

Decolonial Interventions in Performance and New Media Art: In Conversation with Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Kent Monkman

by Julie Nagam and Kerry Swanson

The economic, social, cultural, and political conditions of Indigenous people in Canada have reached a tipping point, as reflected daily in the Canadian media and represented by the world-famous Idle No More movement. There are unjust living conditions, underfunded and underrepresented populations in the education system, outstanding land rights and claims, and a slow-moving Truth and Reconciliation Commission grappling with the testimony of residential school survivors—to name a few of the most pressing challenges facing Indigenous people. At the same time, we are seeing a renaissance of contemporary Indigenous art. Louis Riel famously predicted, “My people will sleep for 100 years, and when they awake it will be the artists who give them back their spirit,” and this is the precise moment of time we are experienc-

ing. There is no better moment to critically analyze and document Indigenous contemporary art.

Our interest in Indigenous performance and new/digital media art stems from a desire to investigate Indigenous performance artists who intertwine their work with emerging technologies—artists like Rebecca Belmore, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Mark Iglo-liorte, Kent Monkman, and Tanya Tagaq, to name a few. Ideas about identity, gender, queerness, land rights, and other socio-political issues are being communicated at the intersection of art and new technologies. To date, there has been only a small amount of academic research in the areas of Indigenous media and performance art in Canada. Until recently, there was no major online database for artists, curators, teachers, and academics to access in-



Kent Monkman, *Welcome to the Studio: An Allegory for Artistic Reflection and Transformation*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas. 72 x 288 inches. Image courtesy of the artist

formation about Indigenous performance and new/digital media artists. Dr. Julie Nagam, an assistant professor in the Indigenous Visual Culture Program at OCAD University, is currently leading a Social Sciences Humanities Research Council–funded study, the Kanata Indigenous Performance New and Digital Media Art Project, to create a web-based archive, entitled “Transactive Memory Keepers” (transactivememorykeepers.org). This web resource will document performances and exhibitions created by Indigenous-led organizations and Indigenous artists and curators.

This interview explores the work of two of the artists featured in the project: Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Kent Monkman. These artists are moving between both traditional practices and contemporary art forms, and they are on the cutting edge of unpacking both popular culture and traditional world-views. L'Hirondelle and Monkman are integrating Indigenous ideologies and embodied knowledge through interdisciplinary meetings of performance, painting, music, and new and digital media art, and they are actively using these media as decolonizing tools.

Kerry Swanson: What exciting projects are you working on right now?

Kent Monkman: A very large painting for the McCord Museum's art in residence program. In 2011 I did an exhibition at Concordia University's Ellen Gallery with Michèle Thériault. Michèle had asked me to work with collections of Montreal's McCord Museum of Canadian History and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. While working with the collection, I discovered the incredible collection of photographs by nineteenth-century photographer William Notman [one of the first internationally recognized Canadian photographers]. But it wasn't until 2013, when the McCord asked me to be their artist in residence that I decided to really look closely at the Notman photographs. They showed me the exhibition space, which is four walls encompassed with floor-to-ceiling glass vitrines that are about 18 inches or 2 feet deep. The

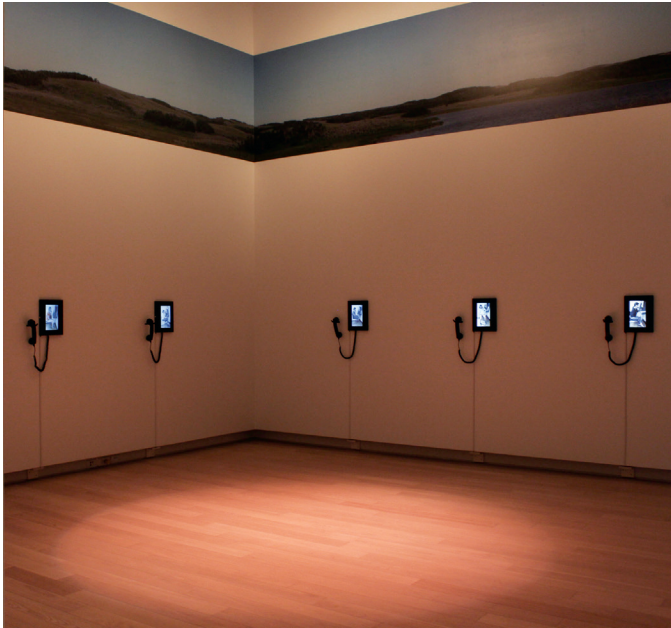
experience of being in this room made me feel like I was inside a black box or a camera. The reflections of the audience in the glass were so present. (The McCord would normally display textiles and things such as hats behind the glass.) So I thought it would be fun to play with that built-in sensation of reflection in the room and work with it instead of against it.

