

PERFORMING SOVEREIGNTY IN THE MUSEUM

Wanda Nanibush*

*transcribed from the spoken word,
most humour has been removed

Aniin. Wanda Nanibush nindizhinikaaz. Ma'iingan dodem. Chimnissing nindonjibaa. Hi. I'm Wanda Nanibush. I'm Wolf clan, my community is Chimnissing—which in English means “big island”. We call it the Caribbean of the North; it's in Georgian Bay, it's quite beautiful. I grew up there on and off. In my life, I have maintained this insider-outsider status, which is the status I also maintain at the museum.

Wanda Nanibush can mean “wandering trickster”, and I feel like that's totally me. Hopefully you can trust something of what I am about to tell you!

I work as the curator of Indigenous art and co-lead of the Indigenous & Canadian Art Department at the Art Gallery of Ontario. It's important to note that I started my career and also still continue my career outside of the museum. I value the outside, and I value the ways in which I can bring the outside in. I have been full-time for three years and while I have been there I have developed the programme, developed the position of curator of Indigenous art and developed the new department, which I will tell you more about in a minute.

I just want to show you this. It's the heart of the building, it's called Walker Court. It's the largest museum in Canada. It's encyclopedic. Very much European-centric and Canadian. Those drums on the walls that you see there, those are done by Anishinaabe artist Robert Houle, who is one of the foremost artists and the first Indigenous curators in Canada. He started curating in the seventies. He is one of the people who really changed the way we operate in museums, partly by quitting.

In 1980, Houle quit what was then called Canadian Museum of Man, and is now the Canadian Museum of History. He quit because a sacred bundle was opened and tested even though the First Nations family who donated it said it was never to be opened because it is sacred medicine. He realised the museum could not break free of anthropological interpretations of Indigenous art and that our belongings were not being treated with the right respect. His action started a whole conversation about our sacred objects/belonging/spirits, whatever you want to call them, in the museum.



Installation view, Robert Houle, *Seven Grandfathers*, 2013, oil on canvas, digital prints, mylar, watercolour on paper, outside: 20.3 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Purchased with the assistance of the Martinsell Fund, 2016. © Robert Houle 2015/38.1-14. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario

These drums represent the seven grandfathers of Anishinaabe philosophy, the seven-value system. One of them is Debwewin, which is truth in our language, and to actually transliterate it: it's heart knowledge. Our concept of truth is about heart knowledge.

About eight years ago I decided that I was no longer wanting to talk *about* Anishinaabe stuff but wanting to be and perform and become more Anishinaabe in my daily life. One of the ways that I do that is through this kind of talking. I had to think about: what is oral knowledge? What is speaking from an oral place without reading with a paper? What is it to speak from the heart? What is it to say that I am only allowed to share with you what I actually know? That's why I don't read papers anymore. It was so hard in the beginning, because you just digress everywhere, and it's really hard to hold your thoughts—it's a learned skill. It's a really important one too, I believe, because you think you know something—but you don't, just because you can write it. Until you can actually talk about it in this kind of way, it's not embodied knowledge yet. I think that is also something that is informing my work.



Rebecca Belmore, *Clay on Stone*, 2016, sunset to sunrise performance in Anishinaabe, Art Gallery of Ontario, Walker Court. Curated by Wanda Nanibush for Nuit Blanche. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

In this same space, Walker Court, I invited Rebecca Belmore to do a new performance in 2016. She chose this space because Robert Houle's work was there, and she wanted to honour her relationship to this artist who is more senior than her. These kinds of relationships of honouring are very much why I curate—to do this relationship of honouring.

So, we took over the heart of the building. Rebecca Belmore is an Anishinaabe artist. I have been working with her for over ten years—kind of like a film director who has a favourite actor, she and I have this relationship as curator and artist—we work together a lot. She actually challenges all ideas of control that a curator might think that they have in a situation. You don't have any control. As a human being myself, growing up with a kind of traumatic past you tend towards control as a response to that trauma; but what ends up happening is that you end up reproducing a lot of colonial attitudes, ideas and ways of operating without realising it. One of the processes of getting past that is actually to learn how to give up control, and also learn how to be vulnerable. The other part—which was mentioned on the first night of this symposium—is love. If we're talking about heart knowledge, we have to ask what is love's relationship to all of the work that we do and all of the knowledge that we share.

