Making a Puncture

Intro.1 Edgar Heap of Birds, *Beyond the Chief*, 2009. Twelve commercially-printed steel signs, 18 x 36 inches each, installed at the University of Illinois, Champaign.

Caption: Heap of Birds was invited to create *Beyond the Chief* by the University’s American Indian Studies Program, which collaborated with other campus organizations including the African American Cultural Center, La Casa Cultural Latina, Asian American Cultural Center, Department of African American Studies, and Asian American Studies. The installation included signs with text in English, Spanish, and Chinese, with the names of twelve Native tribal nations with traditional territory in what is now the state of Illinois.

In 2009 Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954, Wichita, Kansas), a contemporary artist and enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, installed a
temporary public artwork titled *Beyond the Chief* on the campus of the University of Illinois in Champaign. Heap of Birds’s artwork comprised a series of twelve commercially-printed steel signs, each eighteen by thirty-six inches, deployed around the campus and looking very much like official signage posted by the university’s administration. *Beyond the Chief* was based on Heap of Birds’s signature series of public installations, *Native Hosts* (1988, ff.), which name the displaced indigenous nations that once enjoyed sovereign ownership of the lands now claimed by settler nations such as the United States and Canada. *Beyond the Chief* greeted visitors to the campus: “FIGHTING ILLINI” (in reverse type) “TODAY YOUR HOST IS” followed by the name of a tribe with traditional territories in Illinois, including Peoria, Kickapoo, Myaami, Mesk-waki, Kaskaskia, Potawatomi, and six others. Today there are no federally recognized Indian tribes residing in Illinois; nations listed on the signs in *Beyond the Chief* had been relocated to Indian Territory – present-day Oklahoma – and other far-flung places in the nineteenth century.

Heap of Birds has been an influential presence in the contemporary art world for over three decades. Based in Oklahoma, where he is a Professor of Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma, he is sought after as an artist, lecturer, and visiting critic. Since completing his art studies at the University of Kansas, the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, and the Royal College of Art in London in the late 1970s, he has travelled the world producing site-specific artworks and gallery exhibitions including numerous locations in the United States and Canada; Sydney, Australia; Derry, Northern Ireland; Cape Town, South Africa; and Hong Kong, China. He has participated in major international art exhibitions such as Documenta 8 in Kassel, Germany (1987) and the 52nd Venice Biennale in Venice, Italy (2007). He has maintained a disciplined practice in multiple genres: public art installations, both temporary and
permanent, in multiple media; the abstract-landscape paintings of his ongoing Neuf series; large scale, text-based drawings; prints and multiples. Taken as a whole, his body of work comprises a trenchant and thoroughgoing critique of the loss of land and autonomy endured by Native North Americans under the heel of settler colonial expansionism. His art also embodies a distinctly indigenous epistemology as regards place, nation, and identity.¹

Beyond the Chief exemplifies Heap of Birds’s practice in many ways. The sign panels installed throughout the campus were not labeled as artworks – there were no explanatory plaques or didactic text other than the credit line “Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds 2009” at the bottom of each panel – but were left to be encountered by passersby, like other official notices and directional signs. Heap of Birds has explained that he intends for his artworks to create a “puncture.” His public projects are not explicitly identified as art because, as he explains, he is interested in making psychic inroads before a viewer has time to cordon off the experience as just an artwork. The intervention has already commenced its work as the viewer begins to wonder about the unfamiliar message she has just read. As Heap of Birds explains, “The idea of it being art or not being art… well it’s too late to worry about that.”² His works are less a political statement than a platform for discussion; they need to be completed by an engaged public. These unannounced interventions into shared spaces, he hopes, will engender a critical conversation and allow new understanding to emerge.

Heap of Birds first appeared in the contemporary art world alongside a cohort of radical artists such as Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock and David Avalos, who installed advertising placards reading “Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation” on public buses in San Diego during the Super Bowl in January 1988 introducing the issue of labor exploitation in the border city’s hospitality industry; or the artist-collective Gran Fury, whose public posters sought to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. *Welcome to America’s Finest Tourist Plantation* played the part of an unlikely local Chamber of Commerce campaign of truth telling; Gran Fury’s well-designed productions appropriated the look of public-service announcements in the years before government and the non-profit sector had taken action to address the growing epidemic.

