

March 17 - April 29 2017

John Hupfield's Woodlands Indian Art + West Coast Indian Art

Maria Hupfield

John Hupfield was waiting outside of Western Front smoking a cigarette. It was early January and Vancouver (though sunny on that particular morning) was uncharacteristically cold and covered in snow. I joked that our Vancouver weather this winter was probably a lot more like Parry Sound than he was anticipating, but he quickly reminded me what January in Ontario on the Georgian Bay was like. John was staying with his son in Burnaby and had taken the bus over that morning. He explained that the reason he was waiting outside for me was that he decided to take the bus that would get him there 15 min early rather than the bus that would arrive a couple minutes late. It reminded me of something my dad would do, and made me wonder if John was also the type that would insist on filling the gas tank up once it dropped below half.

John was a collector. I knew this much not solely from what his daughter, Maria, had told me about him in advance, but from what I could quickly glean from the way he clicked through some images on his digital camera to show me what winter in Georgian Bay looked like, or scrolled through the thousands of photos on his laptop to show me some pictures of his boat building shop. These pictures were icebreakers, a way to open up conversation and get to know each other through the weather and our professions. The

real task that day was to begin to sift through a few hundred 35mm slides that he and Maria had dug out from boxes in his house.

A couple weeks prior to this, I had received a medium sized box full of 35mm slides and ¼” audio tapes from John. The slides were mostly arranged in clear plastic sleeves, though some were in slide boxes and one set in a particularly ingenious container: an empty box from a roll of aluminum foil. The audio tapes were all on seven-inch reels—some in cardboard boxes, some in plastic cases, some loose with the tape unspooling from the reel, and all of them thick with decades old musty odor. Somewhere in this box, Maria was hoping we would find the original source material for *Woodlands Indian Art: A Living Culture* and *West Coast Indian Art*. These two audiovisual slideshows were John’s first projects after graduating from the media arts program at Sheridan College in the early 1970s. The projects consisted of 35mm slides that John showed on a slide projector in sync with a soundtrack played off of an analogue audio tape deck. The subject of these were, as the titles suggested, explorations of art from the Woodlands school of painting and various First Nations of the Northwest Coast.

Most of what we looked through that day were images from the west coast,

taken at, and with the cooperation of different museums including the Museum of Anthropology. John photographed Haida totems, Kwakwaka'wakw masks, as well as boxes, blankets and other works by Nuuchahnulth, Haisla, and other peoples of the Northwest Coast. I'm not sure if that was because John remembered these better, or if they were better organized and catalogued, but for whatever reason, he seemed to focus in on these. He couldn't perfectly recreate the more than four decades old project, but he pulled together pieces and segments, remembering certain transitions and sequences roughly, and assembling something that had the overall tenor of the original.

The images are casual, more like snapshots than professional documentation of a museum collection. Interspersed are a few landscape shots—sunsets, trees, the ocean—which only add to personal quality of the image sequences. John clearly loves this work he is photographing. But even though the photos possess a warmth and closeness that is distinct from the institutional surroundings many of these works were photographed in, they still read as images made by an outsider looking in.

I'm distinctly aware of this as we load up a draft sequence of images into a slide carousel and project them onto the wall of the Western

Front kitchen. Here's two settler guys, both uninvited guests on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations looking through images of artworks made by the First Peoples of this region that are housed in a settler institution. These photos date back almost a generation before the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association report "Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples" ¹ which helped to shape MOA's repatriation policies and their Guidelines for Management of Culturally Sensitive Material. I'm not really equipped to delve into an analysis of the current ethical positions around collections in institutions like MOA, but suffice to say, these images came from an era when settler recognition and understanding of Indigenous artworks in museum collections was less resolved than it is today.

I outline this to say that I am, at times, uncomfortable looking at these images. Here, from my position in 2017, I'm acutely aware of the complicated histories that led to these works being included in collections like this. I'm also acutely aware of my role in this as an accomplice. Rife with complications as these images and their framing are, this work isn't constructed with blame in mind. Nor is this work about the museum, at least not directly. Though Maria's

exhibition certainly speaks to the role of institutions in holding and managing cultural knowledge, her work in this show is concerned with different relationships and points of exchange: from father to daughter, Indigenous to settler, nation to nation.

The second slide sequence, *Woodlands Indian Art: A Living Culture*, is much less complete.

We were never able to find the original soundtrack and unlike the west coast slides, John didn't have detailed notes about which slides were included in the project. These slides are presented with a fixed duration of three seconds for each slide as there was no audio to cue them up to. In these images, unlike the west coast images, John feels less like an outsider. These photos, taken in and around Parry Sound, bear the look of someone familiar with the land and the people there. Here, the inclusion of the landscape, or of people wearing regalia and dancing in a pow-wow, demonstrate a closeness to the subject that isn't apparent in the west coast project.

John made these projects before Maria was born, and though she recalls seeing some of these slides when she was younger, it was only recently that she came to know the extent of her dad's projects and how they circulated in the world. The slide projects were shown by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto

and licensed for broadcast on TVO in Ontario. Despite the more official, educational positions of those platforms, John didn't regard the work as anything other than being authored from a singular perspective that didn't and couldn't represent its subjects completely. Just as there is a certain naiveté in how John looks at First Nations artists and their work, particularly those of the west coast, there is also a genuine spirit and intention in his work. From a present day perspective, it's easy to look critically at good intentions, but at the heart of this work is recognizing the value of historical context, and the way that perspective and understanding shift in time.

