Eagles Speak a new project by
Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds
March 3 through April 14, 2002

A conversation among indigenous artists across time and space.

For over a decade, Cheyenne/Arapaho artist Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds has explored the relationships between this country's living native cultures, contemporary society, history, and indigenous cultures from other continents. During his Providence residency he has brought these different elements together quite literally by asking three other artists to join him. On January 21, 2002, Heap of Birds [HOB] sat down for a discussion with two of the artists: Thembinkosi Goniwe [TG] of South Africa and Mashantucket/Pequot/Wampanoag Tall Oak [TO]. Also participating were David Henry [DH], Head of Education at The RISD Museum, and Stephen Oliver [SO], Art ConText coordinator. Narragansett/Wampanoag artist Cynthia Ross-Meeks [CRM] responded to some of the questions the following week.

DH: Edgar, for years you have been traveling around the world looking at ancient drawings done on cliffs, in caves, and at ancient ceremonial sites. I'm curious to know how that research has influenced your art.

HOB: First, it is an interest I have in my own culture—sharing it and expanding into other indigenous cultures. It isn't reflected in my art so much as it is in my life and values. I am personally very interested in renewal and in issues of ceremony and honoring and respecting traditions. In addition to my research, I have been collaborating with artists from different cultures, too. That has been really useful to me and, I think, to the artistic community.

DH: What are some of the different connections you have found as you travel from culture to culture?

HOB: There is an awareness of our positioning on the globe—how the earth is moving beneath us and how the stars are moving above us. My thesis has been
that we really have a lot to share and understand without even leaving home, in the sense that we have the same star systems above us.

DH: Does your interest in working with other living artists come from a similar interest in finding connections?

HOB: Yes. Collaboration has been so natural; I don’t pursue it. Indigenous artists tend to be very welcoming to each other and to respect one another. We share a disadvantaged perspective from being colonized, which is a unifying factor. Reservation life in Oklahoma is similar to life in Australia for Aboriginal artists. If I am in a township in South Africa or if I am in Zimbabwe, there is a certain kind of style of living and circumstance of domination that has to be struggled through. I think artists who work hard to deal with the market system of art in the world and still speak their mind and get their work done share in the same struggle. In Eagles Speak, I hope to articulate this experience to the public. Artists are some of the best people to put forward that issue and to demonstrate that we have this alliance. Indigenous populations should align together. We can present artwork that has an affinity, and we can learn from each other. I hope it will encourage more collaboration worldwide.

DH: Perhaps now would be a good time for the other artists to describe their work and discuss whether collaboration has played a role in their art in the past?

TO: I guess I would have to say it hasn’t. In my work I like to express the things that are important to me and that I feel are important to the world. I want to find the best way to make the improvements that are mandatory—not simply necessary, but mandatory—to our survival! Very often people try to sidestep issues that are vital; sometimes deliberately, sometimes not. Through art, I can force people to confront reality. If you communicate verbally, people will very often challenge you with their denials; but if you make a visual statement, you have the last word. I enjoy that. I do a lot of research, and now I am trying to find a way to combine it with my visual expression.

TG: In my early years, I did lots of murals, and I also facilitated the painting of murals by young people. In terms of working with other artists, it will be a new experience in a way, although I have helped other artists with some of their projects. I’ve also been a performer in videos or collaborated with artists in terms of building ideas from scratch. In my own work, I am dealing with my experience as a South African black person and as a young person growing. More than that, my art is about celebrating life. It is informed by what I see, what I
hear, what I touch, what I feel, and lots of reading. One thing I like to do is listen to conversations. In South Africa when I am riding on public transportation, I just listen to people's stories, and then I come home and interpret those stories, and they become my stories.

CRM: My art draws on themes from various cultures, as well as my own Native American background. I work with others continually, both at the school where I teach and at the Ryes and Reason Theater at Brown University. There, I do costume design and collaborate with the entire production staff on such elements as lighting and set design. I've gotten to work with some pretty remarkable people, including the famous playwright Atozake Shange.

DH: Where did the title Eagles Speak come from?

HOB: It comes from my life experience. I'm a Cheyenne/Arapaho person from Oklahoma, and in our Warrior Society—I'm one of the leaders of the Elks Society—the eagle has a huge prominence. We have been living with the eagle and its value system for hundreds of years. As I travel the world, I am looking for things that are shared by many, such as the stars above us. Once, I was in Botswana in a boat on a river. It was raining. I saw a big fish eagle sitting on the reeds near me. I had this vision that as I travel and witness other cultures and bring to them my own culture, it is like eagles talking to each other. An eagle from a ceremony in Oklahoma could speak to the eagles in Africa. Then I went to Great Zimbabwe and did some research on rock art, and I found these wonderful carved stone eagles that were the prominent symbols of freedom in that culture.

