

The Temporary Autonomous Zone is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it.

— HAKIM BEY

PIRATES OF PERFORMANCE:

Wanda Nanibush

IN CONVERSATION

WITH CREE

PERFORMANCE

ARTISTS **Cheryl**

L'Hirondelle

AND **Archer**

Pechawis



<this page> Archer Pechawis. *Shoot the Indian*, 2008. Photo: Merle Addison. Courtesy: the artist.
<opposite page> Cheryl L'Hirondelle. *ekayapahkaci (the beauty within)*, 2008. Photo: Scott Stephens.

In mid-May 2008, I find myself at the Belgo building in Montréal peering precariously down the space between the stairs where the banisters form an amazing rectangle. My line of sight ends at a tiny red bag sitting beside the last stair. Cheryl L'Hirondelle climbs up over the banister, looking like a rogue animal freed from her cage. She smiles through the physically strenuous act of climbing while audience members randomly join her. L'Hirondelle carries the equipment that she will need to set up a pirate radio station on her back, making several climbs up and down the banister. The performance we are witnessing is called *awa ka-âmaciwêl pîwâpisko* (*waciya/climbing the iron mountains*). Curator Joanne Bristol, having learned just the day before, assists Cheryl in setting up the pirate radio station on the roof. The radio broadcasts for 5 miles — pirating 89.9 FM for downtown Montréal. As corporations and countries claim the air, Cheryl quietly infiltrates these spaces and reclaims them for the birds.

One month later, I am in Vancouver with L'Hirondelle, lined up to “Shoot the Indian” at the Magnetic North Festival HIVE2 event. The Indian in this case is Archer Pechawis, standing in a white painter's suit in front of a white 30-foot screen with a projection of remixed scenes from the “Cowboys and Indians” film genre. The most disturbing part of the performance is that Archer is wearing a Tsimshian mask





Archer Pechawis. *Elegy*, 2006.
Photos: Leonard Fisher.
Courtesy: the artist.



carved by Simon Reese, which is being pelted with paint. People are paying \$5 for five shots at Pechawis with a semi-automatic paintball gun. Some folks seem interested, some are fairly uncomfortable, others relish the act with a chilling lack of restraint. One man makes me worry for Indians everywhere.

These two Cree artists blur the boundaries between art and activism, between memory and forgetting, mind and body, artist and broader community. The lines are blurred in their practice not because they are working against a western enlightenment tradition but because they are working from within an ever-changing Cree conception of the world. Each artist interrogates their Cree-ness and brings Cree-ness into view in their performances. I met with L'Hirondelle and Pechawis in the back garden of Vancouver's Western Front Gallery to talk about the social, political and cultural implications of the way they engage people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and how their art is informed by a new (read: Old Indian) ways of being political that starts with one's own life, body and relations.

Wanda Nanibush: Isn't the first question we always ask: Where are you from?

Archer Pechawis: I am Plains Cree on my mother's side. She is from Mistawasis First Nation, Saskatchewan. I am status through Bill C-31. Growing up as a non-status Indian until I was in my mid-20s had a profound effect on my identity. I was born in Alert Bay, B.C. in Kwakwaka'wakw territory on the coast. I am adopted into my uncle's clan which is Quolus. And that has affected me profoundly as well. We moved to Vancouver when

I was a teenager, Vancouver is my home. In short I am a West Coast Cree.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle: [in Cree] It is one of the pivotal questions — *tânitê ohci kiya*, the one that lets you know how we are related. It lets you know who you can take to your tent (ha ha) and what your blood line is. I am from Northern Alberta. My mom is a mixed-blood Cree woman from Lac La Biche in northern Alberta, Kikino and Pahpahstayo. The latter is a band surrendered by the Canadian government during the Louis Riel resistance to make way for the railway expansion. They wanted to build the railway through from Calgary, so they could send the Gatlin guns to the river and float them up to Northern Saskatchewan to squash the uprising. The band was surrendered when it was hunting season so the government could say no one was living there. That was quite common. My dad is German and Polish and came over after the second world war, so in Cree you'd say he was *mistik-osiw iyiniw* (a wooden boat being), an old way to say European.