The stern appearance of Heap of Birds’s signs masks their subversive intent. His public artworks have avoided the slick look of advertising, instead adopting a bare-bones layout and text set in Helvetica or Avant Garde – typefaces favored by government agencies and other bureaucracies because they convey essential information transparently, seemingly, without calling attention to their artifice, their presumptiveness. Such objects speak with an authority that appears natural, partaking of the anonymous authority of the state and institutional power that art historian Benjamin Buchloh, describing an earlier generation of Conceptual artists, termed the “vernacular of administration.” An official looking sign hails a viewer, enlists them as an obedient subject. Information presented in this format seems beyond question; signs announce that we are on the campus of the University of Illinois, for example, or that parking is prohibited between the hours of eight and ten in the morning. There is, apparently, no reason to question such simple directives. But whereas institutional signage demands compliance, Heap of Birds’s projects aim to provoke critical thinking. As he explains of his choice to assume the mode of official signage: “People tend to believe a sign. I ask them to also learn to question other ‘official’ signs, which they may see in the future. All signs, laws, and histories are editorials.”
Beyond the Chief also exemplifies the serial nature of Heap of Birds’s practice. In Illinois, he adapted the format of his ongoing series Native Hosts, much as he has produced abstract paintings and text drawings in new situations and varied locations throughout his career. While the formula is spare and simple, unchanging in layout and design, each installation is attentive to its local context, requiring time on the ground for research with local informants and other resources and collaborators. Beyond the Chief differed from previous installations of Native Hosts in important details. In other locations Heap of Birds has used place names, generally states or provinces – “NEW YORK” or “BRITISH COLUMBIA” always in reverse type – to address passersby. In Illinois, in collaboration with students and faculty, Heap of Birds chose to break from this pattern and make an artwork that engaged with the University’s recent decision to retire “Chief Illinewek,” a costumed performer whose half-time dances in ersatz Plains Indian regalia had made the University of Illinois’s “Fighting Illini” sports teams (named for a powerful regional confederacy of indigenous nations in the upper Mississippi Valley), the subject of some controversy.

Heap of Birds’s project in Champaign, Illinois also resonates with what art historian Miwon Kwon has termed “site-oriented” art, in that it operates outside the gallery and art’s conventional institutional spaces, outdoors in public spaces. The content of the work merges with the physical site itself – the University and its charged history – revealing voices and perspectives that have been obscured by official public representations. Moreover, this and all of Heap of Birds’s public works have been exemplary of what artist Suzanne Lacy has termed “New Genre Public Art,” a movement that might best be described as a social interventionist practice, in which artists use varied forms to engage diverse audiences about the meaning and function of shared spaces, the often turbulent histories of those spaces, as well as the notion of
the “public” itself. Hailing as passersby as “FIGHTING ILLINI” (in reverse) implicated all who viewed the piece in the University’s troubled culture of sports fandom. This public placement and deliberate address encouraged viewers to think about the complex history of a shared space, as well as their own investment in and attachment to the institution and state.

Addressing the viewer in reverse text is one of Heap of Birds’s signature artistic strategies (along with his use of commercially-printed signage) and it has several effects. Critic Jean Fisher has written that the “use of mirrored English words… disrupts legibility, forcing us to relinquish our mastery over language and read it ‘otherwise.’” Lucy Lippard locates an indigenous precedent: “The reversed words,” she writes, “also recall the historical “Contraries” – Tsistsistas [Cheyenne] warriors who rode their horses backwards, said hello for goodbye, and washed in the mud.” Interestingly, this links an indigenous trickster practice to a warrior tradition – which has relevance for what Heap of Birds calls his “insurgent messages.” For his part, Heap of Birds describes the use of reverse text as an embodiment of an imperative that viewers/readers learn to see and think historically – an injunction against cultural amnesia and forgetting. Indeed, it is not just the address to the viewer – a proxy for the occupying state or offending institution – that is reversed. Heap of Birds text also reverses expectations. It is commonplace to speak of indigenous peoples in the past tense – as an artifact of a lost culture, denizen of the historical museum – but Beyond the Chief is insistent in its use of the present tense: “TODAY YOUR HOST IS POTAWATOMI.” Here the Native Hosts live beyond the chief, outlasting the obsolete colonial stereotype, demanding recognition and deference. But as the reception of Beyond the Chief would demonstrate, not everyone in Champaign was willing to take up Heap of Birds’s challenge to think historically. The reverse text in this case might be seen as a metaphor for irreconcilable viewpoints.