In the back of my mind I had always been thinking of doing a project that was about that turning point in art history, when photography took over from painting—that moment where photography and painting coexisted for the first time. Painters such as [Eugène] Delacroix actually used photography; they interpreted photographs for their own work. The photographer replaced the painter as a portrait artist, so that was one major shift in terms of painting becoming subservient to photography, or less important in terms of its functionality.

I remembered Gustave Courbet's painting of his own studio [*L'Atelier du peintre/The Painter's Studio*, 1855], and I decided to make a painting that would respond to that. Courbet was painting at the time when photography was emerging as a new medium. It was a self-portrait, as well as a multiple portrait of many people from various aspects of his world. I wanted to create a similar painting that would reflect Notman's studio, with many of the different characters from Montreal society that he photographed there. Sometimes his subjects were photographed with elaborate staging: snow scenes, winter scenes, painted backdrops, props, and that kind of thing. We found some really fascinating photos, and the project just grew from there.

The painting, titled *Welcome to the Studio: An Allegory for Artistic Reflection and Transformation*, will be situated behind glass. We will light the room in such a way that the viewer's own reflection will be caught on the surface of the glass. We did some measurements and calculations to work out how big the figures were going to be in the painting so that one's reflection will be almost the same size, basically the same size as the painted figures. The idea is that you will feel like you are part of the studio or you





Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *Why The Caged Bird Sings: Here I Am.*
© Kate Tarini, Ryerson Image Centre



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *Why The Caged Bird Sings: Here I Am.*
© Kate Tarini, Ryerson Image Centre



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *Why The Caged Bird Sings: Here I Am.*
© Kate Tarini, Ryerson Image Centre

are a visitor to the studio. And then, directly opposite from where I painted my portrait, we are going to position a stool so audience members will be able to sit there on it and line up their reflections with my image in the painting. They will be able to take their own self-portrait with their cell phones, sitting in the studio. So it's this idea of photography coming back as a form of self-portraiture ... everyone is a photographer now with cell phones.

Julie Nagam: So when you imagined the piece, was it important to you to think about the viewers actually being embedded in the image and being able to document themselves in the studio?

Kent: Yeah, that was the idea—that people would be able to take pictures of themselves, capture the painting but also capture their own reflection. Then they are going to be able to post them on *Instagram* or something, and there will be this afterlife of people's personal "selfies," extending the exhibition in a way.

Kerry: And normally in exhibitions you can't take a cell phone photograph, so—

Kent: In this case it's encouraged.

Julie: Cheryl, can you tell us what you're working on right now?

Cheryl L'Hirondelle: In 2008, I started working on two major multi-site, multi-iterative projects. One is called *Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a singing/songwriting/recording project with women in federal prisons and provincial correctional institutions across Canada. The other, *SingLand/SongMark*, formerly known as *Songlines*, is a sonic mapping and songwriting project. The title, *Why the Caged Bird Sings*, might seem like it is derived from the Maya Angelou book, and in part it is, but it is also an homage to the work of the late Arthur Solomon, a Native Elder, who, along with another Elder, the late Dr. Joe Couture, worked tirelessly to create cultural programming in prisons. In one of Mr. Solomon's books of poetry, he describes the work he is doing as opening cages and letting the birds free. Both of them have written about giving voice back to incarcerated Native people. I actually learned how to play a hand drum thanks in some way to Mr. Solomon, so I guess he gave me back my voice too.

My practice has been closely associated with the visual arts world for many years, probably because of my performance art and new media work, so at some point I realized my mark-making tool, or how I render or draw best, has always been my voice. I am very oriented towards audio. I started thinking about the sonics inside prisons, the sound of the gates locking, of the guard's keys jangling, of the flip-flops the women wear, and how it sounds as they are walking down the hallway. It's been a lovely shift from what was originally solely a songwriting and recording project into media installations, to create environments that take people into, and maybe give a little more insight into, what the women are like and via the lyrics what their commentaries are about life. It makes sense to me that this project extends to create different scenarios that somehow depict and honour the lives of these women.

