

CLOSE READINGS

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Brian Jungen, *Court* (2004).
Sewing tables, painted steel, paint, basketball hoops
and backboards, 2500 × 300 × 250 cm.
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Gift of the Rennie Collection, Vancouver, 2012
© Brian Jungen Studio
Image courtesy of © NGC

A column of frank reviews of recent exhibitions of Indigenous art.



***Sakahàn: International
Indigenous Art***
National Gallery of Canada
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(facing page)

Jimmie Durham, *Encore tranquillité* (2008).
Fibreglass stone and airplane, 150 × 860 × 806 cm.
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Image courtesy of Roman März.

I was going to say that *Sakahàn* is the most important exhibition of Indigenous art since *Land, Spirit, Power and Indigena* in 1992. But then I stopped myself. Not because I doubt the importance of *Sakahàn*: it is hugely important. I'm just not sure that I would even be comparing the same category of things. We may be in entirely new territory here. For those who don't recall, the 1992 exhibits were the most prominent first attempts by major Canadian institutions to acknowledge and survey what we would now call contemporary Indigenous art. At that time, the term Indigenous was not in wide use and the curators explored the field within the geographic boundaries of two settler colonies: Canada and the United States. Since then the rise of the term Indigenous has coincided with a history of international relationship building and political action that has led to an expansion in the scope of our field to the global scale. The curators of *Sakahàn* showed up ready to take on the world (and institutionally, positioned to take over most of the National Gallery as well).

I headed to Ottawa for the exhibition's opening confident of my expertise, and left it humbled and exhilarated, a novice once again with many new issues to work through and much to learn. I will therefore begin with a few caveats. This is an enormous exhibition featuring over eighty artists from sixteen countries. Along with Canada and the US, there are artists from India, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, the

Pacific Islands, Northern Europe, Japan and Taiwan. I am intimately familiar with much of the work coming out of Canada and the US, but my ignorance of the specificities of culture and historical circumstance of many of the other artists in the show is profound. I take some comfort knowing that one of the purposes of this show is for us to get to know each other. For the sake of brevity in the face of a huge exhibition I will depart from this column's usual focus on artworks in order to address the important meta-issues posed by the exhibition. That said, I want to acknowledge at the outset that the work in the show is, with only a few exceptions, very strong and represents a stunning range of intellectual inquiry.

At the heart of *Sakahàn* is a question the curators have wisely chosen not to definitively answer: What does "Indigenous" mean in an international context, and therefore, who is and is not Indigenous? Under that question is another: What social and political work are we trying to make this concept do? Are we attempting to define an essence, or construct a series of political affiliations? Despite the curators treading lightly around a definition, their comments in the catalogue essays and their selection of artists do provide provisional suggestions. The exhibition had three curators: Greg Hill, Candice Hopkins and Christine Lalonde. There were also a number of advisors and catalogue essayists. [1] Many emphasized the fluid and multiple character of the term Indigenous

while also suggesting provisional definitions. Hill mentions diverse but shared experiences of colonialism as a key element, while catalogue essayist Jolene Rickard points us to Ronald Niezen's reference to "peoples who have 'existed (presumably in a particular territory) since time immemorial'" [2] This makes me wonder about who isn't in the exhibition. The Irish, for example, could meet both criteria without a stretch. Why exclude them? Are they too European? Not "tribal" enough? Any answer we give leads to more questions. What about Africa? Should the term Indigenous be confined to peoples of settler colonies that didn't decolonize? One of my favourite proposals is Jimmie Durham's suggestion that the category Indigenous could include all the peoples of the world who have had nation statehood imposed on them overtop of their existing forms of social and political organization. [3] This could then give us common cause with the Romany, for example, and many others.

However we probe the term Indigenous it becomes clear that it is a big sticky mess—a heuristic rather than an essence. This is why I have always gagged over the derivative term, indigeneity. The suffix "ity" is added to words to suggest being in a state or having a quality of the word that it is applied to. To me this suggests some sort of "Indigeneness," but what could that possibly be? Imagine if we tried to move back and forth in the same way between the term feminism and femininity, as though they were synonyms? Or if we described Canadian studies as the study of "Canadianity" or Canadianess? In both cases it would be immediately recognized as a limiting essentialism. If it is too late to come up with a better term then I think we ought to at least be clear that by indigeneity we mean something like "anything having to do with one or more Indigenous peoples"; an aggregate rather than an essence.