WN: How does where you come from influence your artistic practice?

AP: It influences everything about me. Thinking of my practice — it has really been varied. I started out as a street



performer, a street juggler. Now I am a performance and media artist. It has been a journey through all those places. Like many Native artists, my primary motive was social change via art for the Cree people. When I came to the arts I realized this was where I could effect social change.

CL: I have never been just one thing. No Native artist I know is just one thing. Some of my early love of what performance art could do versus theatre was that you don't have the hierarchy of the gaze of what you have to witness. You could gaze at what you want. There is a beauty to that openness. It reminds me of family gatherings where you can look at uncle's tapping feet and no one will say to you that you should be looking at Aunt Celeste singing. That translated for me later in performance art.

The other thing is that I grew up without the language. I think I have always thought that making performance art is like building a language or a lexicon — a way to recreate something that got lost at some point.

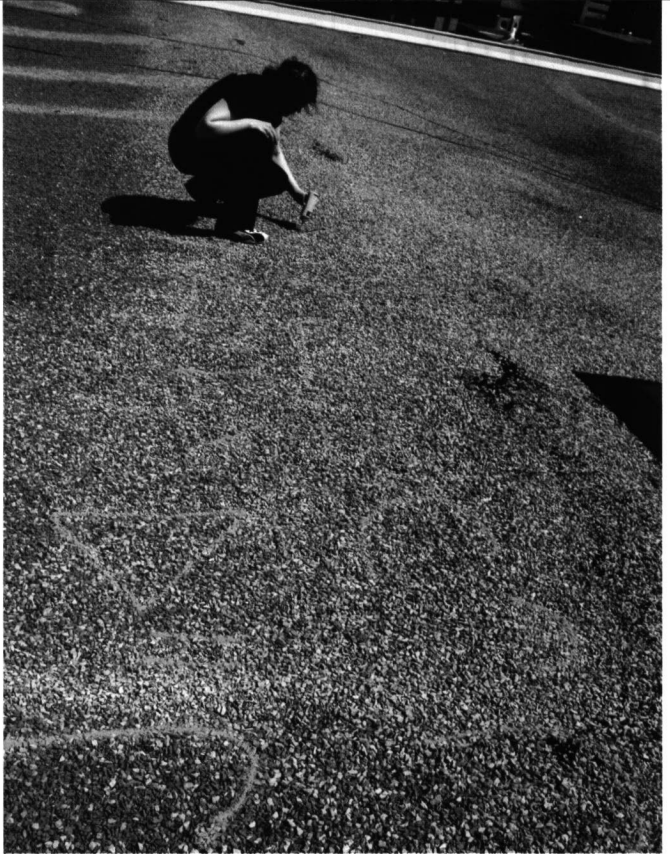
AP: The whole language thing is critical. If you look at the work that I do versus the work that Floyd Favel does, he is fluent in Cree, there is always a sense of journey and home. My French is better than my Cree so there is a gap there. I cannot teach my daughter Cree so it becomes

generational. That is part of the legacy of residential schools. I love this idea that Cheryl is talking about, performance is about creating a lexicon and it's a space of freedom. Even experimental theatre is regimented. In performance anything goes and anything should, that way it is constantly pushing boundaries.

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WN: You're seriously political, but you have a playfulness or an openness to what happens in your work. What role does play have in your work?

CL: I like to play. Looking at some of my old performance work, it is so serious. I look like a robot. I would have this dialogue with myself and say it's a sense of ritual. But then I started going to ceremony and realized that there is a lot of play and jokes going on and so I realized I could assume a more natural position and not be so stiff. I started working with the notion of play to challenge the way I had been socialized to think this is serious business, serious art making, and have a bit more fun with it.



Cheryl L'Hirondelle.
Awa ka-amaciwet piwapisko waciya
(Climbing the Iron Mountains), 2008.
Courtesy: La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse.



