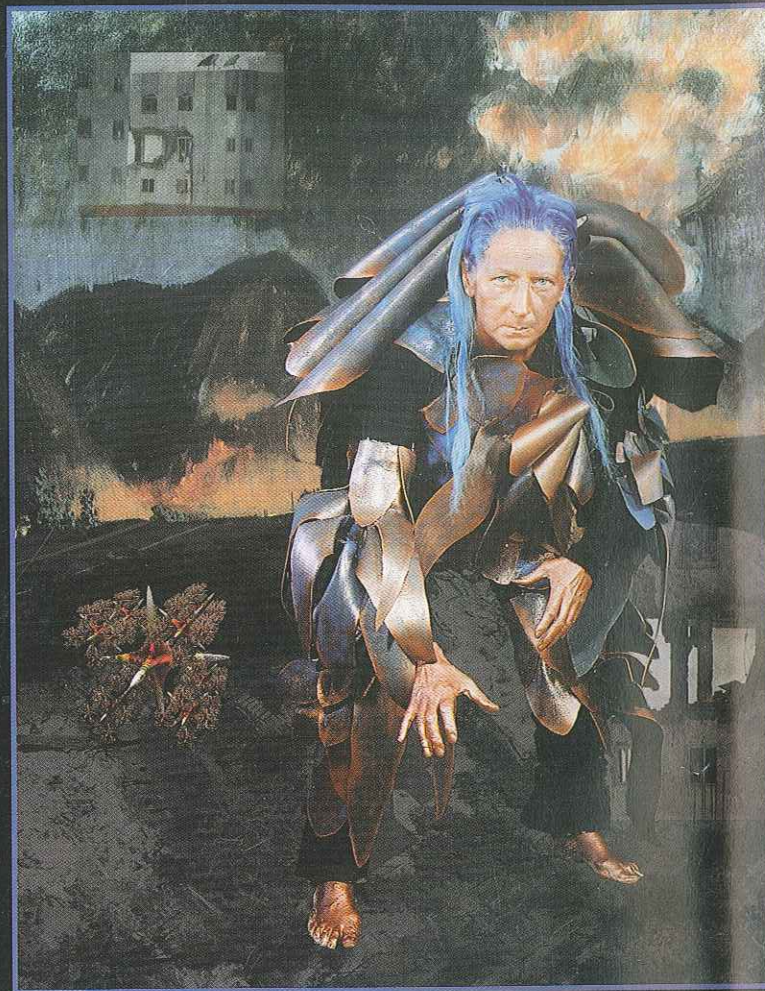


Featured artist **Eva Quintas**

Eva Quintas has exhibited as a photographer since 1990, both in Quebec and abroad. In 1997, she began working with multimedia creation, producing various web-based projects, video installations, and a fiction on CD-ROM. Her practice relies on the digital process of the image and collaborative work with other artists. Her work, rooted in the ritual of portraiture, questions cultural identities and mythologies. She is active in the Montreal cultural milieu and is the founder/chair and artistic director of Agence TOPO (www.AgenceTOPO.qc.ca), an artist-run center dedicated to the convergence of photography, literature, and new media. Quintas will be having a solo show at Galerie Luz, in Montreal, May 2 - May 26, 2007.

RIGHT: Untitled
BELOW: Wendake



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Women & Environments

international magazine

WOMEN, ART & COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

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was accepted at The Studio Gallery in Kingston, Webster and Sarah were delighted. Despite fracturing her arm in a fall, Sarah was on-hand to help install the sculptures. On January 22, 2006, she attended the vernissage, although she had only been released from treatment of a lung infection at the hospital an hour earlier.

The Beautiful Women Project has now been exhibited in Kingston, Vankleek Hill, and Cornwall, Ontario. Thousands have

attended. Even more have participated in curriculum-based workshops. Webster has organized personal casting sessions to help breast cancer survivors heal emotionally after surgery. She has made presentations to high-school classes, university students, and social service and community groups. The Beautiful Women Project has truly become a teaching and healing tool, and a means to raise social awareness about the link between body image and self-worth.

To quote Webster: "Our bodies tell our life stories. They are portraits of our journeys and experiences. Knowing that our body is beautiful just as it exists is a message more people need to see and hear." ❧

Laurie Gordon is a freelance writer who lives on a lake north of Kingston, Ontario. She is a former elementary school principal, and is currently working as project manager for the Beautiful Women Project.

