



September 18 - October 24, 2009

GALLERY

Codetalkers of the Digital Divide

(or why we didn't become "roadkill on the information superhighway")

Alanis Obomsawin

Buffy Sainte Marie

Melanie Printup Hope

Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew

Mike MacDonald

Jimmie Durham

Jackson 2bears

Jennifer Wemigwans

Δ∩L

Curated by Cheryl L'Hirondelle



Presented by A Space Gallery and imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

Opening Reception Friday Sept 18th, 7-9pm

Artist and Curator Talk Friday October 16th, 5-7pm

A SPACE GALLERY . 401 RICHMOND STREET WEST . SUITE 110



Alanis Obomsawin 1972, still image from *Manawan* DVD

Codetalkers of the Digital Divide (or why we didn't become "roadkill on the information superhighway"')

To govern ourselves means to govern our stories and our ways of telling stories. It means that the rhythm of the drumbeat, the language of smoke signals and our moccasin telegraph can be transformed to the airwaves and modems of our times. We can determine our use of the new technologies to support, strengthen and enrich our cultural communities.

- Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew, *Drumbeats to Drumbytes: Origins – 1994*
[<http://drumbytes.org/about/origins-1994.php>]

Aboriginal people have been, since time immemorial, "making things our own" and, certainly since the 1960s, finding our own "indigenous aesthetic in digital storytelling."²

This is proven in the vast array of film, video, radio and new media programmed every year at imagineNATIVE and other Aboriginal festivals, artist run galleries, media centres and independent radio stations all across this land now called Canada and beyond. Yet as we move as fast as bytes of information, catapulted through time and space and by the imperative of our continued survival, its important to hit the pause button, reflect on our history and pay homage to the agency and ingenuity of our pathfinders.



Jason Zbears 2005, homepage of Ten Little Indians website

For the 10th anniversary of the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Festival, *Codetalkers of the Digital Divide* will contextualise what "new media" was pre-Internet to what it has become in the current web 2.0 paradigm and how we have used it to tell our stories. Like our ancestors

before us, we have always been keen to identify new tools to accomplish a necessary survival task. The multi-disciplinary artists honoured in this exhibit are renowned masters of this; their example embodies and manifests the imperative of being skillfully adept with a variety of disciplines and media. As Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew writes:

Aboriginal new media did not emerge as a singular and isolated practice... 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.³

Among some of her first projects with the National Film Board, **Alanis Obomsawin's** curriculum-based filmstrip/audio projects illustrate her pre-eminence as one of our most distinguished and dedicated Aboriginal filmmakers by blazing a trail utilizing the most innovative and immersive media of the time. *Manawan* (1972) introduced to school children and university students both the story of previously unrecognized Indigenous identity (the Atikamekw people) and the notion of community collaboration while keeping the reins of creative control within the country's public film producing institution. Utilizing the tone-triggered technology of the time, encoded within the opening narrative by Cesar Newashish is the reminder of language, code, translation and the legacy of relationships – something computing relies on for optimal execution, performance and versioning.



Melanie Printup Hope 1997, detail from Prayer of Thanksgiving website

For decades **Buffy Sainte Marie** also showed the world what a consummate Aboriginal visionary can do. Selected works from her 1994 *Painting with Light* series reveals her use of early versions of digital imaging software such as MacPaint, PixelPaint and Photoshop to discern untold/unseen layers of narrative from both archival and more recent photographs. She also introduced, in this art project, the concept of pixels-as-beadwork, explaining: “[t]he tools are whatever we can get, beads or pixels, hunting bows or a computer.”⁴ Traveling the world with a guitar and mouth bow, she is world renown for “making music on a weapon”⁵ – another poignant reference to the early military uses of what has become common day technological and computing devices.



Jennifer Wemigwans 2007, detail from Four Directions Teachings.com website

Moving to the online environment, *Prayer of Thanksgiving* (1997), by visual and video artist **Melanie Printup Hope**, takes the viewer/user through the very “backbone of the Iroquois culture”⁶ with her magnificently rendered point-and-click prayer site. A cultural documentary, each page beautifully illustrates her masterful artistic process of working with concepts, materials and tools - from beading, digital audio recording, hardware/software manipulation, and hypertext markup language. Every page contains audio samples of each phrase of the prayer in the Tuscarora language – a vital linguistic legacy she leaves for future generations.