One of the things I wanted to do especially with *climbing the iron mountains* is to de-socialize myself in space. I also wanted to decentralize myself as the performer. Like Raphaelle [an audience member who climbed with Cheryl in Montréal] said she might upstage me because she is fit and climbs like a monkey. I said, there is no upstaging in this piece. It's part of decolonizing oneself in space and time.

I am trying to impart something like tools for survival. *Tools for Survival* was an old piece I did where I went around yelling at everyone "have you got your tools for survival?" Setting up pirate radio is instructional, letting people know how to do it.

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WN: Cheryl, you constitute accidental audiences or audiences by chance. How does this type of audience differ from a captive audience when you are on stage? Does it affect the content of the performance?

CL: Well, I had a captive audience this week at Pine Grove Women's Correctional Centre. One of the nicest weeks I have had in a long time. We did a songwriting workshop and a recording session.

It was a combination of working in theatre and not wanting to prescribe to people where they should sit and what they should witness, and as I began to question that more, I began to realize that most people are not audiences anymore. We are in a state of being a vidience. Audience comes from Shakespearian times when people would go to hear a text, but now we are a vidience because we go to see or to witness.

I wanted to open the experience up because random things are more meaningful. We know as Indian people that when we see something random — we wonder what they mean, we may not think about that when we are forced in front of something. We don't think of synthesizing it, cataloguing it.

WN: Archer, you usually have a more classical audience. How do you interact with it?

AP: First thing I do is think about who I think will be there, which is not how a lot of artists work. If I think it will be primarily a Native audience then that's going to have a big influence on the work I do. Context is a big factor for my work. I have been working very much with a watching audience. Tomorrow's *Shoot the Indian* performance is more random. I came out of street performance where the audience is more random... you have to make the audience stay, so the performance shifts and changes constantly. I made a conscious choice a few years ago to make work for a Native audience. I would be working here at the Front or at Grunt, and a lot of Native people would come because I was Native. But galleries are so intimidating... they are unknown locations... lots of people won't come to them. There is very much a sense of privilege in people who go to galleries. Very different than performing at Talking Stick festival, where it's a broad-based audience of Native people. For a Native audience, I can do work like *Elegy*, where I conducted a service — a religious type service, a mourning — a memorial for the women of downtown east side Vancouver who had been murdered. It was about humanizing these women. I was pissed off about the coverage that pegged them as prostitutes and drug addicts. I wanted to connect us to them. There is a gaping wound in us because we have all experienced violence in some way, so even if the people did not have a direct connection to the women, they had one in their experience as Native People.

WN: Is there a difference in the meaning of your work in the context of an Aboriginal audience? We rarely get to travel our art to our own people. Have you found this to be true?

AP: I have a history of making pieces for my family and taking them back to the rez to perform them for my family and whoever else happens to be around.

CL: I was learning Cree and traveling around to different reserves. Many colleagues thought I had moved to the Bush and become a kohkom (grand-mother). So they say the best way to learn a language is between the sheets, you know, so there was funny banter that would go back and forth between Joseph and I when I was learning Cree. It turned into a performance piece. You know the *When Harry Met Sally* scene where she fakes an orgasm? Well, we'd go over to an old lady's house and Joseph would say, "You should hear her Cree. It's getting a lot better." I would be saying everyday words in Cree but sounding orgasmic. The old ladies would be just about pissing themselves laughing. They knew exactly what I was doing. That gave me an idea of how you could do work on reserves and how it would be received.

I got invited to a Development of Performance gathering organized by Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder, and I was moved by the interventionist work I saw, but some of it was kind of like an inside joke. If you did not get the joke, it was meant to be an abrasive piece, meant to irritate the audience. I just have so much love for people that I do not want to irritate people in that community. You do not want to irritate people who have been traumatized or who have been left on the outside. So I wanted to subvert that in some way. I asked instead how you could go onto a reserve and do work that just

embraced people. That's where *cistêmâw iyiniw ohci* came from. I wanted to start doing these homages. The run was 21 km and began on Crown land, where Big Bear fought the North West Mounted Police during the North West Resistance, and ended at the residence of an Elder at Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation. I did it as an homage to honour the community's ceremonial runner, Cistêmâw Iyiniw. The old ladies on the reserve were phoning each other, saying "she's running for our ancestors." People would drive by and yell out their truck windows, "âhkameyimêw" (keep going).