Transforming Indigenous Cultural Politics through Art and Dialogue in Rural and Remote Manitoba

Julie Nagam

In localized areas of Manitoba, there are Indigenous women artists that are moving beyond a counter-discourse, or resistance. They are in the state of "untested feasibility,"¹ since they are working towards a dream, or a vision of socially-engaged art. This article concentrates on my research (including personal testimonies) on Indigenous women acting as activists or social change agents², their work socially engaged in current political performance and dialogical discourse. The focus of this article will be on the artwork, observations, and conversations with three rural and remote Indigenous women artists, Margaret Dumas, Cathy Mattes, and Colleen Cutschall.

Dialogical aesthetics³ is a method to interpret and understand artwork through conversations and dialogue-based aspects, instead of focusing solely on an object created by the artist. In order to set the framework for dialogical aesthetics, the reader must envision an artform locked into a collaborative process that is socially engaged and applies "a performative, process-based approach" (Kester 1), and can challenge aesthetic concepts of the avant-garde object-based art⁴. In order to comprehend dialogical aesthetics, one has to have a compara-

tive aspect, so avant-garde art is the contrast nevertheless. I am not stating that either type of aesthetic is superior. However, the works I will be discussing still have elements of avant-garde object-based aesthetics; it is the analysis of these artworks that will differ. In order to begin comprehending the framework of dialogical aesthetics, it is important to note the following:

In dialogical practice, the artist, whose perceptions are informed by his or her own training, past projects, and lived experience, comes into a given site or community characterized by its own unique constellation of social and economic forces, personalities, and traditions... What emerges is a new set of insights, generated at the intersection of both perspectives, and catalyzed through the collaborative production of a given project (Kester 95).

This type of art practice shifts the primary focus of an individual artist or object, image, or system that is challenging the viewer's expectations into a collective or dialogue based upon disruption of per-

ceived social norms. In avant-garde aesthetics, the social norms are transformed into social practices, which include the notion that the artist is the sole creator, the main concept is created by the artist and is considered to be a new idea, and that artwork is an object to be viewed. A dialogical aesthetic rejects these norms and practices thorough the artists' ability to become part of a process where they listen to people, and participate in the overall collaboration of creating a body of work. The final work becomes a "collective interaction" (Kocur & Leung 81) rather than a final shocking project, and the whole process ultimately transforms the role of the artist and artwork.

The first example of "collective interaction" is in the creation of the first Cree immersion school in Thompson, Manitoba. The artist, elder, and educator, Margaret Dumas, who is a resident in the area, envisioned a need for a community-concept Cree immersion school. In this northern community, where the majority of the population is Cree, there was no educational institute that taught Cree as an immersion language. The dream was to stop watching people in Dumas's community lose their language and cultural ties to their Indigenous roots. Therefore, the goal was to

create a space where key individuals could speak openly about issues surrounding the complexity of loss of culture and language that was simultaneously contributing to high suicide rates, crime, substance abuse, family breakdown, and domestic abuse for Indigenous people.

Dumas and others transformed a small group into multiple discussions resulting in the Wapanohk Cree Immersion Community School. They brought elders, principals, school board members, parents, and government officials to a table to discuss these issues and advocate for the creation of this school. The dialogue that happened formed a community concept school, creating a new space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous children would have elders teaching traditional art forms such as beading, sewing, and painting within the standard Manitoba school curriculum. The goal of the school was to empower people with a strong Aboriginal identity for the upcoming generations of children who would be taught dancing, fiddling, drumming, and, through an outdoor camp, how to live with the land. The new syllabus will include community feasts and regular pow-wows to celebrate community spirit and build strong, healthy families. This transformation was built on Dumas's creative vision, which has revolutionized her community by collaboration and valuing everyone's contributions and thoughts in the process. These attributes are typical of dialogical projects.

A second example of collaboration is a project that fused breakdancing and traditional Métis dance. After hearing the voices of the Aboriginal youth at a conference, Mattes decided to go back to her community and begin a conversation about the possibilities of an Aboriginal youth dance group with Manitoba Métis Federation Youth Coordinator Jason Gobeil. They then brought various people to the table, including government agencies, arts organizations, Aboriginal groups, and community members, which triggered a dialogue dealing with the issue of youth not being interested in traditional Métis dance. This discussion transformed into a new kind of dance, a fusion of breakdancing, hip-hop dancing, and traditional Métis dance. This sparked a cohort of young people participating in this



Colleen Cutschall with Artwork

new dance genre. This creative endeavor was made possible by collaborating, listening, evolving, and respecting the youth, people with knowledge and a vested interest in passing down and sharing these traditions.