DH: What are your hopes for the collaboration?

HOB: One of the best things about it for me is letting people in different communities represent themselves. Collaboration fosters self-expression. People think collaboration joins you together—one object, one voice—but it can be different and alive at the same time. I think Rhode Island needs to acknowledge the cultures here at this table, and it has a duty and obligation to seek out these cultures and let them speak for themselves. Rhode Island now has an opportunity to learn from these artists.

TG: I believe art can transcend boundaries. The theme itself, the beauty of birds flying from one place to another, is symbolic of the whole project: how to transform boundaries, how to move from one location to another.

DH: Edgar, have you ever found the notion of giving voice to others to be in conflict with your own artistic vision?

HOB: For me it goes back to how you conduct yourself in a ceremonial setting. In the Cheyenne Nation, there are certain protocols. For instance, if you are in the teepee and the chiefs and warriors are going through the ceremonies, you don't talk about art shows or your job. There are crucial things to deal with that are far beyond art. This is important to remember, because artists are often seen as one-dimensional, always consumed with themselves. That is a Eurocentric view of art. Collaboration isn't all I do. I make paintings that are about beauty. I create drawings that are much like a diary. I pursue other activities, public art.

DH: Is there a question each of you would like to ask each other?

HOB: What are we going to make?

TG: One of the issues I want to deal with is how history and tradition have positioned me here at this point in time. Looking back now, I am able to see South Africa from a distance: with no fixed ideas, but with a base of cultural and political issues.

TO: I have been focusing on the history of slavery here in America, but specifically here in New England, and how that affects we who are a direct result of that reality. I hope to help people see the connection between what happened historically to our people and what is happening right now. There is a legacy.

HOB: I have been traveling for a long time. It's always played a big role in my life. You have freedom; you have new restrictions; things change often. Maybe racially too, you have more freedom to just be yourself. There are all kinds of perceived freedoms. I made a small drawing years ago of airport codes. Places were reduced down to three letters: JFK, YYZ. For Eagles Speak, I am working right now on a ten-foot-wide drawing that will have the airport codes of all the places
I've ever been. I'll focus primarily on CPT, where Thembi comes from; and then the Cape Verde Islands; then maybe Atlanta; then Oklahoma City; and then all the places I have traveled, from the Amazon Basin to Iquitos, to Lima, to Cuzco, to Stockholm, to Winnipeg, to Calgary, to Vancouver. It will be a drawing of three-letter codes, as though I am an eagle flying on aluminum wings. People are knowing each other because of airplanes.

DH: I wonder if we could also talk a bit about your educations. What has your training meant for you?

TO: I always loved faces and the human figure. Like a lot of young boys, I started doing pin-ups. These fantasies were in my mind, so I would draw them, and sometimes they would get me in trouble. My art education started in sixth grade, going to RISD's junior school for the children of Providence. I went every Saturday right up until I graduated from high school. I developed this skill with figures. To this day, if I see something in front of me, I can reproduce it very easily. After high school, I got a scholarship to RISD. I did well in all the art subjects, and I did well in the academic subjects, too, but I didn't always complete my work because of a self-discipline problem. After that first year, I met this girl who was beautiful beyond description, and she was the fulfillment of all those fantasies. She ended up becoming the mother of my daughter.

TG: I come from South Africa, where the situation has been really difficult for a black child. Now I am studying at a so-called Ivy League school [Cornell University]. I never had art as a subject in school. Art found me and took me to where I am. The importance of education is enlightenment: to open people's eyes and ears. It is to fill your heart and to make you grow and understand. For South Africa, I think it is important to enable black children who are disadvantaged.

HOB: I think it is really important to have a diverse education. If you can, find a good faculty that is diverse and very active. I think it is too bad that a lot of art education is from nonactive teachers. For me, there are two kinds of education, and my art has been enriched by both. One is academic training. The other is a ceremonial education within the tribe, which is ongoing. I've been at it for around twenty years. This is something that is underneath all the time and can guide you around the world in whatever you do.

CRM: I was taught by the women around me. My Native American heritage came from my maternal grandmother, my sewing knowledge came from my mother. My multicultural and ethnic studies came from my interest in other cultures and especially tribal peoples.

DH: What are some of the other aspects of this project?

HOB: This exhibit will be traveling to the AVA gallery [Association for Visual Artists] in Cape Town. We're also working with children at the Fox Point Branch of the Providence Public Library and on the Narragansett reservation with Dawn Dow's after-school program. I will bring the work of the children to South Africa. We'll have this full circle from Providence to Cape Verde—where a lot of the Fox Point kids are from—to South Africa and back again.

DH: I wondered if you would speak about your hopes in working with The RISD Museum, which has a 125-year history.