Julie: What are some of the key concepts or ideas that you are exploring through your work?

Kent: One of the main things I am working with now is this idea that modernity was a period of compression, of flattening. I am speaking of the Modernists' flattening of pictorial space. The Modernists moved away from creating the illusion of space, and

they started to reduce pictorial space, to compress it, until painting eventually just became all about the surface. I am now inserting cubist figurations by Picasso, and so forth, into my paintings as a metaphor for how Indigenous cultures got flattened during the last 120 years—the compression of pictorial space as a metaphor for the loss of Indigenous language and culture. European or Western painting is the tradition that I work within, so it is a way of continuing that tradition but re-contextualizing the period of modern art inside a much longer period or history of painting.

The Denver Art Museum commissioned me to do a performance piece, which happened in October [2013], and I wanted to work with these ideas and carry them forward in a live performance. I've been painting cubist figurations and juxtaposing them with a more representational way of painting a figure. In this context, the cubist figurations look like damaged people, like their bones have been broken, or they've been run over by a truck. I've been casting these Modernist figurations as casualties of violence or disease. In Denver, I created a performance called the *Casualties of Modernity* in which Miss Chief Eagle Testickle [Monkman's drag alter ego] visits the modern wing of the museum, kind of like Princess Diana would visit hospitals. She's a philanthropist that comes to touch and shake hands with the sick and ailing, in this case the sick and dying art movements. She's led on a tour by a doctor of fine arts (an actor I hired to be a doctor). He introduces Romanticism, played by a male model painted to look like marble, who is rolled out on a gurney. Miss Chief ogles this perfect male physique and comments on the tragedy of his demise. The next casualty that gets wheeled out is one of Picasso's cubist women, the Demoiselle [from *Les Femmes d'Alger*]. We made it out of plywood so it was very flat. The performance continues all the way through the Death of Painting, a black square canvas; a performance artist who was halfway between Yoko Ono and Maria Abramović; and then ends with conceptual art, which is essentially an empty bed. The performance is a critique of art history, and Miss Chief does her very best, in her regal manner, to reach out and give each one of them the love that they deserve. For the duration, a scrum of paparazzi follows her taking photos and videotaping, so the documentation of the performance was part of the performance.

Kerry: Why is the digital documentation so central to your performance work, and how does that play out?

Kent: I have made videos whenever I get an opportunity to do a live performance. I see it as an opportunity to make a film or a video—to document it and then to complete it as something in and of itself. I would always try to document a performance anyway, but I also go that extra length and shoot it as a stand-alone piece with more care given to how it's being shot so that it can be edited well. It will have a longer life if it is completed as a more polished product. Most of the performances I have done are in some great locations, so I'm also thinking as a producer, as these kinds of environments or sets would be expensive to rent. For instance, the *Taxonomy of the European Male* [2005] was a live performance I did in England on the incredible grounds of an eighteenth-century English estate that had been converted into an art museum [Compton Verney]. I could never afford to rent a location like that, much less have all the grounds crew and museum staff supporting you as your film support staff. So I also



Still from Kent Monkman's film *Dance to Miss Chief*, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist

see digital documentation as a way of being able to extend my production dollar and use those situations to get a film or a video piece out of it.

Julie: How about the central concepts in your work, Cheryl?

Cheryl: Call-and-response is a central idea in my projects. If you think about what music is—i.e., when a bird sings, its echo locates itself in the environment. The bird sings out, its voice resounding into the proximate environment, and another bird responds, so the combined musical phrase is a call and an answer. As a Cree woman I realized the importance of echolocation, of grounding oneself in an environment and singing one's environment. It's a different viewpoint than looking at land and saying, "I own this land" or singing about or singing to land. It is a way of saying, "I am inside and part of this environment, and I am resonating and calling out into myself, into this environment." Digital media and other recording techniques afford me a dynamism to capture and simulate that process in more than four directions; above, below and from within as well.

This is how *Why the Caged Bird Sings* fits into this modus operandi. The women have taken risks by sharing their words and their voices in agreeing to be part of my project, and, in turn, they have informed and shaped the process and taught me a lot about taking risks. That exchange in itself has been like a call-and-response. There is this continual my-voice-their-voice, and, after a while, we start a loop where I am as much being given licence to use my voice as the women are in finally having theirs heard. The



Kent Monkman, *Robin's Hood*, 2007.
Courtesy of the artist

media-rich installations about this exchange are also now letting other people in on that conversation.