Both works of Dumas and Mattes are rooted in their political engagement. Each project involved the creation of a temporary group of people that was linked to the broader community interested in social issues that were impacting their area and people. In the case of Dumas's work, many of the people at the table were required to be there and did not necessarily share the idea of change, but they understood there was a growing problem with Indigenous youth in northern Manitoba. Therefore, this awareness caused them to work collaboratively and in a respectful manner. None of these projects could have taken place without the commitment to social change and radical brainstorming of all the people involved.

Dumas's philosophy is that "everybody plays a role and everybody is important, by what gifts they bring to the table. That's how Aboriginal people saw it: everybody has a gift, and this was acknowledged". The principles that inform dialogical aesthetics are closely linked to

that of Indigenous values and epistemologies. As Dumas has explained, Aboriginal values include collaboration, respect, giving, understanding intergenerational effects, and building community, which are all built into the framework of dialogical aesthetics. Therefore, dialogical aesthetics are a good fit with Indigenous art. The concern for art theories and practices to incorporate Indigenous has been a major issue for Indigenous artists, curators, and theorists; by analyzing Mattes, Cutschall, and Dumas and their artwork in the context of dialogical aesthetics, I am contributing to the fusion of Indigenous philosophies and values, and art and aesthetics, without perpetuating Eurocentric attitudes. The possibility that traditional and contemporary Indigenous values are encompassed within the principles of dialogical aesthetics makes for an easier transition into representing Indigenous worldviews in the realm of art.

Another example of socially conscientious art is Rielisms, curated by Mattes. This show was a piece of work that dealt with the historical figure Lois Riel. The goal of the exhibition was to facilitate cross-cultural, "imagined", and inter-community dialogues, and to raise important Indigenous issues and

concerns. Mattes's intent was to bridge the cultural divide between systems and institutions such as The Winnipeg Art Gallery, political organizations, the art community, Indigenous people, imagined communities, and art theory with Métis people and culture. Mattes suffered the repercussions of using the controversial icon Riel; it gave her a greater appreciation of community, activism, and politics.

The backlash of events inspired a process that allowed various participants and stakeholders to speak, listen, and respond to the complexities that surrounded the icon Riel and the contested history of the Métis people and culture. The dialogical aesthetic of the work was the communication among the participants, Métis community, art community, and major stakeholders. Few leaders in the Winnipeg region of the Manitoba Métis Federation supported the show and instructed members not to attend, and, somehow, the Riel Foundation withdrew any or potential financial support for the project. The relatives of Riel did not support the show, and made their displeasure known, while the Winnipeg Art Gallery cancelled relevant programs and activities that might have broken some of this tension. Yet Mattes's goal was to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue about Indigenous issues surrounding the controversial icon Riel. Therefore, not only did the art in the exhibition display the complexities of the perceptions and experiences of Riel, so too did the dialogical aspects in the process of the work. This project dealt with the complex ideologies we as a Canadian society have within contested Indigenous histories and knowledge. Not only did the Eurocentric art gallery institution snub Mattes, so did part of her imagined political community of the Manitoba Métis Federation. This demonstrates the multiple layers that Indigenous people find themselves embedded in. The active participants took on their own role and had agency to speak, listen, and respond to the artist, the institutions, community members, and the political organizations. Rielism is a success, due to its ability to create dialogue around Indigenous issues and to deal with the absent Indigenous person in institu-



Barry Ace's exhibition curated by Cathy Mattes

tions, imaged communities, and politics.

To contradict the negative impact that Rielism had in Winnipeg, the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, insisted on taking on this show, which turned into a huge success. The gallery, unlike the Winnipeg Art Gallery, gave Mattes agency in the project. The Dunlop Gallery coordinated a Métis Advisory Committee, which was supported by well-known local Métis people such as Maria Campbell. This gave Métis people some agency so that they could feel a part of the show; there was discussion around food, music, and entertainment, issues that Mattes wanted to be part of the Winnipeg Art Gallery show. They had bannock, a fiddle player, youth dancers, and a large turnout of Métis people. The show was successful in creating a space where Métis people could demonstrate their culture and learn at the same time. This exhibition at the Dunlop Art Gallery did not continue the "historic exclusionary museum practice, in which exhibitions are about a culture, and not for a culture" (Mattes). This performance was for the Métis culture, and demonstrated the support needed by the gallery or institutions to create an inclusive space.

