

Storm Spirits: The Cultural Ecology of Aboriginal New Media Art

This curatorial residency researches and presents the findings about how the work of emerging and established Aboriginal new media artists connects with, contributes to, and is transforming the Aboriginal media art history and critical thinking of the past two decades. It is focused on enriching the understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal new media art within diverse audiences but concentrating on two primary on-line communities. The first is the large and growing demographic of Indigenous youth, many of whom regularly access computers at school and in community centres, who often participate in on-line communities, and yet very few of whom will encounter information about, or experiences of contemporary Aboriginal art. The second is that of international new media critical discourse as represented by distinguished examples such as Rhizome.org, Leonardo On-line, the Whitney ArtPort, Turbulence.org, Ars Electronica, and the trAce Online Writing Centre. Finally, this project will confront the challenges of presenting new media art in the off-line physical space of artist-run centres and galleries. This requires compiling and reporting on best practices, and working with artists to devise innovative approaches for presentation, documentation, and critical context that enrich the presence and experience of new media art in both the physical, public space of exhibition and the intimacy of on-line space.

The guiding paradigm of the historic research to be carried out will be ecological – examining geo-cultural sites of Aboriginal media art production with an eye to

- how local resources developed to nurture producers,
- how changes in regional and national cultural meteorology supported and constrained production, recognition and support,
- how communal networks of interaction, inspiration and presentation waxed and waned, and
- how new media art practice came to be established within these processes.

While the production apparatus required to create Aboriginal media art often demands close connections with the non-Aboriginal media arts community and dominant technological and media driven culture, Aboriginal history and contemporary society shapes the most significant aspects of the unique story of Aboriginal media art producers. The most challenging component of this research on the geo-culture of Aboriginal media art is the examination of how distinct and diverse Aboriginal cultures shape and are represented in the works of Aboriginal producers. Taking this analysis a step further, this research will examine how artistic perspectives based on distinct Aboriginal geo-cultural origins provide new vocabularies for the critique of media art in general, and transform prevailing notions of history and contemporary culture.

The next step is examining how Aboriginal new media producers have an intimate relation to the larger ecology of Aboriginal visual and media art production and yet are in the midst of exploring and creating much different production, presentation and critical discourses.

Aboriginal new media did not emerge as a singular and isolated practice. The history of Aboriginal art presents many instances of disconnection and renegotiation where Aboriginal artists were subjected to the inadequacy of, and lack of understanding within dominant modes of contemporary art in relation to Aboriginal expression. The overall production of Aboriginal artists demonstrates a vision that has not been constrained by divisions of pre-existing and predetermining individual arts disciplines, but one that honours story and strives to make the best match with production methodology – creating new branches within their art practice to achieve this match. New media was chosen for expression, when appropriate, by artists working in various disciplines, but primarily the interdisciplinary media arts. This research will examine the relation of new media art works to other modes of production in the bodies of work of Aboriginal artists who have explored multiple approaches in the production of an interconnected expression.

But new media is also both an outcome and a facilitator of major cultural and social shifts, not merely an additional creative tool. While media art already has well-established critiques closely aligned to cultural self-determination and social change, the apparatus of media arts production and presentation has often been institutionally prescribed, inequitably distributed, and Aboriginal access to it tenuous and temporary. New media, while still far from meeting standards of equitable access to production and presentation, is providing many more communities world-wide with tools for international expression, activism, recognition, and networking. This trend shows no sign of slowing and offers significant opportunities for participation and leadership by the rapidly rising demographic of Aboriginal youth. This research into Aboriginal new media art works will examine their relation to

international networks of Indigenous activism, and to supporting the cultural development and creative expression of Indigenous youth within new media art environments, practices and critiques.

The interest in new media is not a new aspect of contemporary Indigenous culture. 1994 could be said to be a banner year for two notable reasons. In January the armed uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in the Mexican state of Chiapas flashed into conferences and lists on networks such as Peacenet, the Internet and Usenet. (*Internet & Society* by Richard Rogers, 2000) In March the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance hosted the Drum Beats to Drum Bytes gathering to discuss the possibility of establishing a "*nation-wide computer based multi-media telecommunications network to serve the communications, information resource, and training and professional development needs of First Peoples (Metis, Inuit, and status and non-status Indian) cultural producers, facilitators and educators working in the fields of our languages, literatures, visual and media arts, performing arts and music, etc.*" (Drum Beats to Drumbytes report, 1994, Appendix 2, p.1) Since that time concurrent developments between arts and activism have taken place with Aboriginal new media arts projects and collectives such as CyberPowWow in Canada and CyberTribe in Australia becoming established along with on-line networks advocating for social justice within issues such as James Bay, Gustavson Lake, and Ipperwash. In Canada the five National Aboriginal Organizations (AFN, MNC, ITK, CAP, and NWAC) have also joined together in a rare alliance (that also includes federal and provincial departments) as a Working Group governing the Aboriginal Canada Portal mandated to "*act as a central gateway to increase the awareness of Aboriginal Peoples history, heritage, traditions and Aboriginal community successes among Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians*" as well as for information sharing and research. (<http://aboriginalcanada.gc.ca>)

But perhaps one of the most encouraging signs of Indigenous participation and self-determination in global network culture has been the rise of self-generated, independent on-line communities of youth such as the Aboriginal Youth Network, Redwire Magazine, and nativegame.net in Canada; indiginet.com.au in Australia; and 4natives.com in the US. While there are many others, these in particular demonstrate the strong interest among Aboriginal youth in developing on-line communities that are accessible and welcoming, with strong links of communication between the participants – actively discussing Aboriginal culture and youth issues.

These types of on-line cultures guide the following four critical components of the measures of success for audience development in this curatorial project:

1. mapping a compilation of these on-line communities of Aboriginal youth that includes an analysis of their unique characteristics and focal points,
2. presenting the new media art works and results of the curatorial research of this residency in contexts that are accessible and welcoming to these communities – acknowledging their unique and growing sophistication,
3. developing effective outreach, education and interpretation strategies that invite and encourage the participation of on-line community members through their own inter-youth dialogue and creative action – that also function and will be carried out at the local community level, and
4. making reports on the results of this work widely available in the Aboriginal curatorial community for further research, outreach and development of on-line Indigenous youth culture.

Another important measure of success will be to gain acknowledgement and critical response to Aboriginal new media art within senior and well established venues of critical discourse on new media art. This will involve compiling and utilizing the already well developed promotional and outreach strategies of the non-Aboriginal new media curatorial community, as well as establishing mutually beneficial collegial relationships within it, to promote and disseminate Aboriginal new media art and the results of the curatorial research in this project.

Finally, this curatorial residency will result in exhibitions of Aboriginal new media art works in a critical context and a solid tour plan. Many have faced the challenge of making strong relationships between the physical, event-based context of exhibitions and the more ephemeral, intimate and long-term presence of new media art – especially in the on-line realm. This residency will compile best practices, looking at the strategies of both small-scale events and large international exhibitions and festivals. But the key approach of this residency is to develop with each artist a specific, innovative and appropriate strategy and context that enriches the experience and understanding of the work – both for the artist and the audiences.