Caption: Exemplary of contemporary art’s archival impulse, Durant’s artwork comprised a proposal to relocate a selection of monuments erected across the United States to commemorate massacres – from the colonization of the Americas to the end of the Indian Wars in 1890 – to the National Mall in Washington, DC, making a grim demonstration of the foundational role of violence in American history. Durant noted that the overwhelming majority of the monuments memorialize white deaths, even as the toll for Native people was far greater. In his conceptual proposal for redeploying the historical markers to Washington, DC, Durant planned to separate the memorials to whites from those memorializing Native American dead – a vivid demonstration of the bias inherent in national histories.
Heap of Birds’s historical imperative links his practice to other contemporary artists, who share what art historian Hal Foster has termed “an archival impulse.” Foster describes a number of artists including Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, Sam Durant, and others whose projects since the 1990s have explored historical experiences that have been forgotten or actively suppressed, offering “counter-memories” that might offer salutary “points of departure” in the present. Heap of Birds’s projects including *Beyond the Chief*, which make available a history of indigenous struggles for homeland and sovereignty and provide historical background for a dialogue about the uses of images of Native peoples, might be seen to offer such a point of departure – an occasion for critical conversation about the burden of the past and the power of representation. If the artists Foster describes as embodying an archival impulse have explored alternative histories in a moment when the notion of a shared historical inheritance seems outmoded or reactionary, Heap of Birds’s work, which makes of indigenous knowledge and oral traditions, challenges ideas of what comprises history, and who claims the right to define it – what histories matter, as it were.

The controversy over the use of Indian names and images bespeaks a deep divide between Native Americans and non-native people – a fundamental and incommensurable disagreement about the meaning of history and the right to define and control symbols and Native American heritage. Heap of Birds has argued that, “No human being should be identified as subservient to another culture. To be overpowered and manipulated in such a way as to become a team mascot is totally unacceptable.” Yet many non-native sports fans have argued that Native team names such as the Indians or the Braves, logos, and costumed performances are not intended as insults, but as honorific celebrations of America’s Indian culture. Indeed, throughout the Midwest and across the country, Native names and other references to Indigenous
culture and people are an important part of non-Natives’ sense of place and history – instilling feelings of rootedness and community for many.

Other universities, responding to protests by Native American activists and their supporters, had quietly relegated their cartoonish Indian mascots to the dustbin of history. However, the University of Illinois kept Chief Illiniwek on the field until 2007, longer than most of their peer institutions, bowing to pressure from sentimental alumni. (A number of professional sports franchises, including the Kansas City Chiefs, the Washington Redskins, and the Cleveland Indians have persisted in using Indian mascots and stereotypes, although newspapers in cities including Minneapolis, Portland, Salt Lake City, and Seattle have editorial policies against publishing “Indian” team names, referring instead to the team by city.) The controversy continued to mount; several schools in the Big Ten Conference would no longer allow Illinois’s mascot to perform at home games, and an accreditation report for the University recommended that the Chief be retired out of respect for Native Americans who found the image offensive. Ultimately, the University retired the Chief – but retained the name Fighting Illini for the sports teams – when faced with mounting public pressure, lost revenues from the athletic programs, and the threat of being banned from conference play.

In creating Beyond the Chief, Heap of Birds sought to highlight an authentic, historical indigenous presence in Illinois. When Heap of Birds’s signs appeared on campus in the winter of 2009, they touched a nerve that was still quite raw. The signs became targets for multiple incidents of vandalism – they were defaced with permanent marker, the metal panels bashed and creased at the corners – prompting Heap of Birds to have the signs refabricated in a heavier weight construction. Melissa Merli, writing in the Champaign-Urbana, Illinois News-Gazette, linked the incident to the University’s recent retirement of the Chief Illinwek mascot, and a
popular backlash in some quarters. She quoted Heap of Birds’s explanation of the artwork and the public reaction. “It’s a memorial to the tribes that are gone,” the artist said. “People take it as a sort of an affront to the sports team. The signs are self-referential. When natives make memorials to themselves or their losses that’s more important than a college mascot or other issue. Everything doesn’t have to be about the dominant culture.”

