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Angela Weber
Indigenous Positions in
Canadian Art Discourse Since the 1960s:
A Cultural Studies Approach



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To the memory of Otto Freundlich

In 1978, German art historian Joachim Heusinger von Waldegg published an artist's monograph along with a documentation and inventory of the artwork of the exiled German sculptor and painter Otto Freundlich (1878–1943), one of Germany's first abstract artists.¹ Four years later, Uli Bohnen edited the unpublished manuscripts of this artist,² whose work was officially banned from public space under the National-Socialist regime after 1933. Both art historians considered the political and social contexts in their work. In 1935, while in Paris, Freundlich completed a manuscript, in which he explicitly recognized the contribution of non-European cultures to modernity.³ Freundlich concluded the text with the sentence: "Denn ihnen schulden wir eine Gegengabe für das, was sie uns gegeben"⁴ [So we owe them a counter-gift for what they have given to us]. In 1938 he finished a mosaic with the title "Hommage aux peuples de couleur." In 1943, Nazi troops deported him like other exiled Germans in France to the concentration camp Majdanek, where he was murdered shortly after his arrival.

1 Heusinger von Waldegg 1978.

2 Freundlich [Bohnen, Ed.] 1982.

3 Otto Freundlich: Zur Nationalisierung des Geistes [1935]. In: Freundlich [Bohnen, Ed.] 1982.

4 Ibid.: 195/196.

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Introduction

Much of the colonialist existence of the past few hundred years has silenced Native voices. The stories which we would have liked to tell were largely appropriated and retold by non-Aboriginal 'experts' in such fields as anthropology, art and history and especially in the political realm. Not surprisingly, the appropriated stories distort the realities of our histories, cultures and traditions. Underlying this paternalistic and damaging practice is the supposition that these "experts" have the right to retell these stories because of their superior status within the cultural and political constructs of our society.¹

Lee-Ann Martin/ Gerald McMaster, *INDIGENA* 1992

In 1992, both of the two large national museums dedicated to Canadian art and culture in Canada's capital Ottawa, the *National Gallery of Canada* and the *Canadian Museum of Civilization*², hosted group art exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous artists critical of the 500-year-anniversary of Christopher Columbus' landing on American shores in 1492. Both clearly presented Indigenous artistic perspectives and intellectual positions. *Land Spirit Power*, the exhibition at the *National Gallery of Canada*, was curated by Diana Nemiroff, art historian and curator of contemporary art, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, anthropologist, curator and art critic, and Robert Houle, Indigenous artist and curator. *INDIGENA* at the *Canadian Museum of Civilization* was curated by Gerald McMaster, Indigenous artist and the museum's curator for contemporary Indigenous art and Lee-Ann Martin, an Indigenous scholar and art critic. Martin was at the time centrally involved in one of the most ground-breaking museum discourses in Canadian history as coordinator of the *Task Force on Museums and First Peoples*³ (1990-1992) and was the author of the report to the *Canada Council for the Arts* titled *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion; Contemporary Native Art and Public Art Museums In Canada* (1991).

The year 1992 would prove to be a turning point both in Europe and in the Americas in the ways European-American encounter history was reinterpreted and Euro-centric epistemologies began to be questioned. The two exhibitions, documented in detailed art catalogues, remain two of the most visible witnesses of how North American Indigenous artists have contributed to this paradigm shift. This book sets out to explore some aspects of the larger communication processes involved – also discussed as decolonization – relating to the realms of art discourse in Canada and to Indigenous positions in this discourse. It will shed light on what can be perceived as a communicative meeting ground between Indigenous art traditions and European and European-derived art traditions and their respective interpretations over time. In both the symbolic and the social realm of the Canadian art system many steps of reciprocal recognition enabled a development that is in my eyes remarkable and noteworthy.

