with its own art history and contemporary trajectory. Critical discourse must be at the heart of this dialogue, and while not refuting other theoretical constructs, we must shift the discussion to issues of cultural meaning. Do we widen the terminology we use when discussing Native art, or do we create our own lexicon? Is the work Postmodernist or does it reside in its own historiography of art?

We must avoid overly simplistic critical constructs based on race, identity, and unequal power relationships. The colonial effect is a reality we all contend with. However, this must not be our overriding critical concern. Authority resides within the critical context of the art, not in its (allegorical) constructions, whether implicit in the work or not.

In Aboriginal cosmologies, object and meaning do not have the same dialectical imperative nor, I would suggest, the same meanings. We must explore the nuances of a cultural aesthetic not predicated on a Postmodernist theoretical construct. As Scott Vickers notes, “identity and identification are as allusive, elusive, and controversial as they are in white discourse, and any definitive characterization of Indian-ness must remain as impossible as that of humanness in general. More importantly, we must look to particular Indian artists and writers who express some degree of individual integrity that transcends the repetitive, the banal, and the mere reproduction of commodious Indian iconographies.”⁵ For Native people, memory is history. And, it is also the present

and the future. So where then, does technology fit into the mix? Consider the following story:

Long ago, when man was newly come into the world, there were days when he was the happiest creature of all. Those were the days when spring brushed across the willow tails, or when his children ripened with the blueberries in the sun of summer, or when the goldenrod bloomed in the autumn haze.

But always the mists of autumn evenings grew more chill, and the sun's strokes grew shorter. Then man saw winter moving near, and he became fearful and unhappy. He was afraid for his children, and for the grandfathers and grandmothers who carried in their heads the sacred tales of the tribe. Many of these, young and old, would die in the long, ice-bitter months of winter.

Coyote, like the rest of the People, had no need for fire. So he seldom concerned himself with it, until one spring day when he was passing a human village. There, the women were singing a song of mourning for the babies and the old ones who had died in the winter. Their voices moaned like the west wind through a buffalo skull, prickling the hairs on Coyote's neck.

“Feel how the sun is now warm on our backs,” one of the men was saying. “Feel how it warms the earth and makes these stones hot to the touch. If only we could have had a small piece of the sun in our teepees during the winter.”

Coyote, overhearing this, felt sorry for the men and women. He also felt that there was something he could do to help them. He knew of a faraway mountaintop where the three Fire Beings lived. These Beings kept fire to themselves, guarding it carefully for fear that man might somehow acquire it and become as strong as they. Coyote saw that he could do a good turn for man at the expense of these selfish Fire Beings.

So Coyote went to the mountain of the Fire Beings and crept to its top, to watch the way that the Beings guarded their fire. As he came near, the Beings leaped to their feet and gazed searchingly around their camp. Their eyes glinted like bloodstones, and their hands were clawed like the talons of the great black vulture.

He watched all day and night as the Fire Beings guarded their fire. He saw how they fed it pine cones and dry branches from the sycamore trees. He saw how they stamped furiously on runaway rivulets of flame that sometimes nibbled outwards on edges of dry grass.

³ Paul Antick in Tracey Moffatt's “Scarred For Life or The Unenviable Task of Parenting and Being Parented” in *Subject To Representation*, ed. Clark Dion et. al. (Ottawa: Gallery 101, 2000), 25.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Scott B. Vickers, *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 43.

Coyote saw that the Beings were always jealously watchful of their fire except during one part of the day. That was in the earliest morning, when the first winds of dawn arose on the mountains. Then the Being by the fire would hurry, shivering, into the teepee calling, "Sister, sister, go out and watch the fire." But the next Being would always be slow to go out for her turn, her head spinning with sleep and the thin dreams of dawn.

Coyote, seeing all this, went down the mountain and spoke to some of his friends among the People. He told them of hairless man, fearing the cold and death of winter. And he told them of the Fire Beings, and the warmth and brightness of the flame. They all agreed that man should have fire, and they all promised to help Coyote's undertaking.

Coyote waited through the day, and watched as night fell and two of the Beings went off to the teepee to sleep. He watched as they changed over at certain times all the night long, until at last the dawn winds rose.

Then the Being on guard called, "Sister, sister, get up and watch the fire." And the Being whose turn it was climbed slow and sleepy from her bed, saying, "Yes, yes, I am coming. Do not shout so."

But before she could come out of the teepee, Coyote lunged from the bushes, snatched up a glowing portion of fire, and sprang away down the mountainside. Screaming, the Fire Beings flew after him. Swift as Coyote ran, they caught up with him, and one of them reached out a clutching hand. Her fingers touched only the tip of the tail, but the touch was enough to turn the hairs white, and coyote tail-tips are white still. Coyote shouted, and flung the fire away from him. But the People had gathered at the mountain's foot, in case they were needed. Squirrel saw the fire falling, and caught it, putting it on her back and fleeing away through the treetops. The fire scorched her back so painfully that her tail curled up and back, as squirrels' tails still do today.