The vandalism revealed a divided campus. Commentators linked the incidents of vandalism to what they described as a climate of racism on campus citing fraternity parties with ethnic slurs as themes, as well as other incidents of threats and intimidation of minorities. Moreover, Chief Illiniwek managed to linger even after his official retirement in 2007. Diehard fans still brandished Chief paraphernalia as a sign of solidarity with the former mascot; their tenacity was taken as an affront by those who struggled to end the use of the Chief. Teresa Ramos, a Ph.D. candidate in cultural anthropology at the University of Illinois penned an editorial critical of the continued appearance of the image after the University’s official retirement of the Chief, arguing that the “lack of response to the vandalism contribute to a culture of tolerance of racist action.” Ramos wrote that “Upper administration’s management of these incidents displays similar ethics to CEO’s who are more concerned with profit than their responsibility to their clients and the people they serve.” Heap of Birds returned for an open campus meeting on Wednesday, April 29. Robert Warrior, the Director of the American Indian Studies Program at the University and one of the project’s sponsors was quoted in the News-Gazette linking the incident to a larger pattern of institutional racism: “This meeting will provide an opportunity for people on campus to discuss the significance of the recent vandalism and other crimes directed toward American Indians and other people of color in an open forum.”

But the incidents of vandalism continued unabated in the summer; two signs were stolen in the
early morning of Saturday June 13, 2009. A group of local artists and activists started a
campaign, concerned by the lack of a public response from University administrators. The group
printed free yard signs with the text “Respect native hosts: Wea, Peoria, Piankeshaw and
Kaskaskia,” the names of the tribes on four of the damaged signs.14

An anonymous tip left on the Crimestoppers hotline led police to a recent graduate who
was identified as the early morning thief, but nabbing one vandal did little to repair the rift in the
university town that Heap of Birds’s artwork – and puncture – revealed. The thief was arraigned
on single misdemeanor (rather than a felony) charge, as the combined value of the two signs was
placed at less than $300.15 Heap of Birds and several supporters voiced concerns that the
vandalized artworks were undervalued – appraised for only the cost of their fabrication – rather
than as artworks. Previously, a similar installation of twelve Native Hosts panels in British
Columbia had been valued at $10,000 per sign (for a total of $120,000) by two independent art
appraisers.16 One of the appraisals had been furnished to the Champaign County state’s
attorney’s office. However, State’s attorney Julia Rietz disregarded the art appraisal and based
her charge on the costs to fabricate the pieces – $88.65 per panel, which Heap of Birds paid to
American Logo and Sign, Inc. in Moore, Oklahoma, who produce most of his signs. Of course
appraised values of artworks are never based solely on cost of materials and fabrication, but
rather on other factors, not least of which is the value of other comparable work by the artist.

John McKinn, assistant director of the American Indian Studies Program, interviewed in the
News-Gazette, linked this latest insult to a climate of institutional racism, and also University
officials’ ignorance of contemporary art. “We see it as a pattern of behavior of treating American
Indians as second-class citizens, both on campus and in the community,” McKinn argued. “It’s
just another attempt to devalue American Indians and their experience. It also speaks to the lack
of education we all have for what constitutes art.” Travis McDade, writing for the News–Gazette, noted that Illinois law considers “fair market value” in determining charges for theft and property destruction and reasoned that perhaps State’s attorney Rietz calculated that she could not win a felony conviction: “In central Illinois, in this economy, it’s not a stretch to think a jury of local folks would have a hard time believing that what appears to be a collection of street signs could be worth anywhere near six figures.” McDade also suggested that if the thief, for example, “had stolen an Anasazi pot or vandalized a Hopi petroglyph, for instance, he would be in real trouble,” under the provisions of the federal Cultural Heritage Resources Guidelines. For his part, the thief sent a letter to the editor of the News-Gazette, in which he apologized for the incident and said he had been drinking and “made an extraordinarily bad decision.” He was fined $200, sentenced to one-year of court supervision, and ordered to perform one hundred hours of community service and to submit to a substance abuse evaluation. No conviction will appear on his permanent record.

**Sharp Rocks**

As Beyond the Chief illustrates, Heap of Birds’s public art practice – grounded in local history and context, critical and at times antagonistic – is also generative of dialogue and engagement. The agonistic and hostile responses to the artwork when it was installed at the University of Illinois revealed a public not merely unprepared for a concept-driven and political art, as John McKinn argued, but also in some quarters unable to fathom the fact of living, contemporary Native people. Heap of Birds’s text based works are insistently in the present tense (“YOUR HOST TODAY IS…”), rather than focused on nostalgic representations of Native
people in the past – gone and no longer threatening. Native people continue to claim the right to
their lands, their cultures, and their images.