The *SingLand/SongMark* project is similar and really helped me start finding a way to integrate the different disciplines I was working in: performance art, new media, and music. This project started when curator Glen Alteen invited me to make a performance piece for Vancouver grunt gallery's ever-growing exhibition archive, entitled *nikamon ohci askiy* [songs because of the land. 2008]. The project was a songwriting, sonic mapping, community engagement, performance, and net.art project and two of the final traces are the website (vancouversonglines.ca), and a couple of songs professionally produced (cheryllhirondelle.bandcamp.com). I wanted to map Vancouver, the new city I was living in at the time, and I asked myself, "Why don't I use the tool that I know how to do something with—that being my voice and just 'sing' the city?"

Around that time I sang at an international symposium on Indigenous music and dance at the University of Toronto and shared the stage with a few Sami musicians, the Indigenous people in Scandinavia. They actually sing their mountain ranges; they sing the horizons and contours of their land. Then I learned that the Anishinaabe in this territory had a similar practice. It reminded me of all the years being with my former singing partner, Joseph Naytowhow. We toured what seemed like every reserve in Saskatchewan and would always be singing while on the road, going

from one community to another. And we weren't rehearsing our songs. Later I realized that we were just experiencing the splendour around us and reading it like you'd read notation and just singing it.

With the first iteration of *SingLand/SongMark*, I visualized myself doing performances on the street. But I know because of how many homeless there are in Vancouver that I would be performing for homeless, and I didn't want to objectify anybody. So I started to think of the web interface as being a place where, in the privacy of one's own home, the art audience could put on headphones and have some sort of participatory way to play around with the sounds I was hearing and creating as I walked around. I made the website abstract and conceptual and not a literal map so that it wasn't referring to a specific physical location like the corner of Hastings and Commercial. I didn't want to make anyone vulnerable, to say, "Oh this is where this guy lives." And that's problematic with what GPS is all about—it was a military tool, and I don't think it has been demilitarized yet. That's how that project came to be. It's now becoming an international project; I am doing it in different locations.

Julie: Do you want to talk about the other locations?

Cheryl: Well, I did it in Toronto. There are so many areas around Toronto that are Indigenous, but they've been covered over by the city. In Toronto, I did a binaural 360° Quick Time VR [a virtual

reality panorama] of the Humber River and a grove of a forest; that would have been a place where, among other things, Indigenous women would have picked medicine. For that, I wrote a song called “maskihkiya mēskanaw,” which means “medicine path” or “medicine trail.” It was part of the exhibition *Concealed Geographies* [2012]. I am doing one more Toronto iteration around the Scarborough Bluffs and The Guild sculpture gardens for Restless Precinct this spring [2014]. Then I am going to be going to London, England, to sing *The Horniman*, a museum of musical instruments. And I'm developing a slightly different iteration of singing the land for Australia and Ireland, where it's about telling the stories of the land beneath the cities and contemporary life. Australia is looking like it's going to be much more of a generative website where other people can contribute to it, and Ireland is looking to be something more connected to environmental issues and the inherent relationship between Irish language and the land.

Julie: Why are these media specifically suited to exploring your personal narrative and the histories and realities of Canada's Indigenous peoples?

Cheryl: I love net.art and have been making online projects since 2001. With much new media one is working with language—coding languages—and it reminded me of what was happening in my house growing up. My dad was non-Native—he's German-Polish—and my mother is Métis-Cree. And so English was not the first language. There were a whole bunch of languages including physical languages, gestural languages, that had to be navigated before anyone could understand what was really going on and who was saying what. The same is true when you are working with computers in that there are so many different languages that are speaking through compilers and so much translation that is happening when any one command is being executed. There is also other stuff when you are working on servers. There's stuff around permissions—who has permission to do what. It reminded me of protocols within our culture. When you are building databases, you've got values so that you'll know where to categorize things. That reminded me of our value systems. So, for me, there were so many metaphors and interesting things to play with conceptually.

Julie: How do the digital, new media, and performance art mediums intersect in your practice?