WN: They are so used to being ignored that when you pay enough attention to run for their ancestors it is such a big deal.

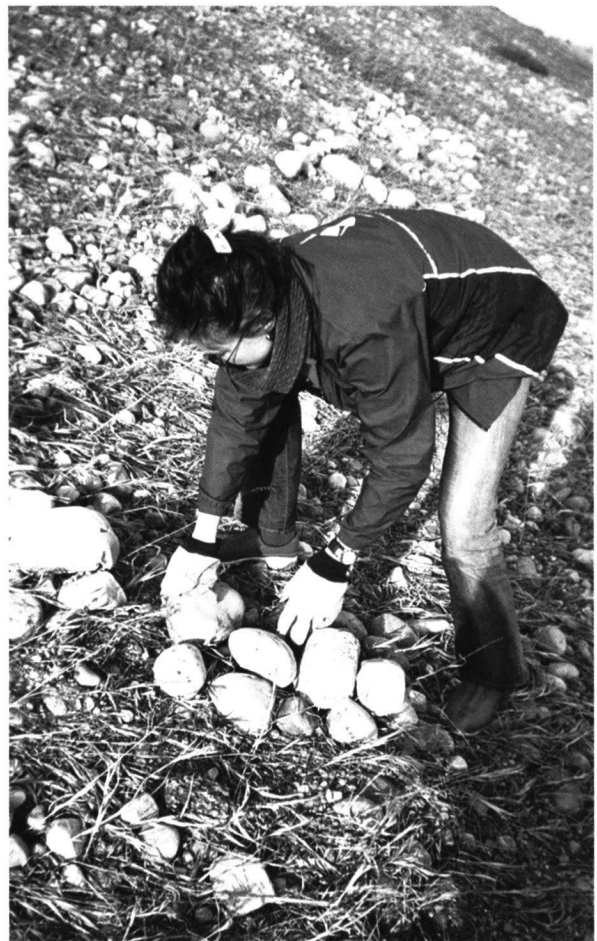
CL: Yeah, it is a huge deal — especially for me. I remember one of the most poignant moments for me happened at the Tribe Inc. sponsored artist talk the day before the run. We held it at the school. When you are working with youth, if they do not leave the room that's a standing ovation. The standing "O" on a reserve is when everyone comes up afterwards and shakes hands with you. At the end of my talk, this youth who was at the back looking disinterested, legs stretched out, asked a question. I had been talking about how I would stop at people's houses who tagged their doors. I would know I could go there for water on my run. This youth asked what he would have to write on his house to get me to stop and visit the next day. I almost wept.

AP: What Cheryl's talking about has become my modus operandi in the last decade. I call myself a performance artist out of convenience more than anything else. A lot of performance art seems like you need to understand the history of performance art to get what is going on. Its not very accessible work. Native performance art seems a lot more accessible generally. Now, I ask myself: "What would my mom and aunties and uncles think of this?" If they cannot get meaning from what I do, then I am not really interested in doing it. I do not just want to speak to people who know the history of performance art. I am rejoining my populist roots. One of the most populist forms being street performance. If everyone doesn't get it you don't eat.

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WN: I have noticed that people have been using performance art-like tactics and street performance in political protest — cultural jamming, clowning, juggling. And if I look at the history of both of your performance work, it's linked to protest. You talk about infiltration and social change and de-socialization, these are all terms that come out of political activism. There is a strong connection between performance art and political activism.