While the formal strategies that Heap of Birds employs in his artwork – from text-based
conceptual and public works to painterly abstractions – do not draw from indigenous aesthetic
traditions, his art continues a warrior tradition specific to the Cheyenne and other Plains peoples.
The narrative art customarily made by Plains men persevered as captured Cheyenne and other
combatants – including Heap of Birds’s paternal great grandfather – were detained in a military
prison at Fort Marion, Florida following the Red River War of 1874 and into the reservation
period of the twentieth century, representing significant community events as well as individual
accomplishments. For Heap of Birds art making is a kind of symbolic or semiotic warfare,
undertaken for community protection. Heap of Birds has compared his art to the “sharp rocks” or
flint-knapped arrow points that are easily found on the ground of the Cheyenne reservation and
elsewhere in North America – physical evidence of historical indigenous presence on the land,
and of the struggles to sustain and defend Native homelands. In an early essay Heap of Birds
noted that these “sharp and strong weapons” were used traditionally as weapons by the Cheyenne
people. They were instruments of self-defense in warfare against human aggressors, and as
“tools of preservation” in the hunt, which brought sustenance to Native communities: “The sharp
rocks idea came to me from living out here on the reservation land. I find stone arrowheads
hunting as we have arrows within the tribe that are very important throughout our history.”20 In
contemporary times, however, the strategies of community protection have shifted from armed
resistance to struggles in the symbolic realm. “At this time, the manifestation of our battle has
changed, ” Heap of Birds wrote. “The white-man shall always project himself into our lives
using information that is provided by learning institutions and the electronic and print media…”
Therefore we find that the survival of our people is based on upon our use of expressive forms of modern communication. The insurgent messages within these forms must serve as our present day combative tactics."21

Native Artist in the Contemporary Art World

To date, Heap of Birds’s work has been discussed primarily in relation to Native American art history. This is understandable given that his work in large part addresses the experiences of Native North American peoples, and he is best known as a member of a cohort of contemporary Native American artists including Rebecca Belmore, Bob Haozous, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Jimmie Durham, George Longfish, James Luna, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Shelly Niro and others who first garnered acclaim in the 1980s and early 1990s, and were included in a spate of exhibitions mounted in 1992 to counter official Quincentennial commemorations of the European discovery of the New World. Moreover, Heap of Birds has spoken of being mentored by Native artists including Blackbear Bosin (Comanche-Kiowa, 1921-1980) while growing up in Wichita, Kansas, and he attended Haskell Indian Junior College (Now Haskell Indian Nations University) in Lawrence, Kansas, before enrolling at the University of Kansas and pursuing graduate studies in art in Philadelphia and London.

But like other Native American contemporary artists, Heap of Birds has pursued a career in the wider contemporary art world at a key moment in its history. As a member of a generation of artists who, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, broke from the strictures of late modernism, and who, driven by the social and political movements of the 1960s, pushed beyond formalist explorations to address issues of power and identity. Heap of Birds’s works, as art historian Jackson Rushing has noted, “helped define their moment in time.”22 The generation of
Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, Introduction

artist that came of age in the era of pluralist postmodernism – and influenced by Black Power, the Chicano Movement, the American Indian Movement, Feminism, and Gay Liberation – produced the multicultural art of the post-Civil rights era, a period of contemporary art history that was crystallized in such watershed exhibitions as *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (mounted in 1990 by the New Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, and in which Heap of Birds was featured), and the controversial 1993 Biennial Exhibition of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

![Image of text drawing](image)


Caption: *CPT* is a 2002 text drawing, created for *Eagles Speak*, a traveling exhibition mounted in collaboration with indigenous artists from New England and artists from South Africa. Heap of Birds’s drawing is an accumulation of the three-character codes for the many international airports through which he has traveled in pursuing his career as an artist. *CPT* is the code for Cape Town International Airport in South Africa.

Moreover, since the early 1990s and coinciding with the emergence of a global contemporary art world, critical attention and not a little commercial energy have been expended
Anthes, Edgar Heap of Birds, Introduction

on a cohort of artists who, as described by the editors of a roundtable published in *Art Journal* in 1998, “travel widely to create and exhibit their work, much of which derives from their experience of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile.” Indigenous contemporary artists certainly fit this description, and they have, to an extent, engaged with the new institutions of the transnational art market, exhibiting in venues including the Venice Biennale and pursuing careers as what Miwon Kwon describes as “itinerant artists.” Since the late 1990s, new support structures and Native critical and curatorial efforts have been launched to advocate for Native artists on the global stage. Yet, with few exceptions, Native artists are absent from most accounts of global contemporary art. Notably, an otherwise expansive classroom textbook *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (2011) fails to address a single Native North American artist. In *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, Shari M. Huhndorf identifies a similar lack of attention to Native North America in the larger project of cultural studies. Huhndorf argues that this invisibility has the effect of “extending the colonial erasure of indigenous peoples” even as the historical experience of indigenous peoples in North America might otherwise be seen as a key example and implicit critique of imperialism.

