
Artistic displacements: an interview with Edgar Heap of Birds

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Hock E Aye Vi (Edgar Heap of Birds) is an artist of Cheyenne and Arapaho descent, whose uncompromising art challenges colonial history and contemporary realities in unsettling and creative ways. He has placed provocative public art in cities across North America, including Seattle, Vancouver, New York, Portland, Santa Fe, and Denver, designed to remind the city's current residents that they are "guests of people whose land they occupy". His work deals directly with issues of colonial violence, displacement, and dispossession, and has been exhibited around the world. More information can be found at <http://www.heapofbirds.com>.

In February 2004, while in Vancouver, he spoke to Nick Blomley about his work. The interview below emerged from this conversation.

Nick Blomley Edgar, in your talk in Vancouver you began by showing a slide of land on the reservation in Oklahoma where you lived for several years, noting that it is always necessary to begin with the land. Can you expand on this?

Heap of Birds The land is the beginning and end. It is to humble yourself and know that the land and earth comes first before the people: somewhat like caring for the children first because they are precious, although we are not parents of land. The highest value goes ahead. Of course as someone grows to know certain sites on this earth then it can cradle you, reaffirm you, and offer you a relationship. Also the earth remains after you are gone and was here before with one's distant relatives. The earth also is an instrument giving the necessary tools and plants in order to create ceremony.

NB Beyond the importance of the land, how does place matter to you and your work?

HB Place is very key, tied into my comment concerning ceremony and plant life. Territory in a contemporary mode is important as well. This idea is in relation to treaties, wars, massacres, government policies, and memories of history. There are also the very personal notions of where one raises one's children and where you walk. Overall 'time' is a large factor in significance of place, where you live your days and nights, where your Grand Mothers and Grand Fathers lived theirs. For me this is also the origin of my *Neuf* series of paintings, having come out of the land west of Geary, Oklahoma.

As a result, displacement can be a central problematic and sad thought particularly in reference to political histories and actions. The personal and emotional commitment to place, for me, is a conceptual state. The notion is similar to love for someone, you carry it with you without having to see the person or be with them. So the relationship to land lives on, even with a displaced reality.

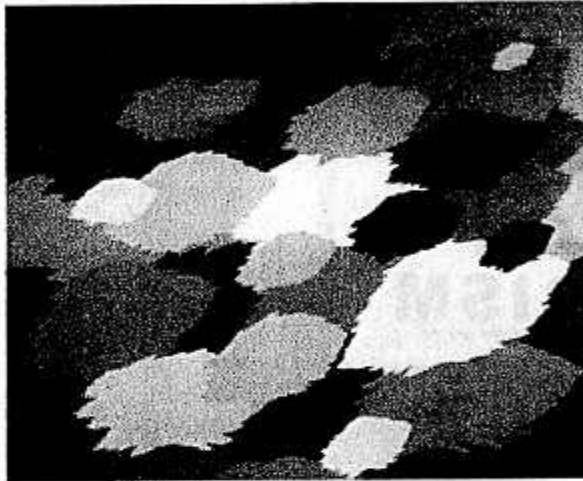


Figure 1. *Neuf*.

NB But it also seems that Native people have not only been displaced from their land by colonialism, but also from their culture. Could you comment on the ways your work deals with this issue?

HB The artworks which I create in the public realm brings Native culture to tribal citizens as well as attempting to enlighten the non-Native viewer. The first step is to bring the indigenous presence back to lands and urban sites which were lost to the white invasion. But I also am very keen on allowing the current tribal community members, at these specific locations, to be able to interact with the issues of Native culture. They are ready to reembrace their own histories through the artistic information and respect shown publicly towards the artwork.

In Cleveland and elsewhere, I encouraged local urban tribal representatives to act as spokespeople for the cultural issues embodied within the art. They engaged history and political concepts while learning and speaking out to the mass media. So I see the delivery of culture directly to Native people to be a primary mission of all the public art which I create.



Figure 2. *Smile for racism (American Leagues) 1*.