CL: Many forms of political activism come out of the Indian underground. We have been a part of that subversive style of activism for a really long time. Infiltration — that's basically the sneak-up. This stuff gets recycled and



repurposed over and over, and at some point the Indigenous roots get forgotten or left out. Part of my work is tagging in Cree syllabics. I used tagging because of the history of hobo tagging and youth graffiti. Hobos used to tag dumpsters and buildings, etc. But this really originates with Indians when they were first being let off reserves — Connie Dieter Buffalo told me this story. The men were let off reserves, and they were using syllabics and images to tag places as Indian-friendly or as sources of water and food — very old school and new school mixed. When thinking about tagging — I am definitely old school, using syllabics instead of roman orthography or images.

AP: Traditions change. In the old days there was always someone in the camp who would be the camp crier. Well, that's our job — we are the Native News Network (ha ha). Our job as performance artists is to contextualize what is going on around us. The most significant event of my adult life was Oka, 1990 and the incredible effect it had on the arts, not just Native People as a whole but in the arts. It precipitated the inclusion of Aboriginal artists



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *wapahta oma iskonikan askiy (URONNDNLAND)*, 2004. Photo: Janna Graham. Courtesy: the artist.

in the contemporary arts scene and the wave of activism that happened here in Vancouver. The Duffy Lake Road blockade happened the day after the shootout at Oka and lasted much longer. It did not have the kind of press Oka did. Oka reinforced the split in the country.

WN: I was talking to Cheryl in Montréal about Hakim Bey, whom she happens to love. It seems to me that you create a temporary autonomous zone in your performances. They are subversive because they help us reconsider our relationship to society and one another.

CL: I moved from abrasion to embrace in my work because one of the things Hakim Bey talks about in his work is that the point of anarchy is radical inclusivity. The idea of radical inclusivity is significant in a Cree worldview, we can say us all of us, it means humans, rocks, birds — all animate things. It's nice to meditate on how to make work that is radically inclusive. It is temporary and autonomous because once the piece ends it's over.

WN: If we think about tradition, western art has us caught between being traditional and contemporary. If tradition changes over time, and this includes Indigenous cultures, how do you characterize the more "traditional" in your work?

AP: "Tradition in relation to what?" is the question. Everything becomes tradition eventually. I did an Aboriginal thing in a school for grade fours last week. The school had originally put me in the tipi because I was dubbed an Aboriginal storyteller. I had to break it to them that I had a laptop and a data projector so I could not use the tipi. So I took over the staff room. I asked them, what is traditional? One kid answered: "whatever you do in your culture that's traditional." "Oh snap," I said. "Good answer." "If I stand up here in front of you guys, sing some songs and drum, is that traditional?" Everyone goes "yes." "So if I stuffed a laptop in my drum that was showing a video while I sang songs and told stories, is that traditional?" Everyone paused and then said "no." I said: "Does a drum grow on trees?" They said "no." I said: "At some point some guy stretched a skin over a log and tapped on it. Some people thought that was great and others thought it was weird and freaky." I asked them if they had relatives who are freaked out by computers. They all said. "yes."

You know, no one questions the drum now. I think everything I do is traditional. I took a laptop and jammed it inside a drum and coupled that with storytelling. The piece was called *Horse*. To me that is traditional. I was saying this is what time it is — like a camp crier.

CL: I love hearing people like you and Candice Hopkins saying “traditional” really means things that are changing. Someone told me this story once — think it may have been Lynn Acoose. There was this old man doing a ceremony, and he said “I am doing this ceremony exactly as my ancestors have done it for hundreds of years.” Someone said to him, “How can that be, Mushum (grandfather), because you’re wearing jeans, you have cowboy boots and are using a cast iron pot for the smudge.” He said, “I am doing what our people have always done, adapted.” So I think it’s that definition of traditional that I work with. I have moved into cyberspace and new media to present these concepts. One of the things about internet is that it is an alchemy of so many different elements. If tradition is change, then adaptability is a cornerstone for survival and *miyo-pimatisiwin* (a good healthy life).

AP: Cyber powwow was our big land claim in cyberspace. In terms of my practice, wherever my laptop happens to be is my territory.