1 Martin/ McMaster (Eds.) 1992: 16/17.

2 Later renamed *Canadian Museum of History*.

3 Cf. Hill/ Nicks 1992: 3; the second coordinator was Lance Belanger.

The terminology applied in describing this complex field of interaction is part of the discursive debate and has changed over time. The terms *Indigenous*, *Aboriginal* and *Native North American* will here be used synonymously, as the authors and artists use themselves, if possible complemented by their affiliation with a *First Nations* community or descent. The Euro-Canadian art world has in much of the source literature, particularly from the 1980s onward, been discussed as Canadian *mainstream* art world – implying that this *mainstream* is somehow heterogeneous in itself. More recently, the term *settler-colonial art history* has been used to describe this ambiguous phenomenon within the wider range of post-colonial experiences, mostly associated with former British colonies. Beyond contemporary discourse, in the 1960s, the notion of *Indian art* and *artist* was common, in French-Canadian inspired texts *Amerindian* was used. In the 1980s the notion *artists of Native ancestry* was introduced by a group of artists (*Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry*, S.C.A.N.A.)⁴ to counter a stereotypical idea of “Indian art” which implied not only a purism in “traditional” artistic technique but also excluded Aboriginal artists who were *Métis* or *Non-status Indians*, that is, individuals who were not members of Indigenous groups recognised in treaties (cf. I.3.2.1).

The research frame for the following study extends from the 1950s/ 1960s to approximately the year 2006. The decades of the 1950s and 1960s mark the end of a severely restrictive and assimilationist colonial time period, also termed the *reservation period*, in which specific laws (amendments of the *Indian Act*, cf. I.3.2) attempted to suppress Indigenous political self-articulation, culture and spirituality for more than 70 years (1874 and more particularly 1885-1951). In 1951, First Nations’ right to organize politically was reinstated, and their right to vote in Canada was established in 1960. From a colonial situation of complete under-representation of Aboriginal peoples in positions of decision-making between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century, even when their own lifeways and futures were concerned, many things have changed.

In Canadian art history since the 1960s, artists of Native ancestry like Bill Reid, Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Jessie Oonark, Kenuak Ashevak or Robert Davidson have come to the foreground of national discourses alongside partners in the professional fields of cultural anthropology and activism, the visual arts system, media, the art market including government agencies, and art history among others. They participated in national processes of identity construction that embraced the concepts of “Inuit art” and “Indian art,” and they started to form a genre „Indigenous contemporary art“ that proved to have lasting effects on the Canadian and international art world.

Particularly from the late 1980s onward, Aboriginal authors voiced an explicit critique of the “paternalistic and damaging” representation practices of non-Aboriginal scholars in anthropology, art and history as well as in the political realm. This critique was at the center of endeavors to insert own interpretations of the stories to be told about the contemporary and historical art production of their colleagues and ancestors (see opening quote). George Erasmus, *National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations* in Canada said in a speech given in 1988:

4 On the formation of S.C.A.N.A. cf. Hill 1989: 13.

We (the Aboriginal peoples) are well aware that many people have dedicated their time, careers and their lives showing what they believe is the accurate picture of indigenous peoples. We thank you for that, but we want to turn the page...⁵

The hierarchies inherent in the European-derived society's definitions of "expertise" in a field such as culture, art interpretation and art institutional politics were successfully challenged in the years that followed through continuous activism and dialogue. In a national Canadian society that started to institutionalize multicultural communication through explicit cultural political interventions in the early 1970s, the art discourse had become a field of inter- or transcultural negotiation with various and strong voices by the 1980s, even before the international art discourse experienced a similar "cultural turn" in the 1990s. Economic and political developments supported what would be perceived as a "globalization of the art world" since the 1990s, a process which continues to keep art theorists busy producing adequate approaches to critique, interpretation, institutional reaction and curatorial practices. The year 2006, the preliminary end of the period being studied, is characterized by a major event in Canadian Aboriginal art history: the first solo retrospective exhibition of an Indigenous artist at the *National Gallery of Canada* curated by an Aboriginal curator (Greg Hill): *Norval Morrisseau. Shaman Artist*. Events of the decade since then have not escaped my attention, but would need more detailed consideration of contemporary discussions, which are rapid and characterized by an incredibly vocal and expanding scene of Aboriginal art professionals and writers.