HOB: I see the museum as a public utility, a collective. It should be everybody's house. I hope this project opens the door wider; but the main thing I hope is that this continues—that we've started something today. I hope these artists and others will be back. The network has been built, and it will keep extending to the people it should serve.

TO: I never dreamed I would be having a show at RISD when I was going to school here. I'm humbled and honored at the same time. I'm just grateful that I have been blessed with this opportunity to express myself in a place where I might have more attention than my art would get elsewhere. I thank the Creator for making that possible. I believe everything is part of his plan, and if I am the instrument to convey the things that the world needs to acknowledge, then I am grateful to have that opportunity. I'm honored to work with the people who have the experiences that Edgar, Thembi, and Cynthia have had. This is my first time participating on an international level, and there are a lot of things I will be learning. I'm learning a lot already.
CRM: Just as I am honored to collaborate with Edgar, Thembi, and Tall Oak, I am also honored that my art will be in the same building with the fabulous collection at The RISD Museum. It also strikes a very personal chord with me because I am related to Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, whose work is in the Museum’s collection [sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, b. Rhode Island, 1890-1960, was of Narragansett and African American heritage].

SO: It is kind of neat to be here on Martin Luther King Day, and I am wondering: if you could do anything for the world, what would it be?

CRM: I would like to create greater understanding between people. There must be a way, a word, or a concept or some sort of signal that could help people see inside each other, rather than relying on preconceptions or quick judgments.

TO: For me it's an easy question. We have to try as hard as we can to make this a better world. That's all any of us is here for. None of us are going to be here forever, so future generations are going to inherit what we leave them. That is why it is so important for us to use our time here well, so that we can leave them something really worthwhile. We can use our experience of injustices to try and eliminate them. That is good for both the privileged and the victims. That is what we all share in common, whether people articulate it that way and have enough perception to see it that way or not.

TG: I try to see that love takes place. That's my wish in life. With my art I try to produce images that both celebrate life and at the same time try to shift people's perceptions. I can't change people, they have to change themselves. I can only affect the way they see things. It is up to them to take the responsibility for changing themselves.

HOB: I think we are already doing what I would wish to do. For me, very specifically, it is contained in our ceremonies to renew the earth every year. I guess my wish is that we'll continue to do this and leave it for the next generation. My sons are already in there with me, so they've already got it in their psyche as a priority. That's the main thing: the circle keeps spinning and renewing itself.

TG: It is necessary to get young people interacting with their elders. That is where the chain has broken down today. There are so many lost histories. The true stories are told by the elders. If that can continue, life will be much better. I don't know my spirit unless my father teaches me. There is so much information out there right now. It is only at home that I am going to discover myself. Today that space where kids can learn about themselves is lacking.

TO: I don't believe anything is an accident. The fact that we are all here right now is not an accident. We only call such things accidents because we don't know what the Creator's plan is; but everything is part of his plan. As I listen to how young you [Thembi] are—the youngest one here in this group—I feel that the Creator has a very important plan for you. For you to experience the interactions
of people who are older than you and to take part in this is something really significant. I think of everything in historical terms because I have a keen sense of history, but I see you making history. I can't even begin to measure what you have acquired in experiences and the perceptions you have gained from the time you've been here; but listening to you, I know it is way beyond what I could imagine. When you go back home with all of that, I would just love to be an eyewitness to everything that is going to happen to you.

Thembinkosi Goniwe received an MFA from the University of Cape Town in 1999 and subsequently taught there for three years. He is currently earning his PhD in Art History at Cornell University, Ithaca. He has been an artist in residence at Wrexham, North Wales; London, England; Tallahassee, Florida; Johannesburg, South Africa; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. His work has been exhibited in Africa, Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds is one of the leaders of the Taistisitas (Cheyenne) traditional Elk Warrior Society. He is an Associate Professor in the areas of Native American studies and fine art at the University of Oklahoma, Norman; and has been a visiting professor at Yale University, New Haven. Exhibitions of his work have been held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia; and the National Gallery of Art, Ottawa, Canada; among others. Heap of Birds has lectured in Australia, Puerto Rico, Canada, Sweden, England, Northern Ireland, Spain, Western Samoa, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. He has received awards from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Cynthia Listens to the Wind Ross-Meeks has a BFA in Fashion Design and an MAE in Art Education, both from RISD. She serves as the Resident Costume Designer at Rites and Reason Theatre, Brown University, and as a teacher in the Providence public schools. She currently teaches apparel design in RISD's Continuing Education program.

Everett Tall Oak Weeden, a Mashantucket/Pequot/Wampanoag, is an education consultant who has been actively lecturing over the years, giving speeches and performances at various universities and public educational institutions. He has served as a consultant for the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, and the Boston Children’s Museum. He has devoted his life to the survival of the native people of the Americas, with emphasis on the Northeast United States.