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Transacting Place

I think, so far, the discussion has raised a lot more questions about what I'm doing and also makes me think of different ways of looking at things that I wouldn't have otherwise, but I'm going to read what I wrote anyways, and it probably will contradict or maybe not quite fit what other people have said.

Briefly, my role as curator is only fixed at the institution at which I'm gainfully employed. The Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre has a fixed mandate and objectives that reflect the role of the institution as a service to Saskatchewan's seventy-four First Nations. This role/job has a number of stipulations that does not lend itself to the outside work that I have done. The responsibilities of the work and the collection itself do not at this point afford itself to relocating curatorial practice outside the walls of the building. Two projects that I have worked on relate directly to work that challenges the idea of the gallery simply as the only container of artistic work and the role of the curator as fixed.

That was one of the, I guess, some of the... the gallery as the only container, I think it could probably be understood you have projects that are outside the gallery, so... there's kind of like an invisible string that connects the gallery to that outside work.

Dislocation outside the gallery space is one strategy that challenges the notion of positioning works in the specific location of the gallery. A spin-off of this practice is the concept of inclusion/exclusion. The gallery as defined by the old adage of the cube, a container set aside specifically for the display of work of the artist, whether in the form of installation, performance, or static works, interpreted by the curator.

The role of the curator in most respects is to decide what fits and is relevant for the gallery to exhibit. Some work, due to its nature, does not lend itself to this space, perhaps because the work is aimed at a different audience, needs a specific

location, or simply doesn't fit into the gallery. The projects themselves may blur the boundaries between artist and curator.

While working on a couple of different projects, my role was both artist and curator. Two exhibitions, *Monaist:skwan* and *Pimup Toon Kitchi Animoosh: The Great Dog Race*, challenged the role of curator as the go-between between the artist and the audience. *Monaist:skwan* was a temporary installation piece set up for a specific location along the Trans-Canada Highway. The work was constructed as a mock tourist destination aimed at the general population.

This one is... sorry. Yeah, I got mixed up.

Ah, this is the head, but it's... he's at a different location here.

This one is called *Pimup Toon Kitchi Animoosh*, and it was co-curated with Louis Ogemah, and it had much the same content as *Monaist:skwan*, or, I guess, its approach was pretty well... the concept was the same using a different approach.

This exhibition was meant for a gallery space, but it has also been shown outside this context. The two exhibitions are similar, so the artistic expression was based on the stereotyping of Aboriginal people in regular society, a seemingly accepted practice that intrudes on many aspects of daily life. This intrusion can take the form of food wrappers, sports teams, and place names. In this respect, both exhibitions could be seen as supporting an activist ideology: placing and controlling images of a specific segment of the population can be understood in terms of power and race relations.

Monaist:skwan addressed the issue of naming and using Aboriginal peoples as tourist attractions. Briefly, the work consisted of postcards, a tent, a giant inflatable head, and a Polaroid camera to take pictures of the tourists that chose to stop at the mock destination. The postcards were recreated by members of the Aboriginal Sketch Club, which is kind of based in Manitoba, and the Aboriginal Sketch Society, which is based in Saskatchewan. Two members acted as interpreters on the site, so we had a person from Manitoba and a person from Saskatchewan.

The temporary exhibition did not need to have a gallery to program the project in,

nor was one approached. The reasons for this were simple. Those involved wanted to do the project but did not want to have to wait for gallery approval. In this case, the loyalty was with the artist/curator involved. The audience was meant to be the people who happened upon the site as they drove along the Trans-Canada Highway. Those included people on their way home, out for business, and of course tourists. The location along the highway was chosen for a number of reasons. So the targeted audience was readily available, the name of the place where we put it was called White City, and importantly, located on this route is the town of Indian Head, Saskatchewan. The town of Indian Head has a large cement head of an Aboriginal man in headdress with war bonnet... headdress or war bonnet, I guess, depending on which kind of lingo you use to describe it.

The site is marketed as a tourist destination through Sask Tourism. *Monaist:skwan* was a response to this very real spot. The audience was given easy access to the work. They did not need to physically locate themselves in the gallery to see it. The presence of the members was essential in explaining and in some cases defending the work to those who found offence and did not accept the piece as art, nor the intention as legitimate. This was a physical replacement for... the interpreters also acted as a physical replacement for text panels such as those found in a gallery.

The name of the exhibition is clearly spelled out in Cree on the chest of the giant head. The text simply states "White Man's Head". This strategy located the work within the context of Aboriginal culture. Even if one does not speak their language, the majority of people can understand this simple phrase, which is, of course, equivalent to "Indian Head" in English. Those who understood the text immediately seemed to understand the context of the work and its intended meaning. This was important to the artist. The work was meant to have relevance for Aboriginal people first and to create a humorous response to a very specific topic. The head itself, we kind of did an informal survey of... When I used to work at Urban Shaman in Winnipeg, there was three of us, three people of different ages, and people always used to mistake us for the same person, and we weren't, so we decided... We did kind of an informal survey and see what, as far as white people, what we would think of if we were going to mistake one for the other, and a lot of

people said, “Well, I can’t tell the difference between bald white men. They all look the same to me.” So that’s where we got him from.