Figure 3. *Smile for racism (American Leagues) 2.*



Figure 4. *Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi.*

NB Your work covers many different media, ranging from textiles to sculpture and graphic art. However, maybe we can focus on some of your public art, such as your *Purchase* piece in New York and the *Native Hosts* series in New York City and Vancouver. What motivated the New York pieces, for example?

HB The *Native Hosts* works came out of realizing that I was an outsider in New York City in relation to the numerous tribes of New York State. In my artwork I refuse to attempt to speak for all Native Americans. I decline to be backed into a corner of being regarded as a generalized Native American. Rather I see myself as an individual with personal perceptions that speak to Native culture. The given perception in America is to

carve the world into specialized groups of people where humankind can be isolated, cataloged, and studied. I find it much more reasonable to bring attention to a personal relationship to culture. The *Native Hosts* series has been deployed at various urban locations to bring forth awareness regarding local Native histories and issues as I find them, being a guest myself in their Native nation. At these public and outdoor art sites I do not present my individual studio art. Those expressions are reserved for a gallery or museum venue.



Figure 5. *Reclaim* sign panel from Purchase, New York.

NB I find it interesting that you use official signage in much of your public art.

HB On another level, I would rather just go on record with a certain viewpoint instead of having a debate. The sign works do this for me. They also use the same communication form of declaration, like the treaty document or law, which was inflicted upon Native people. There was no reasoning done or compromise made, only a pronouncement directed. Of course the authoritative power of public signage is a useful strategy for issuing a change in knowledge. 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.

The public presence of my sign works is done outdoors to be free to the public. It is also done to present a message for and to everyone, not to an 'art' audience. The museums are elitist zones and not welcoming to all people. The street has a more open decorum. Cities are locations of the sign pieces because often the sites within cities have high value because of the colonial power's wealth. They are charged locations that can be implicated in an unsavory history of conquest. An example is the Vancouver Art Gallery. The current-day building was once a provincial courthouse where lands were taken away from First Nations people. The 12 *Native Hosts* sign panels were deployed encircling the Vancouver Art Gallery to draw attention to this dreadful history. An artist needs the political associations to gather great momentum

while using small and few sign works. The media is also a tool for the public artist. As the art becomes 'News' then the message is transmitted a million-fold at no cost.

NB Does the experience of public life differ for Native people?

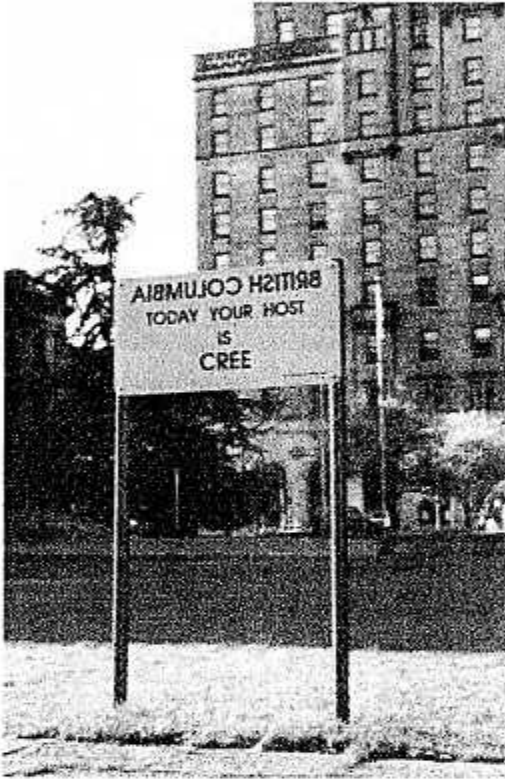


Figure 6. *Today Your Host Is Cree.*

HB There is an important issue to consider as to the perceived public domain of Native American life in the contemporary public world. As Native people engage everyday societal relations, being asked personal questions by strangers is an ongoing intrusive experience. These invasive queries pertaining to tribe, origins, and family lineage are perpetrated because of a perception that non-Native people are welcome to invade Native lives. The indigenous life is viewed to exist in the same purity as a national park: one is privileged to enter as desired. There is an attitude of awe and feigned respect expressed by the stranger, yet the 'Natural' excursion taken into a Native life is oblivious to the intensely personal realm that all individuals hold dear. Being indigenous should not be a curious fantasy open to the public.