For this book's approach four themes have proven to be relevant and will finally be discussed in their inter-connectedness in the concluding chapter: institutions, artists as communicators, curating as negotiation and art historical narratives. In 2003, I was inspired by a comment made by German art historian Beatrice von Bismarck, who was discussing "curatorial practice" in a talk on curating as a form of negotiation between artistic and art historical practice that can be used by participants of different professional groups in the art system, among other things, for dealing with important questions of de-hierarchizing⁶ (cf. I.4.3). Applied to the Canadian context and surmising that curatorial practice would not only be able to negotiate between artistic practice and art history but also between positions in the art world resulting from different cultural concepts, my questions include: Which communication and negotiation processes were possible in the Canadian *art discourse* on the positions of Indigenous peoples in Canadian society and in relation to the land that people from so many different nations of origin inhabit today? Did Indigenous curating and cooperatively curated exhibitions allow new approaches to artifacts and works of art to emerge? Did they have a lasting effect on the art historical narrative? What role did protagonists in the art world and cultural anthropologists play? What do the structures of the art world look like,

5 Hill/ Nicks 1992: 7, footnote 3: George Erasmus' opening address at the conference *Preserving our Heritage: A Working Conference for Museums and First Peoples*, November 1988 (cf. I.3.2.4)

6 27. Deutscher Kunsthistorikertag, Leipzig 2003.

and what do they tell us about possible spaces of communication? During the course of my research, the controversial discussions on *appropriation* in the North American art discourse of the 1980s gained prominence for questions concerning the relevance of art historical interpretations and facts. I would like to suggest that these discussions – which received little attention in Germany – contributed decisively not only to the development of cooperative museology in Canada, but also to the paradigm shift of the late 1990s and early 2000s in Canadian art historiography concerning the perception of Indigenous arts.

My research approach towards Indigenous positions in Canadian art discourse carries an “outside” perspective as far as nationality and indigeneity is concerned. There are certain risks, but also opportunities in viewing this discourse from a European perspective. The Canadian state’s practice of cultural ambassadorship through Indigenous artists’ work was not always reflected back to Canadian audiences, as demonstrated, for example, by Linda Grussani (2003) in her M.A. thesis *Constructing the Image of Canada as a Nation: The International Presentation of Aboriginal Art Exhibitions (1969-1990)*. International exhibitions and publication endeavors contributed to the fact described by Ruth Phillips that “the impact of Canadian museology is more widely recognized abroad than at home.”⁷

In inserting accounts of international cultural communication into the chapters of this book, particularly when related to a German art or scholarly discourse, my research focus broadened and shed light on the fact that there is also a distinct “inside” perspective from this side of the Atlantic: concerning the historical legacies of transatlantic migration, an internationally operating scholarly system (of anthropology and other disciplines), and finally, the larger context of a very globalized art discourse entailing both art practice and art interpretation. The need to pay close attention to larger discursive contexts is partly inspired by such authors as Okanogan artist, writer and scholar Jeanette Armstrong (2010), who explicitly asks to

[i]magine interpreting for us your own people’s thinking toward us instead of interpreting for us, our thinking, our lives and our stories. We wish to know, and you need to understand, why it is that you want to own our stories, our art, our beautiful crafts, our ceremonies, but you do not appreciate or wish to recognize that these things of beauty arise out of the beauty of our people.⁸

One of my main motivations for writing about the in-between-space of art discourse is the potential for communication, for forming relationships and for encountering – as I experienced on my travels in Canada – new curatorial and educational approaches, thought-provoking pieces of art, articulate positions in dialogues, conversations and texts. Beyond reasonable doubts about ethical representation processes, I experienced repeated optimistic encounters with Aboriginal scholars and artists and some explicit words of encouragement. The possibilities inherent in fair self-representation and a new Indigenous self-

7 Phillips 2011: 3.

8 Armstrong 2010: 149.

confidence can be surmised from the writing of prominent North American Indigenous authors in recent decades. W. Richard West, Jr., Southern Cheyenne scholar and founding director of the *National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington, D.C.) emphasized in his foreword to the anthology *Native Universe* (2004), a book published on the occasion of the museums' move into the new building on the National Mall in Washington D.C., the existence of a