Belmore painted the floor in clay with her hands over a 12-hour period—on one of the busiest nights, which is *nuit blanche*. Just imagine tens of thousands of drunk people roaming the streets looking at art. It's like *The Walking Dead* in the art world. Instead of going with the idea of spectacle, which is the only way to hold people's attention when they are not art lovers or they're wasted, we decided to counter that with something really slow, really durational and really difficult. It was amazing to watch people come in and just stay there for a really long time not knowing what the heck is going to happen. They are waiting for something to happen. And as you're waiting; you get in a different mode, you get into a more meditative space, you start smelling the clay, and there are all these other things that start to happen if you are open to it. There is something about the way Rebecca works that leads you there. You are kind of ready for it; you want the difficulties.

Our director came from America and this is one of his first performance art pieces that he saw—and also my work—in the museum, and it was kind of amazing because it really changed his attitude and understanding. He came in the evening at 7pm, watched it for a long time, and then came back in the morning at 7am to see the end. I think that really opened him to some of the projects and ideas that we were going to bring into the museum.



Public opening, *Rebecca Belmore: Facing the Monumental*, July 12–October 21, 2018. Wanda Nanibush, Rebecca Belmore and Robert Houle. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

This is Robert Houle and myself giving Rebecca a blanket at the opening night of her exhibition. I mean, you can feel the love, but it is amazing how much these spaces rarely experience emotion. There was no budget for gift giving or anything like that in our exhibition budgets, all of this stuff had to be built in. It's good for the crowd to feel like this space is a space for community, a space for emotion, a space for affect; as opposed to just here's the important people that get a show in this big important place.



Public opening, *Tunirrusiangit: Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak*, June 16–August 12, 2018. Seal being prepared and served in Walker Court. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

I want to say also that one of the difficult things is food. Food in museums is super intensely difficult, but completely central, so this idea of having a kitchen in the centre of a museum for Indigenous folk, I think totally makes sense. We made Walker Court a kitchen for Inuit food. In the centre of that circle they are all standing around a huge seal that's waiting to be carved. It's kind of amazing in this very white, upper-class space to be taken over by an Inuit community.

This was also part of an exhibition where—I didn't have time to work on this exhibition—my co-lead Georgiana Uhlyarik, who is Romanian Canadian, took it over and we talked about "how can we make sure that Indigenous control is still in this project?". She put together

collectively a team of four Inuit artists to curate the show. This is what they wanted to do—the feast; this is really central to what they wanted to do. One of the artists who was in the exhibition had died, maybe four months before the show, and his wife hadn't eaten country food because he was her hunter. She came down and this was the first seal she was going to eat after he had passed away. There are so many connections, family connections, in this experience; there's thousands of people eating from this seal.

Another way that we bring the outside in is through literal fluids. We heard last night about this idea of fluids as a metaphor for the museum. I think about it as an actual thing. They don't like dirt, they don't like fluid, they don't like anything that is leaky.



Rebecca Belmore, *Fountain*, 2005, single-channel video with sound projected onto falling water, image: 274.4 × 487.8 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Gift of Rebecca Belmore, 2018. © Rebecca Belmore 2018/3731.

This is a fountain by Rebecca Belmore that was central to her show. Which hopefully will be coming here—right, Reuben?¹ This is a 16-foot fountain inside the gallery. It's flowing water and we had it up for four months, and so it was difficult to build and difficult to keep. You have to know what to do with this moisture. All these leaky things are damaging to the sense of preservation and control that museums are based on: it will ruin paintings; it will ruin collections. What they found out is that they could actually redistribute it through the system and just turn off their mechanisms. They could take the moisture and put it back through the system, and it just meant that they didn't have to add moisture in like they normally do.

I want to show you the video. Imagine this projected onto a wall of water. In the video there is a series of actions and images, the main one being Belmore struggling in water then taking a bucket of water, walking to the camera and throwing the water at the audience which turns

¹ Reuben Friend, director of Pātaka Art + Museum, Porirua, Aotearoa New Zealand.

red like blood. It's in constant oscillation, water into blood, blood into water.