A solid stance concerning these public/private issues are approached in the creation and exhibition of the *Marker Drawings*. These large-scale diary-type text works seek to present personal and private disclosures while maintaining a coded signal. The code is not freely offered but a visibly loud presence is expressed in the drawing for all to see. The artwork resists being an arena which one can break and enter unless invited.

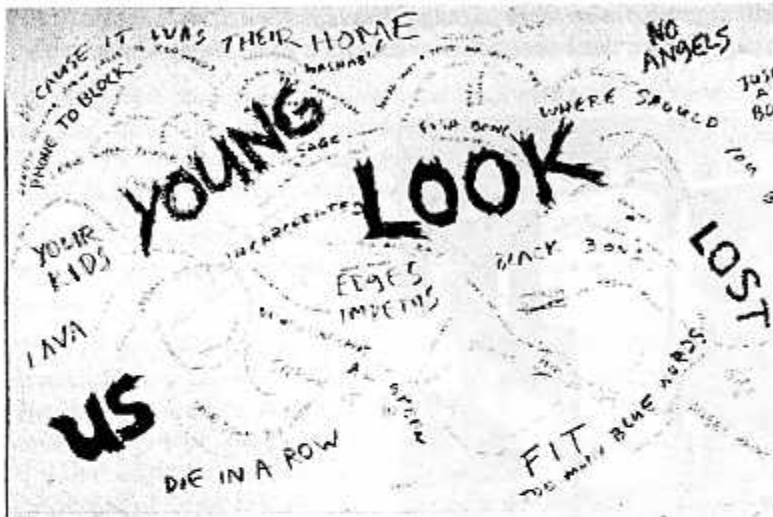


Figure 7. Marker Drawing.

NB I was also struck by the slide you showed at your talk of a *Native Hosts* sign next to a bus stop. Is there something about mobility or migration here that you're commenting on?

HB The *Native Host* sign panel *Today Your Host is Cree* was sited near a Vancouver bus stop at the Vancouver Art Gallery. In my research dealing with British Columbia history I found a bias towards not including prairie First Nations as part of a modern coastal legacy. For many Native nations, being mobile in a traditional sense of migration and also through forced governmental relocation, has played a significant role in their identity and contemporary circumstance. Countless tribal families both in the US and Canada have learned to negotiate and except life as a roving challenge due to economic and political hardships. In the case of the Cree, many tribal members may have come to British Columbia in hopes of finding work. They are a new addition to the province but should receive the same respect and recognition as other First Nations traditionally from the British Columbia region.



Figure 8. *Today Your Host is Cree*.

NB The *Building Minnesota* project also uses signage, but speaks to an historic injustice. Why is it important to make these connections within the present-day United States?

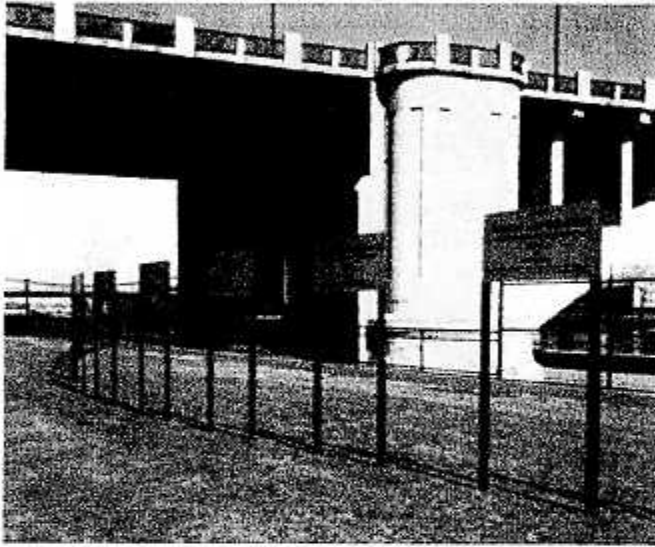


Figure 9. *Building Minnesota*.