A possible explanation for the lack of visibility of Native American artists in the contemporary art world – of their lack of standing vis-à-vis the discourses of contemporary art and contemporaneity – is the lingering stereotype of Native Americans as a people of the past. But perhaps more critical is the failure on the part of the institutions of the art world to engage with issues of land and sovereignty, language and culture, and the burdens of history in terms as employed by Native artists. To be sure, Heap of Birds’s artwork, like that of his cohort of Native American contemporary artists, needs to be considered in light of indigenous cultures, histories, and epistemologies. The work of indigenous artists and critics such as Jolene Rickard as well as
important indigenous writers such Vine Deloria, Jr. and Gerald Vizenor are crucial to understanding his work in this crucial context, and this book is organized thematically to illuminate Heap of Birds’s practice in this light.

But just as important is an attention to the work of Native artists vis-à-vis the practice of art today globally, and of the theories and debates that animate the wider contemporary art world. Moreover, such an approach must also recognize the problems of attempting to engage Native artists’ work solely as contemporary artists, i.e., in terms of a set of discourses and institutions that have misrepresented and disadvantaged indigenous and other marginalized peoples, even as the art world has sought to open up and redress its past exclusions and erasures. Indeed, one of the challenges faced by Native and other artists from marginalized communities is the fact that they have often only been according a delimited space within art history and criticism – appearing primarily in museums and galleries devoted solely to Native art, or included in mainstream institutions only in occasional surveys of “multicultural art” or engaging in issues of “primitivism,” or in exhibitions such as those mounted in 1992 – worthy endeavors, of course, but critical typecasting is inherently damaging. As performance artist James Luna recounted of the attention he received in the build-up to the Quincentennial year, “Curators want a certain kind of Indian and a certain kind of Indian art… They want you to be angry, they want you to be talking it up. So when people call me I have to ask ‘Why didn’t you call me before? You’re calling me now, but will you call me in ’93?’ ”

The most relevant question to ask about Heap of Birds’s connections to contemporary art – or about the work of any indigenous artist in the contemporary art world – is how his work grapples with those discourses and institutions, and how they are challenged and transformed in his practice. It is not so much a matter of lobbying for Heap of Bird’s inclusion in a familiar
history – arguing that he too was a participant in key moments and that he too has made works in recognizably contemporary modes and in conversation with contemporary theories of art, although this is certainly true. Rather, as was the challenge for the first generation of feminist art historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s, the question concerns the inherent problems of seeking to add neglected figures to a received canon, which in its structure – its assumptions and key terms – has perpetuated exclusionary thinking. Heap of Birds’s work, in bringing new perspectives to bear, suggests other key terms for a critical history of contemporary art – an attention to place, land, and sovereignty, which suggest a different take on the contemporary art world’s fascination for works that thematize global itinerancy; questions of language and power, which illuminate still-unfolding postcolonial and neocolonial histories; questions of historicity and notions of history (or histories), which should inform current thinking about the meaning of contemporaneity in global context; and a commitment to a notion of renewal, which suggests a different model of futurity than traditionally associated with artistic modernism, but also distinct from ideas of being-in-the-present that have informed much of the thinking on contemporary art – particularly relational aesthetics or other modes of social practice that currently command critical and institutional attention. In describing a 2009 artwork, Please the Waters which, in part, described the spectacular emergency landing of a commercial airliner in the Hudson River near Midtown Manhattan after a flock of Canada Geese flew into an engine of the Airbus A-320, Heap of Birds has suggested that the downing, was a result of “the birds asking the plane to land.”

US Airways flight 1549 was brought down, remarkably, without human injury; perhaps this is a metaphor for the present project. Not geese, but another Heap of Birds asks us to ground the plane, rather than add names to the passenger manifest – to reimagine the work of art history and art criticism as platforms for discussion of and across differences.
Renewal

A significant and critical point of difference for engaging with Heap of Birds’s work is the degree to which his practice is grounded in Cheyenne ceremony. Heap of Birds has been a participant in the Earth Renewal – or Sun Dance, as it is more commonly known – an annual event undertaken during the Summer Solstice by Cheyenne and other Plains people. Over the years, Heap of Birds has assumed greater responsibilities within the ceremony, taking on the role of headsman of the Elk Warrior society and, having completed numerous cycles as a dancer, as an instructor for new participants. The philosophy and iconography of the Earth Renewal ceremony resonates throughout Heap of Birds’s art in all media – from the repetition of elements in multiples of four, to specific personages such as Lizard and Eagle, to the description of songs and phrases as offerings. His works echo the ceremony’s message of the individual’s responsibility to the community, land, and universe.