The last work I will examine is a

Colleen Cutschall monument, Spirit Warriors, erected to honour the Indigenous people who fought or lost lives at Little Big Horn. The Spirit Warriors sculpture at the Little Big Horn Battlefield is located in Montana, and was erected as a tribute to those Indigenous nations who fought for their land and freedom. Colonization has a long and relentless history for Indigenous people, which created a politically loaded situation right from the monument's inception. Therefore, the community members of several different nations had a vested interest in the outcome of the project, as did the National Parks office, general community members, and the group Friends of Little Big Horn.

In order to comprehend the dialogical aspects of this artwork, it is important to understand the issues surrounding it. First, Friends of Little Big Horn made reproductions of the image of the monument on t-shirts and other consumer goods without the permission of the artist. Second, there was some backlash from the communities in the area because they felt that the monument did not represent their nation or Indigenous background, which brought forth the issue of cultural and Indigenous

knowledge. Finally, the National Parks Branch did not want Cutschall or the architect, John Collins, to sign the work, which brought up issues of copyright and intellectual property rights for the artists⁵.

Amidst of all of these issues, how could dialogue and political performance not be embedded in the artwork? In Cutschall's case, Indigenous peoples were lobbying and exhibiting their commitment to addressing past colonial wrongs, showing that there was community involvement from the beginning. Once the monument was erected, people from the outlying communities and other nations placed offerings (such as sweet grass, tobacco, sage and ribbons) at and on the artwork. The dialogue and written comments of the artist, participants, stakeholders, and community members were documented, allowing for continuous self-reflexivity. It was less about the individual artist or object, and more about the community members, colonialism, and marking land that rightfully is Indigenous-based. Encompassing all these issues at once will cause backlash from any number of stakeholders; this is why dialogue is crucial for a space where all people can speak, listen, and respond.

I am arguing that Cutschall's, Mattes', and Dumas's artwork is enhanced by their status as affected Indigenous persons from the area and their ability to become a member of the politically coherent community as an artist. In framing political performance and socially engaged art in Indigenous terms, the reader must understand, as artist Agard said, "'Art' described in indigenous terms ... is not separated from tribal life. We make art and we are art" (Farris Dufrene 56). In conversations and observations, these three artists felt that their artwork was a part of them and impacted their community, since there was no segregation between the roles of artist and community member. All of the Indigenous women artists discussed did not envision themselves as isolated individual artists; rather, they believe that art is not a total production of culture or produced as 'high art' or for their own individual sake. Their artwork is a site of "critical intervention,"⁶ as it is infused with refer-

ences to social and outward emotional issues. These sites are where the critical dialogue is taking place, where community members are reflecting on the concept of "untested feasibility." It is artists that are rising to the challenge of performing the role of activist and social change agent.

Dialogical aesthetics is not the sole reading of their artworks, but one aesthetic that complements and contributes to Indigenous art and values. The framework provided in this paper for the reading of each artwork discussed is only a potential beginning of understanding Indigenous art. The artists and participants see past the concept of self-interest or self-gain — they see past themselves and into the future. As explored throughout this article, these selected Indigenous women artists are pushing the boundaries of collective and collaborative work and are creating socially engaged art. Hence, the dialogue that is taking place in localized areas of rural and remote Manitoba is creating new kinds of knowledge and ways of educating people about social issues. These women, by engaging in dialogical aesthetics and political performance, are working towards a more "nuanced model of collective identity and action" (86). \square

1 Discussed in Ana Maria Araujo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope*, which is about her research on the history of Brazilian illiteracy.

2 As discussed earlier, the concept of activist and social change agent (I have developed the term "social change agent" in order to find a different ideology that is not embedded in social constructions of frontline radical activists) were developed out of my understanding that the role of an activist and social change agent is to transform the dominant racist, sexist and colonial Canadian (or any) society by providing individuals with tools to resist in local struggles.

3 Rooted in Feminist artists and critical thinkers Susan Lacy and Lucy Lippard.

4 Abstract, oppositional, and reductive is the framework that we as scholars and society members use to understand an area of avant-garde art. I will be arguing there is a new way to view art based on the work by Kester in dialogical aesthetics and interactive community art and activism.

6 The show *...dies again* included digital photographs based on *Spirit Warriors*. The art show was held at Urban Shaman, an Indigenous run gallery in Winnipeg and the curator was Cathy Mattes. This show dealt with the copyright and intellectual properties rights.

Julie Nagam is a person of multiple locations in community, race, class and identity. She has just begun the PhD program at York University in Communication and Culture.

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