Native universe [that] does not extend only backward into the past, nor is it one marked by unrelenting suffering. We move backward and forward in time, mindful of our history, but optimistic about our future. [...] Our universe is no longer defined by others, but by our own scholars, artists, and seers. That power to define ourselves is enormously significant and liberating.⁹

Part I of this book is dedicated to theoretical and methodological considerations based on personal travel experiences in the US and Canada between the early 1990s and 2013, on debates within German and Canadian scholarly and museum contexts between cultural anthropology and the visual arts, and on my participation in an international Canadian studies network since the early 2000s. Given the severely contested relations between “western” culture researchers and Native American peoples since the closing decades of the 20th century on the issue of who speaks for whom (also known as the *crisis of representation* within the international discourse of cultural and social anthropology) the study has been opened with the following four interrelated questions to guide my own theoretical and methodological positioning:

1. Under which circumstances can I do scholarly research on topics of Indigenous cultures in North America at all?
2. What is it that draws me as a European-trained cultural anthropologist and visual artist to do research in the context of the North American or more specifically the Canadian art system?
3. What distinguishes Canada as a research context in terms of Indigenous history and culture?
4. Why look at the *art discourse*?

In chapter I.1 “*Indigenous Voices’ and reflections about one’s own scholarly position*” I will explain the beginnings of my interest in the research field, clarify the use of the notion *position*, recall my own experiences in the 1990s, which led me to understand the rejection of cultural anthropological research by Indigenous communities, and try to gain a more thorough understanding of the contexts of the Indigenous critique of *cultural anthropology*. The notion of *art as cultural research* will be regarded as an alternative if ambivalent method, and – based on the reflection of further experiences in 2003 – my suggestion is to consider dialogical research as the best solution within the changed discursive field. The art discourse about Indigenous art and beyond will be introduced as changing practice and simultaneous field of research and activism.

9 West 2004.

Chapter I.2 "*The discourse on ethics in museum anthropology as related to the practice of Indigenous arts*" will consider the notions of *ethics*, *participation* and *reciprocal responsibility* in the context of museum anthropology, especially in relation to (Indigenous) art practice. A review of participatory exhibition projects in Germany will be reflected against a background of the founding history of the *UBC Museum of Anthropology* in Vancouver, which has served as an international role model for participatory museum work since the 1980s. The chapter also introduces a meta-reflection on internationally active museum discourses: What is a possible perception of a Canadian ethnological text concerning museum issues in Germany? What can be and what might not be read from a German perspective in Canadian texts?

Chapter I.3 "*Canada as research context*" further elaborates on the distinctive background of research with Canadian texts and in a Canadian cultural context. The chapter will introduce the main sources from different disciplines, with which I have worked, and provide an overview about the historically relevant issues in Canadian Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal relations from different perspectives.

Chapter I.4 "*Art World/ Art Discourse*" finally provides the theoretical background for my research about and within the Canadian art discourse. It develops the idea of art discourse *analysis* and art world *observation* to one of *participation* in an ever-changing discursive field and serves as a direct introduction to Part II, the overview chapter on the Canadian art world and art discourse.

Part II provides details of the wider Canadian art world and art discourse in terms of geography, institutions, working processes and protagonists. Adopting a historical perspective, Canadian "settler-colonial" art world developments and art discourses and how they tangent Indigenous art worlds are described. For the decades since the 1960s, the contexts will be carefully considered in which Indigenous protagonists participated in the Canadian "mainstream" art discourse and art world institutions, while at the same time Aboriginal initiatives changed the structures of educational, institutional and funding contexts. Part II can be read as a kind of "ethnography" of the Canadian art world and discourse. It contains three main chapters.

Chapter II.1 introduces Canada's major art centres, and thus provides a geographical overview of the Canadian art world. The interplay between art schools, art production, art museums, the art market and the art public will be regarded from both a historical and contemporary perspective, and also in terms of their relevance for Aboriginal and Inuit art.