In July of 2010, I traveled with my wife Kelly to Oklahoma, to be with Edgar and his family as he danced in the annual Earth Renewal on the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation, thirty miles west of Oklahoma City. The ceremony is practiced widely among Plains people, although the Cheyenne may have originated it; they have traditionally referred to the ceremony as the New Life Lodge; the object of the ceremony is make the world new again each year. The ceremony takes place over four days, during which time participants dance to a cycle of four songs, repeated four times. For the course of the ceremony, dancers (traditionally male) fast and take no water. The ceremony is a feat of endurance – a sacrifice, even though Cheyenne dancers no longer pierce the skin of their breast as a flesh offering as part of the ordeal; daytime temperatures can reach one hundred degrees or more, humidity is high and afternoon
thunderstorms are not uncommon in the summer on the Southern Plains. Participants commit to
dance each solstice for four years, at the end of a four year cycle earning a “paint,” a sequence of
body adornment in which the dancer embodies an animal spirit or totem, which grants them right
to instruct others in the correct protocols of the ceremony. As the participants dance to renew the
earth, they also earn the privilege to maintain and perpetuate the ceremony. The renewal is thus
renewed.

Over the course of the ceremony, Kelly and I drove each morning from our hotel in
Oklahoma City, thirty miles west to Concho, on the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation north of the
historic railroad town of El Reno (and nearby historic Ft. Reno) on U.S. Route 81, which follows
the old Chisholm Trail, used for cattle drives from Texas, across Indian lands, to railheads in
Kansas in the years following the Civil War. Northwest of the tribes’ smoke shop and the busy
Lucky Star Casino, along Black Kettle Boulevard, we pulled into an open field that is part of the
rangeland on which the tribes’ herd of Bison are grazed, but which serves each year as the
campsite for one of three Earth Renewal ceremonies held on the reservation. We were taken
aback by the beauty of the setting: a high hilltop surrounded by rolling hills; individual farm
plots defined by rows of trees planted as windbreaks; trees growing along Turtle Creek and the
Washita River in the distance. The drama of the gathering thunderstorms which always seemed
to skirt the campsite; the breezes which, for the most part, made the hot summer days tolerable
and the nights lovely. By day, the buzzing of insects, and the pungent smell of the fire and the
sage; at night, in the distance could be seen the lights of houses and farms beyond the casino, and
above it all a full moon in a clear sky. At the center of a circular gravel drive rose the lodge,
rebuilt each year with freshly-felled timbers arranged in a circle – a cosmic diagram linked
through the generations to the ancient medicine wheels, marked with stones in the landscape by
the ancestors of the Cheyenne and other Plains people. Heap of Birds referred to the lodge as a “space craft” or a “time machine” that carried the participants through the universe and through the generations in the course of the ceremony.  

Through his participation over many years in the Earth Renewal, Heap of Birds has earned four paints: Cheyenne; Eagle; Lizard; and Deer. These spirits appear regularly in Heap of Birds’s art – a clue to how deeply the experience of and commitment to the ceremony inform his art. As we sat with Edgar’s family and friends, I was struck by the realization that this ceremony – this place – is at the heart of Edgar’s identity as a Cheyenne and as an artist. The Earth Renewal and the reservation ground his sense of himself, and informs his practice and as a contemporary artist. Heap of Birds has cautioned, “Being indigenous should not be a curious fantasy open to the public.” However, it is undeniable that this identity, and the perspective it affords, is foundational to the work that Heap of Birds has created for over three decades.

As a non-Native scholar, my focus for many years has been on writing and teaching about indigenous art, and on modern and contemporary art in terms of intercultural exchanges and multimedia practice. Building on my earlier work, in which I argued that Native American art in the twentieth century was an important story within the histories of American modernism, my initial plan in undertaking a book on Heap of Birds’s work was to argue for his place in the history of contemporary art generally, and in particular in terms of developments in the global art world of the 1980s to the present. And while this is very much the case here – and absolutely true to Heap of Birds’s career in the contemporary art world – time spent in dialogue with the artist and with his work has led me to write a book that foregrounds Heap of Birds’s practice as grounded in Cheyenne spirituality and local indigenous knowledge. I have come to recognize that Heap of Birds’s grounding in Cheyenne epistemology – through which he reckons his place
in terms of the local and the global, and between past and future – is the crux of his contemporaneity.