HB The work in Minneapolis, *Building Minnesota*, commemorates America's largest mass execution, the hanging of 38 Dakota warriors by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. In 1865, President Andrew Jackson hung two more Dakota citizens. This needed to be brought forward as a hidden grim legacy in American history. Like many official signs, official history contains a heavily biased editorial or outright omissions. It is very key to reveal the overall American historical trait, much like the Bush-spun war because of Weapons of Mass Destruction that were never found in Iraq. Fiction is a main method in positions of Power.

NB You're currently working on a massive public installation in Denver, called *Wheel*, that seems to combine an attention to history and the present.

HB *Wheel* focuses upon the prehistoric beginnings of Colorado but spends most of its energies upon the conflict periods with Native people and the invasion from the Whiteman, armies, miners, and government policies. These events changed the Native world in a very rapid and negative way forever.

NB *Wheel* also makes references to government—there are many acronyms for state organizations on the sculptures. How does the state figure in your work? Is it purely negative?

HB The presence of government within Native life is fairly negative but cannot be disassociated with the reasons why we need government assistance in the first place. The government intervention is a case of 'we [the government] hate you for what we have done to you'. The government can never be seen as neutral until there is a portion of it that might be controlled by Native people. A bittersweet marriage, like being given the choice of being brutalized by a bible or a gun: you would rather have neither.

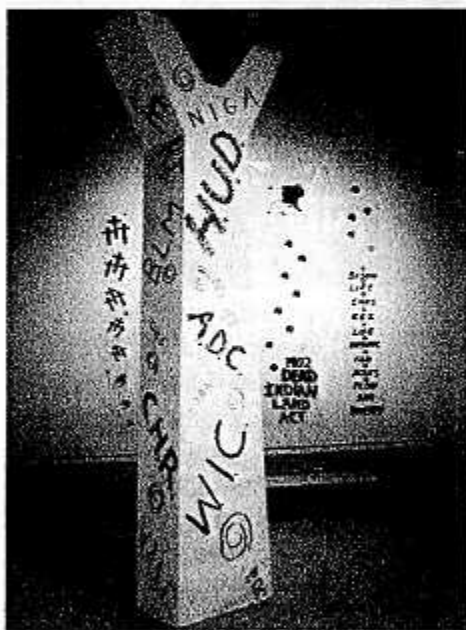


Figure 10. Closeup of trees showing acronyms.

NB While it is clear that colonialism and its effect upon Native people is a recurrent theme, how does your work connect with other forms of displacement or oppression?

HB With my public art, I have dealt with other international points of oppression. Public art interventions were deployed in Northern Ireland, Australia, and Africa. In America I presented a series of five-foot-tall text pieces in a 'rust belt' shopping mall. The messages dealt with accruing debt, while shopping on credit. The piece was titled: *Maxed Out Yet?* We also printed shopping bags and sold them with the messages. I have worked with issues of police violence in Los Angeles, California. The three-part text print spoke about how rapidly a bullet moves and the softness of human flesh.

The work was titled *Good Work L.A.P.D.* and read: 'Bullets are Rapid, Flesh is Soft, Is it Everyone's Pain?' I do see a unified history and struggle throughout our shared histories and the interaction with power.



Figure 11. *Maxed Out Yet?*



Figure 12. *Good Work L.A.P.D.*

NB And what's next for you?

HB I will be extending my learning, networking, and creative potential in Asia this year. It will be my third trip to Asia in three years. I have lectured and conducted research in Thailand and Cambodia. Next I will be lecturing in Java and looking at both modern art practice and traditional tribal textiles from Indonesia. My future goal is to collaborate with artists across Asia and look at issues of freedom. These collaborations may take the form of public art interventions, which I understand will be a new art form in South East Asia.