Chapter II.2 will characterize the specifics of the Canadian art world and also consider some politically relevant topics. Federal and provincial culture politics play an important role for Canadian art, as do museum politics and federal *museum mandates*. By describing art institutions, features of Canada's art market and collecting practice, histories and relevance of Canadian artists' organizations, artists groups and artist-run centers, aspects of art education, the art funding system, and Canada's laws in regards to copyright, traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, the perspective intentionally widens far beyond the immediate topic of Aboriginal positions within art discourse in order to create a broad and ample basis for the understanding and contextualization of these positions.

Chapter II.3 broadly introduces the field of communication about Canadian art and art history, including central university *art history* departments, publishers of Canadian art literature, and relevant Canadian art magazines and mechanisms of art critique, especially concerning Native art. The developments within Canadian art historiography concerning Aboriginal art will be analyzed as well as the changing art historical narratives. The history of and opportunities within Canadian curatorial practice will finally be recognized, and protagonists and curatorial projects acknowledged.

Part III of this publication contains seven case studies that deal with Aboriginal and co-operative curatorial practice (III.1 and III.2), the cultural relevance of Aboriginal art critique (III.3 and III.4), questionings of art historical construction (III.5 and III.6) and the interdependence of the many different aspects of the art discourse (III.7). The uniting theme of the chapters is the interrelation between Indigenous demands for *voice* in the art discourse with those historical developments in the art and museum discourses in North America that have facilitated a growing recognition and influence of *Indigenous voices* as articulated by a growing number of Indigenous art professionals and scholars. Questions concerning the underlying motivations and gains within Canadian society for and from this process and the interrelation of these inner-Canadian processes with developments in international art history have guided the course of my research.

Chapter III.1 is dedicated to the curatorial essay "*Metamorphosis*" by Git'ksan artist and author Doreen Jensen for the exhibition *Topographies. Aspects of Recent B.C. Art at the Vancouver Art Gallery* (1996). The essay proves to be an example of the artistry of curating and writing art (hi)story by an Indigenous author. The focus on the terms and topics of *metamorphosis/ change/ transformation* introduce an important category expressed in Indigenous art writing of the 1990s.

Chapter III.2 describes and interprets the exhibition *Art of this Land*, which formed between 2003 and 2012 the permanent exhibition at the halls dedicated to Canadian Historical Art at the *National Gallery of Canada (NGC)* in Ottawa. Meant as a new approach to the interpretation of Canadian art history, this exhibition included for the first time Indigenous art work from all regions and periods of Canadian history into the gallery halls formerly dedicated exclusively to Euro-Canadian art. On a theoretical level, this chapter also deals with the history of Indigenous critique at the form of Canadian art history and the answer of the Canadian institutions in the early 2000s.

Chapter III.3 examines one of the basic issues underlying the Indigenous critique of mainstream art practice and art institutions. It is based on an essay by the Indigenous Canadian film maker Loretta Todd "*Notes on Appropriation*" (1991) and on a number of art critical texts by Indigenous authors on the work of German artist Lothar Baumgarten – exhibited in North America in the 1980s and 1990s – that raise issues of *appropriation*. This chapter discusses one of the prevalent conflict fields opened up by Indigenous authors within national and international art discourses in the late 1980s.

Chapter III.4 focuses on the writings of American historian of anthropology and cultural critic James Clifford, which deal with the developments in the in-between-space of art discourse, cultural anthropology and Indigenous self-representation

in North America in the 1980s. Clifford's texts are read as a witness to a decade that saw on the one side the opening of the art discourse to cultural issues but also the influential and controversial discussion about the monumental exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* at the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York in 1984, which left its mark on a series of subsequent exhibition projects in Canada as well. Clifford's texts are one of the first internationally perceived descriptions of a changing museum practice in Canada and in the US since the 1970s that made new approaches to *Indigenous voices* within academia, the museum and the art discourse an issue.

Chapter III.5 introduces a topic of Canadian art history of the 1970s and 1980s that can be regarded as preceding the previously described confrontations of the 1980s and 1990s: the perception of contemporary Indigenous art, especially that of the Northwest Coast, as a form of artistic and cultural *renaissance*, the relation between this art historical concept of *renaissance* and the Canadian national identity-building processes of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as conflicts in this context. The main focus of this chapter is on the relevance of the work of Haida artist Bill Reid (1920-1998) and the perspective of authors with and without Indigenous background who contributed to a symposium on his work and life in 1999 (published 2004).