It is important here that the slides are presented as photographic slides, and not digital images. The effect is not to fetishize the archive and or play up nostalgia, but rather to situate the project as being from a specific time. The slides could certainly have been better viewed as digital scans, but as is, they show their age. Time and context are also evident in the titling of the work, where Maria chose to use the phrase "Indian Art" rather than more contemporary terminologies we are used to (e.g. First Nations, Indigenous), which would not have come into common use until some years after John's works were made.

As we talked about this work over the last several months, Maria would bring in the term accomplices. I've wrestled with the language I use to think through my own responsibility and privilege, never quite feeling like I can find words adequate enough to acknowledge the complexity of the situation. I've been struck by Maria's use of accomplice as one possible model to consider. The first position of the accomplice is one who is assisting in a crime. As a settler and immigrant to Canada, as an uninvited guest on Coast Salish land, taking the position of an accomplice acknowledges my own entanglement, direct and indirect, in benefiting from and perpetuating racism or settler colonialism. Turning the definition of an accomplice on end, one can also establish a position that is simultaneously working against these legacies, an accomplice in working towards undoing the legal and political frameworks that have allowed for and continue to permit settler colonialism in Canada.

The central part of the soundtrack for *West Coast Indian Art* includes an interview with Chief Dan George. He speaks broadly about how young people can learn and retain their culture, about the changes he's seen over his lifetime across the 20th century, and tells stories of his own childhood. He concludes the interview saying, "Well, whoever is going to listen to your tape, I'd like

to wish them the best, especially if they are Native people. If they can derive anything from what I'm doing, I'd like to see them make use of it, you know? I don't like my work to be in vain... That's the message I'd like to leave with the Native children, perhaps the white children can learn from it too."

In this final phrase is a suggestion, a kind of cloaked optimism that points towards a possible model. It reminds me of James Baldwin's television interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark where Clark asks if he is an optimist or a pessimist, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist. I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive. But the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country. It is entirely up to the American people and our representatives—it is entirely up to the American people whether or not they are going to face, and deal with, and embrace this stranger whom they maligned so long." ² What Baldwin is suggesting here is not simply that the future of black and white America is intertwined, he's shifting the focus of responsibility, putting the onus on the (white) American people. Though Chief Dan George is nowhere near as direct in his assertion, I read his subtle

redirect in much the same way.
Like Baldwin, he turns the tables
on a question and imagines a way
forward, where, perhaps, settler
children can take the charge of being
settler accomplices in concert with
Indigenous peoples.

—Pablo de Ocampo

¹ A copy of the 1994 reprint of this report can be found at: http://museums.in1touch.org/uploaded/web/docs/Task_Force_Report_1994.pdf

² The complete interview is viewable online in two parts here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Xy3ounRw9Q

Artist Biographies

Maria Hupfield (born in Parry Sound, Georgian Bay, Ontario, Canada, 1975) is a member of Wasauksing First Nation, Ontario, and is currently based in Brooklyn, New York. Solo exhibitions include MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina (2015); Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, Montréal (2015); Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon (2011). Group exhibitions and performances include Trestle Projects Brooklyn (2016); SITE Santa Fe Biennial (2016); Winsor Gallery, Vancouver (2016); A Space Gallery, Toronto (2015); Campo dei Gesuiti, Venice (2015); Aboriginal Art Centre, Ottawa (2015); The Bronx Museum, New York (2015); Vox Populi, Philadelphia (2015); Musée d'art contemporain des Laurentides, Saint Jérôme (2015); North Native Museum (NONAM), Zurich (2014); SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montréal (2013); The Power Plant (2013); Vancouver Art Gallery (2012). Hupfield is founder of 7th Generation Image Makers, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto; Co-owner Native Art Department International; and Assistant Professor in Visual Art and Material Practice appointed to the Faculty of Culture and Community, Emily Carr University of Arts and Design (2007-11).

Charlene Vickers is an Anishnabe artist based in Vancouver, BC Canada. Recent solo exhibitions include "Asemaa/Tobacco" Artspeak and "Ominjimendaan/to remember" grunt gallery in Vancouver. Her work has exhibited across Canada and the United States and toured nationally in the group shows The Fifth World at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, (curated by Wanda Nanibush) and Custom Made at Kamloops Art Gallery (curated by Tania Willard); and can be seen in the permanent collections at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia. Charlene is an MFA grad at Simon Fraser University and is on the Board of Directors at grunt gallery. This past spring 2016, Vickers was selected as the inaugural artist in residence at Griffin Art Projects in North Vancouver creating a series of expansive abstract paintings, plus a new performance work with Chad MacQuarrie called Portals and Improvisations.

List of Works

1. Maria Hupfield

John Hupfield's Woodlands Indian Art + West Coast Indian Art

35mm slides, audio, felt, lumber, fabric, paint, mixed media

The books on display are on loan from the collection of David Vickers.

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Performance

Collaborative performance with Charlene Vickers to mark the opening
Thursday March 16th @ 7:30pm

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