

Born in Wichita, Kansas, 1954
University of Kansas, Lawrence, B.F.A., 1976
Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, M.F.A., 1979

Solo Exhibitions

- "Sharp Rocks," C.E.P.A. Gallery and Bethume Gallery, S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, Buffalo, N.Y., April 8-22, 1986.
University of Oklahoma Museum of Art, Norman, Okla., April 14 - May 12, 1985.
"Foreign Bodies," Southern Plains Indian Museum, Andarko, Okla., April 25 - June 3, 1982.
"1-80 Series: Edgar Heap of Birds," Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Neb., August 21 - October 17, 1982.
"Messages to the Public," Times Square, Spectacolor Computer Light Billboard, New York, N.Y., October 8-31, 1982.

Group Exhibitions

- "Whitney Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y., March 20 - June 2, 1985.
"Spirits Rising Over a Faded Past," Temple University Gallery, Philadelphia, Pa., November 15 - December 15, 1985.
"Image/Word," New Langton Arts, San Francisco, Calif., October 8 - November 2, 1985.
"MASS, organized by Group Material," Hallwalls, Buffalo, N.Y., May 10 - June 8, 1985 (travelled).
"Lower East-Side is Not for Sale," Tenth Street and Avenue A, New York, N.Y., April 1984.
"The 1984 Show," Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, N.Y., January 26 - March 12, 1983.

Published Works

- "Individual Work." *Upfront*, no. 9 (Fall 1984): 33.
"No Beads No Trinkets." *United Nations Magazine* (September 1984): 15.
"Sharp Rocks." *Papers Magazine*, Fifth Edition (1984): 22-28.

Bibliography

- Berkson, Bill. "Image/Word: The Art of Reading." *Artforum* 24, no. 6 (February 1986): 111-112.
Conheim, Maryanne. "Heap of Birds is a Painter with Social Purpose." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 21, 1980.

The individual views expressed in the exhibitions and publications are not necessarily those of the Museum.

The ON VIEW program is supported in part by grants from the Jerome Foundation, Citibank, N.A., and by funds from the Arthur Sahn Memorial Fund.

THE NEW MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

BORN FROM SHARP ROCKS

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS

April 12 - June 12, 1986

Artist's Statement

The native arrow points of the past were worked and formed to become sharp and strong weapons. These sharp rocks were responsible for the defense and welfare of the tribe. As weapons of war the sharp rocks of the Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) people were used for two separate purposes, as defense of attack weapons against man and as tools of preservation through hunting game animals.

Today one may still discover actual Tsistsistas arrow points on the surface of the earth. In touching these weapons I have found clues as to the useful current day defenses and preservation tactics that can serve living Native Americans.

At this time the manifestation of our battle has changed. The white man shall always project himself into our lives using information that is provided by learning institutions and the electronic and print media. Through these experiences the non-Indian will decide to accept or reject that the Native Americans are a unique and separate people with the mandate to maintain and strengthen indigenous rights and beliefs. Therefore we find that the survival of our people is based upon our use of expressive forms of modern communication. The insurgent messages within these forms must serve as our present day combative tactics.

As a native artist, these insurgent messages delivered through art must present the fact that Native Americans are decidedly different from the dominant white culture in America. The world view which we hold is a creation of our circular awareness and sole self-determination.

With Reservations

One of the unique and curious features of the American landscape is the existence of Indian reservations. These anachronistic and unsympathetic boundaries pose an insistent reminder of the historic paranoia of the U.S. government. Although they are not surrounded by stockades or barbed wire, Native Americans are effectively imprisoned by this economic and political separatism. And, insofar as the definition of territory contributes to the definition of national character, in establishing insufficient homelands for displaced Native Americans over a century ago, the U.S. government set in motion a policy of segregation and humiliation which remains uncorrected to this day.

Edgar Heap of Birds wants to educate white Americans about the injustices of Indian life. In his language installations, the phrases he uses are often militant accusations toward the dominant culture, such as, "Oh, Those South African Homelands. You Impose U.S. Indian Reservations." Here Heap of Birds suggests that while Americans are often sensitive to the plight of racial or political minorities in other countries—in this case South Africa—they are often willfully indifferent to comparably grievous inequities in their own country. In support of his argument, Heap of Birds cites the poor standard of living on reservations: housing is insufficient, the quality of health care is low, and the rates of infant mortality and suicide are abnormally high.

Although Heap of Birds believes in the fundamental and irreconcilable differences between Native Americans and Anglo-American culture, his work serves as a type of bridge between the two. In educating the dominant culture about Native Americans, Heap of Birds is also introducing them to their own misunderstandings. Although he cannot enable white Americans to experience Native American culture, he can make clear their misapprehensions, their stereotypes, and their exploitations. One of Heap of Birds' word pieces parodies this appropriative domination: "We don't want Indians, just their names, mascots, machines, cities, products, buildings."

In his exhibition "Sharp Rocks" (from which *The New Museum* installation is drawn), Heap of Birds has constructed a way of informing the public about Native American protests and at the same time gaining some small protection against further abuses. To this end, the exhibition encompasses a variety of media—paintings, language installations, works on paper, videotapes—for Heap of Birds understands that all forms of modern cultural communication must be made accessible if the Native American voice is to be heard. For him access to these media is protection just as arrow points (sharp rocks) were protection for his ancestors.

Edgar Heap of Birds then offers an exemplary model of political art practice, combining didacticism with traditional aesthetic forms. Moreover, his work stresses that for minority artists the alternatives are not simply limited to assimilation or separatism. Rather the more valuable strategy is to place the sharply pointed protest squarely at the center of the mainstream culture.

—Brian Wallis



Lightning Woman and her grandson Edgar Heap of Birds with the language installation "Possible Lives."