Cheryl: *Digital* is a huge umbrella, and *new media* is a perplexing tag or discipline. It's hard to say what makes it “new” versus “old” media, and we seem to have forgotten that “digital” once referred to our fingers. With performance art, there are so many questions around it. Are you talking about being? Are you talking about performing? Are you talking about visual art history? Or are you talking about the “performative,” which has its own meaning? I think it's healthy when you do make a piece and you have more questions coming out than going in.

Anyway, to answer your question, I've been singing and making performance work since the early eighties, when you were lucky if someone had a good camera to document the show. Digital technologies are so pervasive now that I think sometimes the challenge is to know when to say no and not have technology be a part of it—or maybe choose redundant technology and/or go analog. When I was working on making the installation *Here I Am* for the Ryerson exhibition, *Ghost Dance* [2013], I had some



Documentation of Kent Monkman's performance *Miss Chief: Justice of the Piece*, 2012.

Image courtesy of the artist, photo by Katherine Fogden



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *nikamon ohci askiy (songs because of the land)*. Photo by Nadya Kwandibens, Red Works Photography, redworks.ca



Kent Monkman, *Apollo and Hyacinth*, 2012.
Image courtesy of the artist



Kent Monkman, *Achilles and Patroclus*, 2012.
Image courtesy of the artist

opportunities to work with various technologies in the space, and it was nice to know how much was appropriate, to decide when they are useful and effective and when they are not. That was a big realization for me because I've always been so pro-technology.

I was working for a Tribal Council in the 1990s in northern Saskatchewan and was always making sure everything we did would end up a video or a website, and I organized Internet and video workshops for the Elders and youth. When I started being a net artist in 2001, there were virtually no other Native artists making work that was participatory and accessible via a browser, so I was kind of on my own. My mentor, Heath Bunting, was an anti-proprietary software and Linux guy, and I tried to follow suit for a long time, happy to be working on the command line or hand-coding projects. But as technology was becoming more and more and more pervasive, it was really, really hard to be relevant and keep up. Because I decided to focus on net.art, there was a whole array of technologies I had no idea about. For instance, I had only made a couple experimental video pieces but had to hire others to edit. Lately, I have been getting into taking photographs, making videos, and learning Pro Tools and other software, and I am enjoying these new materials I get to work with. There are so many questions these various technologies raise, and they make for a very rigorous art practice. My hope, though, is that we ensure

they are used in ways that are inclusive and participatory; in that way we continue to act and be part of a Cree world-view.

Kent: The digital revolution was important for me, and for many other First Nations people, because it made cameras, and all aspects of film-making that were cost-prohibitive, much more accessible. The kind of money required to make a film really changed with digital film-making. I think this change has given artists like myself the ability to create more work. I can create more with the documentation of the performance in Denver. The fact that we have a digital video of it, and images that can go onto the Internet—that's a way of disseminating your practice to a wider audience. I don't consider the digital my primary medium; it's one of the things that supports and promotes what I do.

Kerry: But when you think about it, you use a lot of technology in your work, particularly the installations.

Kent: Yes, most recently we started photographing me as a performer before a blue screen and inserting me digitally into paintings, which I'm calling "video paintings." I don't know if you saw this work, but we made a digital image of the empty painted landscape as a background, so now it functions as this matte painting, a scenic matte painting, which was part of the multimedia installation *Two Kindred Spirits*, 2012. So that is how I see the digital

medium extending what I'm doing as a painter and as a performer, because now I am bringing them together as these video paintings.

Kerry: Do you think that you are reviving these techniques for a younger generation?

Kent: We live in a time when a lot of people are lazy and aren't really being taught how to paint. There are so many young people that go to museums and are in awe of these old master paintings but have no clue how to make them. That divide is so great, and, in a way, what I'm doing is shrinking that chasm and proving that painting can be a relevant medium. It doesn't necessarily belong in the dustbin of history. When I do these projects with museums, I also try to create dialogue with some of the work that is considered old, or passé, or irrelevant, the opposite of new media, because it is a way of invigorating and opening conversations about things that are often tossed to the side.

About the Authors

Julie Nagam, PhD, is an assistant professor at OCAD University in the Indigenous Visual Culture program, and her research involves (re)mapping the colonial state through creative interventions within concepts of Native space. Current SSHRC research projects focus on Canadian performance, political theory, and Indigenous digital and new media.

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