Rickard proposes that we deploy the term Indigenous as a strategic essentialism, and Hill refers to and echoes this position in his essay. [4] Rickard is a scholar of particular intelligence and commitment

who understands that these issues really matter, and I was not at all surprised to find myself constantly circling back to this claim and trying to decide whether I agreed. I concluded that I'm not convinced of the need for strategic essentialism, but I think that my disagreement here is more a matter of language and emphasis than substance. Let me walk you through my thinking and you can judge for yourself.

Rickard draws explicitly on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who introduced the idea of strategic essentialism in her book *In Other Worlds*. Rickard quotes a key passage, defining it as "the ways in which subordinate or marginalized social groups may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements." [5] What has always confused me about this concept is where essentialism enters into it; that is, who is it for and how does it help? After all, it is commonplace for people to put aside differences to align themselves politically. Many people join political parties and identify themselves as leftists, liberals or conservatives knowing that they share a roughly common purpose but no definitive essence.

Essentialism can only be "strategic" if an imaginary essence motivates people to do something they couldn't



otherwise be convinced to do. But Spivak makes clear that the group deploying strategic essentialism should be aware of their ironic relationship to the notion of essence. It should be "ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized...The critique of the 'fetish character' (so to speak) of the masterword has to be persistent all along the way... Otherwise the strategy freezes into... an essentialist position." [6] If the essentialism isn't to motivate us, it must be to motivate others, as a way of playing into expectations to get what we want. That's a dangerous strategy for us. We have long been the victims of Romantic essentialism—to the point that we often internalize it without the benefit of strategic irony—and I would only hazard to rely on it in the most temporary and urgent circumstances. Spivak also urges us to remember that strategic essentialism is a strategy and that "a strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory." [7] It seems to me that our situation in the art world does not require an essentialist strategy, but even if it did, we would still also need a theory to address the actual complexities of our position.

Returning to Rickard's essay, it seems to call for the use of strategic essentialism in advocating for several things that are quite different. For instance, toward clear legal definitions in international law as well as distinct Indigenous spaces in the international art world. I don't know enough about international law to say whether there is a case for strategic essentialism in that context, but I think that the art world would be more receptive to a non-essentialist position. [8] We can be explicit about our lack of essence and still find many valid reasons to talk to each other, build networks and advance shared political positions.

We can also take Spivak's distinction between strategy and theory further. One of the things that often happens in writing on Indigenous culture is a slippage between discussions and language associated with capital-P politics, and language used to articulate small-p political and cultural theory. This gives us phrases like "cultural autonomy" and "cultural sovereignty"

[1] The advisors were Jolene Rickard, Yuh-Yao Wan, Irene Snarby, Arpana Gaur, Lee-Ann Martin, Brenda Croft, Megan Tamati-Quennell and Reiko Saito.

[2] It is important to note that in the source that Rickard cites, Niezen refers to this definition as a means to point out the problem of expanding it to the global scale: "The same sense of permanence easily transposes onto the global

category 'indigenous,' acting to conceal the fact that the term and the international movement associated with it are of very recent origin." Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2003), 201.

[3] Jimmie Durham, "Binnenlandse zaken" [Internal Affairs],

Metropolis M, no. 6 (2003): 86–93.

[4] See Jolene Rickard, "The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art," in *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art*, eds. Greg A. Hill, Jolene Rickard and Christine Lalonde (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 58; and Greg Hill, "Afterword: Looking Back to *Sakahān*," *Sakahān*, 138.

[5] Rickard, "Global Indigenous

Art," 58. Quote originally from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 209.

[6] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 4–5.

[7] *Ibid.*, 4.

[8] Rickard's argument is directed, in part, at Bill Anthes's suggestion that Indigenous artists adopt a cosmopolitan rather than a nationalist approach at international biennials. See Bill Anthes, "Contemporary Native Artists and International Biennial Culture," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 109–127.

These terms worry me because they seem to lose track of the distinction between institutional arrangements, which are inevitably blunt instruments, and the more subtle and promiscuous movements of culture. Rickard is right to be concerned with working out international legal definitions of terms like Indigenous in order to protect Indigenous rights in international law, for example. But let's not confuse those sorts of legal definitions with the kind of work we want to do as artists and cultural theorists, which should be a more subtle form of inquiry open to ambiguity and internal differences. If by "cultural sovereignty" we mean that we want Indigenous-controlled spaces at international biennales, that's one thing. This would in fact be an administrative autonomy, an explicitly political construct. But it is all too easy to interpret "cultural sovereignty" as the idea that our cultures stand alone in pristine isolation or that somehow we are the only ones who should be able to speak about them. The first is empirically false, the second a recipe for self-inflicted marginalization.