Neuf

This book is not *catalog raisonné* – I do not discuss or account for all of Heap of Birds’s works. It is not organized chronologically, following Heap of Birds’s aesthetic evolution as an artist, nor are the chapters based on the media in which he has worked – although readers will learn something about these subjects and many of Heap of Birds’s artworks. Instead, I have imagined the chapters in this book as interrelated essays, each of which focuses on themes that cut across Heap of Birds’s practice – exploring in detail several of the major bodies of work that he has produced. For readers who are unfamiliar with Heap of Birds’s art – or know only a few pieces – I hope the book will introduce a major figure in the contemporary art world and provide an introduction and background to his practice and the commitments that inspire his artworks. For those readers who are well-acquainted with Heap of Birds’s art – and with other Native American contemporary artists – I hope the book will suggest some new ways of engaging with Heap of Birds’s important work, in the context of contemporary art, but also in terms of how his practice explores critical ways in which indigenous artists’ work can be understood as sharp rocks – weapons for community protection – but also as interventions in the institutions and discourses of the contemporary art world, openings to new and transformative dialogues about the meaning of art in a global culture.

Resonating with the importance of the number four in Cheyenne and other Plains Native cultures, the book comprises four thematic sections addressing the importance of land, language, history, and future generations in Heap of Birds’s art. *Neuf* – the Cheyenne word for the number
four – is a key concept in Cheyenne culture relating to the four sacred colors, the seasons, or the four-directions, and to the process in which a ritual is performed four times – as in the commitment made to undertake the Earth Renewal ceremony for a cycle lasting four years. Neuf – or the number four – resonates throughout Heap of Birds’s practice. Elements appear in multiples of four, linking his diverse works in his varied artistic practice back to the ceremony, to the four directions that define a center and a homeland, and to the renewal of the earth and its inhabitants.

In Chapter One, “Land,” I argue that Heap of Birds’s art must be seen in the first instance as an expression of his Cheyenne-Arapaho identity and grounding in indigenous conceptions of place and identity. I focus on Heap of Birds’s series of abstract Neuf paintings in terms of the particular resonance of the landscape for indigenous cultures and for understandings of indigenous sovereignty. I also describe Native Hosts and other text-based public art installations that address the history of Native land claims and a deeper view of environmental history, in particular as it relates to indigenous nationhood. Chapter Two, “Words,” explores Heap of Birds’s development of text-based strategies, such as large scale wall drawings, prints, and public art installations and “insurgent messages” in relation to the history of conceptual, and activist art, as well as to Heap of Birds’s critique of the use of language as a weapon of domination – and its potential as a medium of expression and tool of resistance.

Chapter Three, “Histories” take up a question asked by Heap of Birds in several art works: “Who Owns History?” and explores what his projects suggest about the meaning and power of history, and of competing notions of historicity. A concluding chapter, “Generations,” brings the book full-circle, as it were, exploring Heap of Birds’s commitments – in his art and as grounded by his practice of the Earth Renewal ceremony – to a notion of “New Growth,” or a
sense of time as distinct from Eurocentric historical thinking, investing in the next generations through creative processes that are collaborative and global, as well as insistently local.


14 Melissa Merli, “Campaign shows support for work,” The News-Gazette, (Champaign-Urbana, IL), Saturday, June 27, 2009; B-1.

15 Mark Schenk, “Recent UI graduate accused of stealing signs last weekend,” The News-Gazette, (Champaign-Urbana, IL), Friday, June 19, 2009; B-1.


17 Melissa Merli, “Artist questions value placed on stolen signs – State listed worth under $300, making charge a misdemeanor,” The News-Gazette, (Champaign-Urbana, IL), Saturday, June 27, 2009; B-1.

18 Travis McDade, “Prosecutor limited by law on art theft,” The News-Gazette, (Champaign-Urbana, IL), Sunday, July 5, 2009; C-5.


22 Rushing, 2005, 369.


24 Kwon, 156–57.


28 Heap of Birds, lecture, University of San Francisco, May 5, 2010.

29 Heap of Birds, conversation with the author, Concho, Oklahoma, July 24, 2010.