Chapter III.6 analyzes the possible influences of Mexican indigenist 20th century art (*Mexican Renaissance*), specifically *Mexican Muralism* and the employment of muralist art forms in architecture, on the Canadian art discourse of the 1950s and 1960s. The results suggest that in the international 20th century North American art discourse, possibilities for making use of Indigenous culture for the purpose of national identity-building exist and have influenced developments in Canada in the 1960s as well. The role model of the "artist as cultural researcher" personified in the Mexican artist Diego Rivera and the implicit consequences for Canadian artists of Aboriginal ancestry will be regarded here.

Chapter III.7 about the work of Canadian Indigenous performance and installation artist Rebecca Belmore as reflected in the Canadian art discourse considers a variety of interpretative texts especially about Belmore's earlier works (between 1987 and 2005). It tries to shed light on developments in the Canadian art discourse in a time period which started with the "Indigenous artist as voice" in an emerging discourse slowly giving way to the "Indigenous artist as artist," who is both "voice" and object in an art critical discourse of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal curatorial and art critical "voices" and positions. The relevance of artistic practice – in this case performance and installation art – for this development is stressed. This last case study has a particular reference to Part II, because it tries to understand the networking character of different art world institutions and practices as well.

The seven case studies follow my own process of understanding a complex issue, and they are not presented chronologically. On the contrary, the main chapters even have a succession that develops "backward" in time. The story of this book begins in the years between 2003 and 2007, works itself back through the contexts of the 1990s, the discussions of the 1980s, the ideas of the 1970s into the identity-forming discourses of the 1960s and 1950s. The last chapter brings

the reader back from the late 1980s to the 2000s and the present. This unusual approach to the linearity of time possibly owes to my perception as having started a conversation with my Canadian artist and art-historian friends in a common present (2003 and after) and acknowledging that there are different ways to look back into history. One theme which has particularly motivated me to look at ever earlier historical sources was the central theme and accusation of *appropriation* within the arts, which was formulated and contextualized in the 1989 text by Loretta Todd (Chapter III.3). For this sojourn into the past I have abandoned to a certain degree my initial plan to introduce a much larger variety of even more contemporary sources and writers, with more exhibitions and publications from recent years. The main focus of my work extends from the late 1950s to the early 2000s. Much has happened since then and is worth communication and research. I do not regret the decision, though, to clarify some aspects of late 20th century art history, particularly, when I discovered that European actors were involved to unexpected degrees. For the course of research, I have tried to initially let suggestions of my Canadian friends regarding important events and writers of the recent past guide my entry into the history of Indigenous art as written in Canada. From there on, two aspects have carried my research further: some central ideas of the authors of these recommended texts and, at the same time, the discussions in my scholarly surroundings in Germany and Europe in conferences and projects – in some cases organized by graduate student colleagues.

Each chapter includes both theoretical and historically descriptive parts, and occasionally shifts to the form of picture essay. In doing so I apply a concept that feminist art historians like Victoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff have in my opinion used successfully to shed light on the complexities of post-colonial research within the discipline of art history. Moving in a discourse – the art discourse – that includes actors who express themselves in various media – still and moving images, performance, installation, happening and various forms of texts – images form an important part of argumentation strategies.

In general, this is not an effort at a comprehensive overview of the history of Aboriginal involvement in the Canadian art discourse – alone because now there are enough Aboriginal scholars who can do so much better. Instead, this is an entry for the interested reader into the possibilities of discourse arising once those Aboriginal “voices” and positions who have – after a long time of colonial oppression and neglect – already contributed to the Canadian art discourse for so many decades are considered. As will be shown in several instances, recognition of these positions is on yet another level long overdue for European (in this case German) audiences, which are usually very positively inclined towards both North and South American Indigenous art, but lack in general a deeper knowledge of the negotiation processes behind its presentation.

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