But I should move on to the show itself. The curators used a light hand in arranging the exhibition and guiding our experience of it. There is an introductory didactic panel at the entrance that tentatively describes themes the curators have noticed, including tendencies amongst the artists to "question colonial narratives, present parallel histories, value the handmade, explore relationships between the spiritual, the uncanny and the everyday" and to present "highly personal responses to social and cultural trauma." The rest of the didactic material focuses on individual artists, and we are left to our own devices in figuring out why works are grouped together in particular galleries. In some cases this is not too difficult. Perhaps the most obvious is a room of works by Sonny Assu, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Nadia Myre, which all respond to Canada's Indian Act. Other galleries seem to take up themes of violence and trauma or the relationship to handcraft, while many others remained a mystery to me. This may be because some of the juxtapositions were more visually poetic than explicitly thematic and I was searching in vain, or perhaps it is just that I have trouble processing a lot of information at once and never made all the connections.

I suspect the curators took this

more subtle approach because this is an exercise in getting to know one another and they wanted to leave things open. Aside from the room exploring the Indian Act, the other spaces tend to mix artists of diverse backgrounds together, and it was fascinating to try and sort through and make sense of both the connections and differences. Although the curators' decision to hold back is legitimate—and certainly preferable to a heavy-handed didactic approach—I still would have liked to see a bit more reflection in the exhibition itself on what they believe they have learned in the process of putting the show together. That said, the work in the show tends to be strong and engaging in its own right and can hold up without explicit explanation. It is also worth noting that two of the most impressive works in the exhibition, Brian Jungen's *Court* (2004) and Jimmie Durham's *Encore tranquillité* (2008), are almost alone in the exhibition in not directly addressing questions of identity politics or Indigenous representation. The fact that both works and many others in the exhibition are now part of the National Gallery's permanent collection is yet another sign of the effect Hill and his colleagues have had on the institution.

The most visible distinction between artists across the exhibition is not the result of their traditional culture but rather their colonial circumstances; that is, between those artists who have been art school trained and function (roughly speaking) within the conventions of the mainstream international contemporary art world, and those who are working in parallel art worlds, with markets aimed at outside consumers. Lalonde notes this disparity in her essay and argues, "The challenge became not so much a matter of masking an inequality of means in the exhibition but of understanding how the artists could be on equal footing and what happens when they are seen side by side." [9] This is a productive first step, but there is still a lot of unpacking to be done. Among other things, it means that those of us with nice, middle-class first-world careers—institutional curators and academics, say—need to begin thinking about how we navigate our own privilege as these relationships develop.

Lastly I would like to speculate about what we might look forward to in five years when the next iteration of this

exhibition is scheduled to roll around. As a curator, I have always been grateful for advice, and have taken much of it to heart; but in the end I have followed my own inspiration and judgment. So I will suggest some things as an intellectual exercise, while remaining happy in the knowledge that the curators of the future will likely have other ideas that better suit their muses. It strikes me that one way to manage the scale and create more focused dialogues across cultures, now that we know each other a little better, might be to break up the exhibition into distinct (perhaps even individually curated) sub-exhibitions. For example, it may be slightly outside the contemporary remit, but after the event's symposium I found myself very curious about how Indigenous artists from around the world grappled with international modernism. I'd love to see a section of a future exhibition explore that question. Another possibility would be to think of "Indigenous" as a theme rather than the identity of the participants, and open it up further to potential non-Indigenous allies whom we would like to bring into the conversation. We'd still be in charge and would dominate things, but we'd be expanding the dialogue at the same time. To my mind this would be an extension of the interest Hopkins expresses in her catalogue essay regarding "the 'contact zones'—the in-between and tentative connections created to bridge the gap between peoples and cultures—areas rich with story and potential knowledge." [10] We might not feel entirely comfortable there yet, but it is the territory most of us have inhabited for some time.

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[9] Christine Lalonde, "Introduction: At the Crossroads of Indigeneity, Globalization and Contemporary Art," *Sakahān*, 18.

[10] Candice Hopkins, "On Other Pictures: Imperialism, Historical Amnesia and Mimesis," *Sakahān*, 27.