Mimicking the ‘sidebar’ current in most Web 2.0 design basics is other important work by a variety of notable artists addressing other survival strategies and imperatives.

isi-pikiskwêwin-ayapihkêsîsak (*Speaking The Language of Spiders*) (1996), by the late **Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew** (originally part of the exhibition *Cyclic*), presents indigenous cosmologies embedded within gritty poetic text and intuitively encoded images aimed at engaging the urban at-risk youth demographic. The website is defined by domains or states of being vis-à-vis Saulteaux cosmology and the title refers to Ahasiw’s vision to use the internet to create an enduring web for the benefit of future generations.



Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew 1996, detail from isi-pikiskwêwin-ayapihkêsîsak (*Speaking The Language of Spiders*) website

As a natural and intuitive extension of his multi-channel sculptural installations, *Butterfly Garden* (commissioned by St. Norberts Arts Centre in 1998), by the late **Mike MacDonald**, offers a loving and carefully cultivated online tutorial of how to grow a butterfly garden with indigenous plants from this land.

In 2000, long before locative media artists were wandering the earth with GPS devices, the legendary **Jimmie Durham** created his own interactive map. *You are Here* (*Sie Sind Hier*) chronicles places of personal relevance in his adopted home city, Berlin that offer the user humorous though sometimes seemingly ciphered histories, insights and truths.

Ten Little Indians (2005) by **Jackson 2Bears** introduces the DIY ingenuity and rhythm of future generations with the concept of remix as “a means of discovering a self-reflexive path of engagement with my own Native heritage by way of remixing and reappropriating Indigenous identity for myself.”⁷

In recognition of her personal experience as an adult literacy teacher of the effects of cultural disenfranchisement she found among contemporary urban Aboriginal people,



Jimmy Durham 2000, detail from *You are here (Sie sind hier)* website

Jennifer Wemigwans shares with the world *Four Directions Teachings.com* (2007). The site was painstakingly researched and is her gift to us – a map back to our source.

From the Inuit who have time and time again demonstrated their exceptional ability to adapt to and master new communications technologies, **Igloolik Isuma Productions** created *IsumaTv 2.0* (2009). The site is an ever-growing database of user-generated audio, video and digital images and as such is a keeper of many endangered indigenous languages.



Mike MacDonald 1998, detail from *Butterfly Garden* website

Furthermore, nominees of the 2009 imagineNATIVE New Media Award are featured in the exhibition pointing to other innovators, movers and shakers. For details on these works refer to the imagineNATIVE catalogue.

Not intended as a survey nor a chronological history, *Codetalkers of the Digital Divide* is rather a selection of artists and specific projects that collectively present a screenshot of a robust web of activities relating to an Aboriginal New Media practice. All artists involved, and their projects exhibited, reinforce and pay homage to the eloquence and adaptability of Aboriginal artists, languages and worldviews. By our ingenuity, we are all modern day codetalkers bridging and championing the chasm that, at one point in our recent history, was thought by some to be an unconquerable digital divide.

To the many artists and projects not cited, I encourage you to continue to conceptualise this chasm as a vessel you fill with mastery, vision and voice. Let none of us fall by the wayside as roadkill on the information superhighway!

- Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Curator



Igloolik Isuma Productions 2002, still image from *IsumaTv 2.0* website

¹ phrase attributed to IndianNet BBS founder Randy Ross

² Candice Hopkins, *Making Things Our Own*, Horizon Zero 17:Tell, <http://www.horizonzero.ca/textsite/tell.php?is=17&file=4&tlang=0>

³ Ahasiw Maskegon Iskewew, *Storm Spirits* Curatorial Statement: <http://drumbytes.org/about/StormSpiritsCuratorial.pdf>

⁴ Buffy Sainte Marie, *Painting With Light* <http://www.creative-native.com/bsmpaintlight.html>