The Fire Beings then pursued Squirrel, who threw the fire to Chipmunk. Chattering with fear, Chipmunk stood still as if rooted until the Beings were almost upon her. Then, as she turned to run, one Being clawed at her, tearing down the length of her back and leaving three stripes that are to be seen on chipmunks' backs even today. Chipmunk threw the fire to Frog, and the Beings turned towards him. One of the Beings grasped his tail, but Frog gave a mighty leap and tore himself free, leaving his tail behind in the

Being's hand — which is why frogs have had no tails ever since. As the Beings came after him again, Frog flung the fire on to Wood. And Wood swallowed it.

The Fire Beings gathered round, but they did not know how to get the fire out of Wood. They promised it gifts, sang to it and shouted at it. They twisted it and struck it and tore it with their knives. But Wood did not give up the fire. In the end, defeated, the Beings went back to their mountaintop and left the People alone.

But Coyote knew how to get fire out of Wood. And he went to the village of men and showed them how. He showed them the trick of rubbing two dry sticks together, and the trick of spinning a sharpened stick in a hole made in another piece of wood. So man was from then on warm and safe through the killing cold of winter.⁶

In this story, it is the People (all those elements, including creatures and Beings not human) that conspire to bring a technology to the humans. The technology exists, but in a form inaccessible to the humans — yet is known and its properties appreciated. It is a part of the makeup of the universe, a tool of survival and self-determination, apart from its innate nature.

A cautionary note about "storytelling:" all too often, the work of Aboriginal artists is placed within the rubric of "storytelling." And, while storytelling is an immensely important part of oral-based cultures, it cannot be used as "catch-all" categorization. As Stephen Foster has commented, "I am not a storyteller and I have no interest in telling stories. Just because my work may deconstruct dominant narratives by using juxtaposed imagery, does not necessitate that the work in turn is narrative as well. To use the term "storyteller" so loosely is to deprive it of any real meaning and avoids any real critique of my work and work like mine that deals primarily with image."⁷

The strength lies not in the telling of the story, but in its power to assert meaning. In the case of the Coyote story, meaning is derived from the interrelationships of all things, including technology. The object in this case (fire, technology) does not constitute a material possession (as we would understand it), but is seen as a "gift." The humans do not obtain fire because of divine intervention, which would place them above all other things, but because its importance and subjective meaning are understood by the People. Coyote (The Trickster) and the rest of Creation (minus the Fire Beings, of course) understand that humans need

⁶ Glen Welker, ed., from website, "Coyote Stories/Poems": www.indians.org/welker/coyote.htm.

⁷ Stephen Foster, "The Divergence of Video Art Practice," *Conundrum* (winter 2003), 12.

it to exist, and prosper. What the humans will do with the technology, and what kind of impact it will have (outside of its properties of warmth) are not considered.

In terms of Aboriginal media arts production, I interpret this reading as defining a certain absolute and contiguous relationship to the technology available, alluding to its ability to transform our perceptions. In this context, technology exists as shape shifter (not unlike the Trickster himself), neither inherently benign nor malevolent, but always acting and active, changing, transformative, giving effect to and affecting the world. The term “language of intercession,” coined by Victor Masayesva, refers to this idea. In his essay *Indigenous Experimentalism*, Masayesva writes, “the Indigenous aesthetic, like each tribal language, is not a profane practice, a basic human protocol, or merely a polite form of etiquette and transaction, but rather, it is the way in which we are heard and commune with the Ancients.”⁸

Media art articulates, according to Stephen Foster, “an expanded field of art, it becomes part of an evolving continuum of technology in art not a discipline seeking definition in an implausible context.”⁹ For Aboriginal media artists, technology defies colonialist modes of representation and allows for what Loretta Todd has referred to as “re-imagining Indigenous airspace.”¹⁰ Or, as Armin Medosch states, “working with technology is not an end to itself but a way of asserting and exercising basic freedoms.”¹¹

Unlike more “traditional” art mediums, such as painting or sculpture, newer technology-based art including digital art, new media art, and web-based practices reside in an incredibly accessible and accessed realm. It exists in a “real-time” logic that separates it from its process and situates itself in the present consciousness of the viewer. We have a constant and participatory engagement with technological mediums, from the ubiquitous presence of television and the ever-expanding World Wide Web, to the complex computer-generated imagery Hollywood movie audiences have become so enamoured with. New technology, as I use it here, is the practical application of electronic and digital production media and interrelationships created by its use.

Thus, technology has an immediacy that lends itself to the confluence of memory and subjectivity. As writer and theorist Michael Rush has suggested, “the sometimes uneasy alliance between art and technology has come of age: the inexorable march of the world toward a digital culture has included art in its step.”¹² We see the

formation of a dialectic wherein technology is placed as the arbiter of “reality.” We embrace the change, or we fear it, we accept that it changes our perception of the world around us, or treat it as banal. But we have it now — the fire has been placed at our feet and we will never be the same again.