WN: I think it is related to democratizing knowledge, because previous to the internet and new communicative technologies, certain people controlled knowledge and controlled histories, and that’s why we were not part of it, because we were not in power. And now we are able to take that power for ourselves, and that has always been a part of art practice in general. A lot of your work, Cheryl, asserts little known histories or relations of space. Like when you did *wâpahta ôma iskonikan askiy* (*Look at this leftover piece of land*) for Banff Centre. You placed those words in syllabics across the side of the highway heading towards the reserve near Banff. You used rocks to form the syllabics. A lot of our histories are getting told in performance art.

CL: Sometimes when you are in the process of making work (like *wâpahta ôma iskonikan askiy*) the elements come together and you understand it as you are making it. I thought to myself, I have been commissioned to make work, but who am I as a halfbreed, and it’s not my territory. I was making a commentary on this “leftover strip of land,” which is the translation of “reserve” in Cree. But it is also me. I am on the road allowance which is my strip of land theoretically as Métis. The piece also had a nice random audience/vidience of mostly truckers driving



Archer Pechawis. *Horse*, video stills, 2008. Courtesy: the artist.



Cheryl L'Hirondelle. *cistemaw iyiniw ohci* (for the tobacco being), Photos: <left to right> Cheli Nighthtraveller, Joseph Naytowhow and Louise Halfe. Courtesy: the artist.

by — honking on their way by while I was working hard placing down those heavy stones. I kept the audio of their participation and mixed it together with my toil. It documents what I heard from what they saw.

WN: In performance art, one cannot deny the bodily existence of Indigenous People or our contemporariness. Does your body as “racialized” or “colonized” come into the dynamics of your performances?

AP: How can it not? When we discuss these traumatizing conditions it's as if we're pretending we have some option on how it affects us. I'm not suggesting that being conscious about this isn't part of the solution, far from it, but colonization and de-colonization is a day by day process: you have your good days and your bad days. For me Yuxweluptun nailed it with his quote, “I'm having a bad colonial day.”

CL: Yeah, except in my work, because I am fair skinned and blue-eyed, identity is usually presented as an inversion or posed as a question.

WN: Do you feel you have to deal with the desiring (exoticizing) gaze, the classifying gaze or the objectifying gaze that is a part of how legal, political, colonial, medical, historical and academic institutions have looked at us?

AP: Yes. But as a relatively fair-skinned halfbreed man I also have tremendous privilege when compared to, say, my mom. And I am keenly aware of how that privilege has functioned in my life. So gaze on, motherfuckers.

CL: My net.art projects *treatycard*, *slang claims* and *world indigenous register* were commentaries on that. My new

project *Ekayapahkaci* is also a commentary on this phenomenon — but again as an inversion. (www.ndnrkey.net)

WN: Archer, you have said that performance art is where “Indians stand up and claim space.” I understand this within a logic of colonial geography where we have been positioned out of view, in the margins, on reserves, at the edges of the city. In this logic, the only way we are visible is when we have offended someone or committed a crime... it is often our abject poverty that leads us into view. The fact that poverty is a colonial legacy is often erased. Performance art claims a positive visibility. Is this what you meant?

AP: Sure, and I also meant it in the sense of performance, contemporary performance being an echo, commentary and mirror of our lives in the modern era. It's the camp crier thing again. For me, performance is a big part of the moccasin telegraph. It's the funny pages, horoscopes and page 2 editorials, all in one.

WN: Is the Cree “way of being” a relational “way of being” and if so, how does that relate to performance as a relationship between artist and audience, person and situation or society and transformation?

CL: As I have been learning and living Nehiyawin (a Cree worldview) — I have been impressed by how it is more relational than proprietary, and process-oriented rather than object-based. To say nitotem (my friend) — one is saying the-friend-I-am-relational-to, and in that there are roles and responsibilities encoded. To approach and see from that point of view, then, everything is shifted and transformed so it's not a dissolution of what is but a shift in perspective — a window to what has always been. □

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