⁵ Buffy Sainte Marie, *Mouthbow*, Cradleboard Teaching Project - Supplements <http://www.cradleboard.org/curriculum/powwow/supplements/mouthbow.html>

⁶ Melanie Printup Hope, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* Home Page http://www.artinjun.ca/printup_hope/

⁷ Jackson 2bears, *Rise of the VJ*: Jackson 2bears <http://www.vagueterrain.net/journal09/jackson-2bears/01>

BIOS

Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki) is one of Canada's most distinguished documentary filmmakers and has been making uncompromising films for almost 40 years. She is an Officer of the Order of Canada and has been recognized with numerous awards and honours including the 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival. <http://www.nfb.ca/alanis-obomsawin>

Buffy Sainte Marie (Cree) virtually invented the role of the Native American international activist pop star. A Ph.D. holder and Academy Award winner, she has received many honours, medals and awards including the 2009 Music of Aboriginal Canada Juno Award for her 18th album *Running For The Drum*. <http://www.creative-native.com/>

Melanie Printup Hope is of Tuscarora descent. Her video, multimedia and installation work has been shown throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships. She currently works as an Associate Professor of Visual Arts at The Sage Colleges, Albany, NY. http://www.artinjun.ca/printup_hope/

Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew (Cree/French Metis) was born in northern Alberta. His brilliant contributions as a performance artist, organizer, curator, critical writer, and web-based media artist have enriched Canada's cultural fabric. He passed away in 2006. <http://www.snac.mb.ca/projects/spiderlanguage/>

Mike MacDonald (Mi'kmaq) broke new ground in video and later in internet-based art beginning in 1979. In 2000 he was awarded the Aboriginal Achievement Award for New Media for *Butterfly Garden*. He passed away in 2006. http://www.snac.mb.ca/projects/butterfly_garden/

Jimmie Durham (Cherokee) is an American-born sculptor, essayist and poet, currently living in Europe. He has worked as a political organizer with the American Indian Movement (AIM) and as a representative to the United Nations. He has exhibited widely including at the Venice Biennale, Whitney Biennial, Documenta in Kassel and the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) London. <http://uinic.de/alex/en/durham/sie-sind-hier.html>

Jackson 2bears is a Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) multimedia artist based in Victoria, BC. He has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Canada and internationally in festivals and group exhibitions. 2bears is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Victoria. <http://jackson2bears.net/10LittleIndians/>

Jennifer Wemigwans is an Ojibwe from Wikwemikong First Nation. She is a new media producer, writer and Ph.D. candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, where she is exploring the convergence between education, Indigenous knowledge and new media technologies. <http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/>

Isuma (Igloodik Isuma Productions) was incorporated in January 1990 as Canada's first Inuit independent production company. They are the independent producers of *The Fast Runner Trilogy*, an award-winning series of Inuit-language films. <http://www.isuma.tv>

Cheryl L'Hirondelle is a mixed blood (Metis/Cree/German) multi/interdisciplinary artist and musician. Her work investigates the junction of a Cree worldview in contemporary time and space. <http://www.ndnnrkey.net>

from: **Buffy Sainte Marie** 1994, *Self Portrait from Painting With Light series*



401 RICHMOND STREET WEST • STE 110 • TORONTO • ONTARIO • M5V 3A8
TEL 416-979-9633 • FAX 416-979-9683
WWW.ASPACEGALLERY.ORG
INFO@ASPACEGALLERY.ORG

GALLERY HOURS: TUESDAY TO FRIDAY 11AM - 6PM SATURDAY 12PM - 5PM



IMAGINATIVE FILM + MEDIA ARTS FESTIVAL 10TH ANNIVERSARY
OCTOBER 14 - 18, 2009. IMAGINATIVE IS A UNIQUE INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL, AND THE LARGEST OF ITS KIND, THAT REFLECTS THE DIVERSITY
OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS NATIONS AND ILLUSTRATES THE VITALITY
AND EXCELLENCE OF OUR ART AND CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

torontodartscouncil
An arm's length body of the City of Toronto