Creativity and the communication of ideas through earlier mechanical technologies such as writing, symbology, and the creation of cultural artifacts is consistent with the development of oral and (sometimes) written languages in Native societies. Thus, we need not reconceptualize the nature of technology-based or new media-based art in a cultural context, but rather to analyze the effect and affect these technologies have had on Aboriginal artistic expression. Doing so negates traditional notions of historical determinism and allows (a problematic word, I grant) for the relocation of a cultural aesthetic within its own art historical discourse.

The development of an artistic discipline based on electronic technologies is an articulation of creative and cultural space that forgoes the territorialized domains of cultural and artistic canons. We get beyond the notion of simple mediation and enter the realm of translation, exploring how media refashions the logic of communication strategies to encompass a broader understanding of contemporary cultural phenomena. For curator Catherine Mattes, “translation can loosely be defined as the act of expressing the sense of one language into another parlance or form of representation. When applied to visual languages, translation can transcend the boundaries of specific movements and discourses and does not bind artists by locating them in (or up against) a particular realm.”¹³

At first this would seem to refute notions of Postmodernist theory. Thus, we return to our original conundrum. Unless, of course we believe that Aboriginal cosmologies and Postmodernism are not mutually exclusive, and that an ontological sensibility is perfectly in keeping with Native world views that reject meaninglessness. Just as Coyote understood the empowering nature of technological innovation, Aboriginal people view technology in the context of their personal and communal existence.

As Nancy Patterson has written, “Postmodern culture thrives on irony — in courtrooms, in politics, in science, in art. Irony is a means for addressing the tensions created by rapidly increasing diversity and the blurring of distinctions based on both sex and gender. Irony delineates an expression of technological realism,

⁸ Victor Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” Jenny Lion, ed., *Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre and Winnipeg: Video Pool, 2000), 239.

⁹ Foster, 13.

¹⁰ Loretta Todd, “What more Do They Want?” *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, eds. Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster, (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), 74.

¹¹ Armin Medosch, “Internet Hot and Cold”, in *Cultural Museum of Civilization, 1992*, 74. and Strategies Net-Forum, House of World Cultures, Berlin: www.hkw.de/forum/forum1/doc/statem/e-medosch.html.

¹² Michael Rush, *New Media in Late Twentieth Century Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 168.

¹³ Catherine Mattes, ed. Petra Watson, “Translating Modernism — The Trickster Way?” Colour Zone: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. (Winnipeg: Plug-in ICA, 2001), 36.

an epistemological grounding of oneself and a way of responding to the accelerating pace of communications. Through irony we represent what is otherwise unstated or unstateable — what is meant or implicated, but never quite articulated. Irony is a key component of millennial theory. Both symptom and remedy for postmodern culture, irony represents a possible path up and out of a pessimistic quagmire of simulacra and meaninglessness.”¹⁴

I think Coyote would understand, and have a great laugh over it all.

PART TWO *The Language of Intercession:* Native Media and New Media Artists

tech-nol-o-gy the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society and the environment.

hy-brid anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of elements of different or incongruous kinds.

As new media art establishes a greater presence within the canon of fine art, it is important to see them as not only a hybrid of technology and art, but also as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon. The exhibition *Language of Intercession* reflects an aesthetic, as well as cultural examination and contextualization of contemporary lens-based and media-based artistic production.

With this exhibition, we present a group show of work by Aboriginal artists working within the media of video, digital manipulation, web, and new media installation art. Dana Claxton, Archer Pechawis, kc Adams, Stephen Foster, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito and Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew use a range of technological and digital media to construct sites of meaning and perception. Although not thematically linked by specific content, these artists typify the rigorous examination and experimentation in technology-based media by Native artists.

What is important to note here, is that this is not a dialogue about the formation of some pan-Indian identity politic, but about the expression of an Indigenous aesthetic and where it resides in a media-saturated society. Each artist has a specific and discrete practice, however the work of each artist also contemporizes

kc Adams *Bleach Series: Cyborg Living Space II*, 2003, installation.
PHOTO Robert McNair. Courtesy the artist and Art Gallery of Hamilton.



an Indigenous aesthetic.

Again, Victor Masayesva’s term “language of intercession,” refers to this idea. According to Masayesva, “the Indigenous aesthetic — like each tribal language — is not a profane practice, a basic human protocol, or merely a polite form of etiquette and transaction, but rather, it is the way in which we are heard and commune with the Ancients.”¹⁵ To that, I would add, the present and the future.

cy-borg cybernetic + organism, a person whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by machine technology.

In her *Cyborg Living Spaces* (2002), kc Adams creates a vision of enigmatic identity within a world of ubiquitous technology. Her work portrays the duality of experience, the seduction/repulsion we often feel when faced with new technologies. An expansion of her earlier cyborg work, Adams has created complete spaces, more complex and layered than her previous work.

Her installation “rooms” present issues of hyper-conformity, ambiguity, hybridization and assimilation, all playing themselves out in a dystopic/utopic vision (Adams is intentionally equivocal). She creates a canvas devoid of colour, but not depth. By incorporating interactive elements and surveillance systems within the work, Adams places the viewer as participant, and thus, as “other.” She