The head also acted as a float in the University of North Dakota’s homecoming parade. While the treatment of the head in Saskatchewan was humorous, taken tongue-in-cheek, here the reception was negative, even hostile. The response was based, I assume, on a very different public perception. In this context, the work was greeted with name-calling, and some of the supporters received hostile remarks even after the head was deflated and the parade over. The reasons for this lay within the struggle to have the name of the Fighting Sioux, the UND’s sports team, changed to something not offensive. The BRIDGES. students’ group brought the work in specifically for the parade. After the parade was over, the head was re-inflated at a few tourist sites, such as the Engelstad Arena, which sports the head of the Fighting Sioux logo.

The project bringing it in was also funded by the Native Students’ organi—I guess, Department—and usually I don’t think they would fund something that they would consider controversial. They don’t like the name.

So he’s in front of the Engelstad Arena. In the back there you can kind of see the giant Fighting Sioux head [*referring to slide*].

And here’s him being deflated [*referring to slide*].

I call it the *Duct Tape Parade*, because I thought “Homecoming Parade”—I had pictures of big fluffy floats and stuff—but it was mostly pickup trucks with people screaming in the back and things held together with duct tape.

There he goes. He’s kind of half-inflated. And actually, he’s really light to carry [*referring to slide*].

The gallery tends to draw a specific audience: those interested in art with planned outdoor settings. Art that is mobile can reach a wider audience; it becomes something else while retaining its status as art.

This one is “Pimup Toon Kitchi Animoosh” [*referring to slide*]. I guess translat-

ed it means “The Great Dog Race”. “Pimup Toon Kitchi Animoosh” is Anishnabe, and “Monaist:skwan” is Cree, so this—both exhibitions I worked on with Louis Ogemah.

So this exhibition was set up as a mock tourist shop. Hung on racks, walls, and on shelves were fictional sports memorabilia interspersed with items from real teams. With its first opening at Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg, a hot dog stand was set up outside the gallery and those wishing to receive a hot dog had to come in and collect a ticket. This strategy was to get those who would not necessarily come into a gallery to do so. This expanded the audience. Responses to the exhibition varied from those who found it extremely humorous to those who accused us of reverse racism. The exhibition also travelled to the University of North Dakota and was set up in the Students’ Union Centre there for students of diverse backgrounds. Again, supporters of the issue greeted it with enthusiasm; those who did not, with negativity.

Louis Ogemah and I have conceived both exhibitions, I think in both we have blurred the line between artist and curator. We acted in both roles, raising money for the exhibition, finding and commissioning artists to do the design work, and sometimes doing the designs ourselves. The work would not have been realized in a timely manner, or maybe not at all, if we had to wait for any kind of institutional support. This brings me back to the institution. My experience as an institutional curator has been mainly with the Centre. This role is interesting and challenging for some of the same reasons as the independent curatorial projects that I’ve done.

Both at times have seemingly insurmountable challenges. This includes raising sufficient funds for the projects and, of course, finding time to do all the work that one wants or needs to undertake. However, the institution has limitations for particular reasons. It has its mandate, board of governors, day-to-day responsibilities, and limitations of the space itself. The work that I have spoken about would be out of context within this organization as an institution, while I know this probably isn’t true for other centres. Therefore, we have chosen to blur the lines between artist and curator, knowing that both require creative process in realizing an idea

through artistic practice.

And I think one... I was thinking about the institution, the idea of institution, and something that seems to... that comes up where I work is that we're... an institution sometimes only within the Western model when we need to get funding and we're scrutinized certain ways, so we have to maintain that hierarchical kind of layering that happens in Western institutions. The difference, I think, between collecting at the Centre—because it's representative of First Nations—is that I think we have to find a way to preserve things that aren't meant to be archived, some knowledge or some things—maybe not the knowledge, but some things are meant to disappear and we're not supposed to keep them, so we have to kind of find a balance between that.

And another thing is some knowledge, we can't record it on video, we can't write it down, because it's a particular kind of knowledge, and it only can be passed through oral tradition, so that's another kind of thing that's different. Another area is the individual artist. Within the institution itself, I think the prime, I guess, focus is the promotion and preservation of First Nations and Metis cultures. Realizing these other terms, that things are supposed to disappear and how knowledge is passed down, so...

I think some of the things are different, but some of the things are the same. There's overlaps, but there's other considerations that I don't think necessarily have to be addressed through non-Aboriginal institutions.

Another thing, I think, with the big head, is the privileging of space—maybe even within the gallery—but the privileging of space outside the gallery, because you have a town called Indian Head, and it's perfectly acceptable to have a giant big cement head built in, I think it was 1989, of a Native man. So there's that allowing. You can go buy margarine, Land O'Lakes, and it has an Indian Princess on the front, so there's that moving into the space and defining of people that we don't have necessarily the luxury of doing.

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