She did that for the Venice Biennale in 2005, really thinking way ahead in terms of where are we going with the water issue. As Anishinaabe women we are water protectors. It is a physical responsibility within the Anishinaabe community. Protecting water is the responsibility of Anishinaabe women and it's Anishinaabe women who started doing water walks to draw attention to the state of water in the world.

This is what you are seeing here, which is a water ceremony in Toronto in 2013. This is part of the Idle No More movement, which started in 2012 and is still going. I was one of the organisers in Toronto for a three-year period with a group of women. One thing about the Idle No More movement is that everything started in ceremony and everything started from a cultural space, which may not have been visible to the outside world. The whole process of leading a movement in that way is what has grounded my ideas about performing sovereignty.

The idea of performing for me is not that I have something true underneath, and I am just going to be performing for you—that's not what performing means. In Anishinaabe philosophy the central tenets of existence are chance and transformation. It kind of jives with ideas that we are always becoming, we are always in motion, we are always transforming. Our choices in terms of actions and our choices in terms of how we do things are actually who we are. They're not separate. You can't say I'm doing something but really, I am something else. You are what you do. That's where I think this movement was really effective, because it wasn't just talking about things it was performing and doing them; which made the movement different than any other protest movement in the past.

This is a water ceremony. That's our elder Pauline Shirt, looking so fab! We're marching down a major street in Toronto, shutting down traffic, then going to do a water ceremony. It was really difficult for me because I come from an older generation than my age, because I am the youngest of all the 18 kids that my mum had and we were really taught to hide our culture after it was banned for 100 years. People became extremely protective, and I'm one of those people who does not want New Age people performing water ceremonies after they come to ours. It was really hard for me to get behind this idea, but after much conversation and much soul searching, I realised that in order for people to have a relationship with water, they have to perform the relationship. How can I hold people accountable for the way they see water as a commodity, or for the way that we treat water, if I'm not even giving them

the tools to have a different relationship with the water? I came into the museum right after all of this, and so it informed how I operated in the museum.

For me, the museum is not a space that I work for. It's a space I occupy, it's a space I occupy without permission; it's a space where I don't ask permission. It's a space where I am merely a conduit between the artist, the work, the community, and other people who want to be in that space and communicate with what we have put on. I think that political activism in certain ways has influenced the way that I am as a curator.

This is Ursula Johnson, who will be performing at *aabaakwad*, an international gathering of Indigenous artists, curators and thinkers about to take place in Sydney. This is a piece called *L'nuwelti'k We are all Indian*, where she physically weaves black ash over you to create a bust. It can be quite claustrophobic when you are inside, so she talks to you and employs a lot of Indigenous methodologies from her Mi'kmaw culture to make it a safe space for you. I did it with her and all I kept seeing was birds, birds, birds—I probably thought I was a bird in a cage or something. But when she was up north and she was tying off my bust, she said that the whole sky just filled with birds—it's quite beautiful.

After that conversation I wanted to bring her into this exhibition, called the *Fifth World*, which is talking about this moment. Navajo and Hopi talk about this, but many First Nations have this philosophy: which is we're coming to this time of decision, between harmony with the earth or destruction of the earth. We are in that time now, and the Fifth World is an imaginary concept of what we might move to, how do we get back to that harmony.

You can see in the background: those are some of the busts, she is going to make 200 of them in the end. They're installed in a circle, because during the Idle No More movement one of the main ways that we operated was through the round dance. They're still going today—people love to round dance. I would make you round dance here at the end if I were in the mood! I'm not in the mood.

You can see, this is about four or five thousand people that have gathered in the centre of Toronto, in one of the busiest shopping areas, to round dance. This movement really was about protection of water, no matter what anyone says: that is the heart of it. It was also about the next generation, and them being able to pick up their drums and pick up their cultural protocols and things that they need to go forward in ways that are based in healing but are also very futural.

It's not about going towards the past. This image reappears all the time. The round dance was given to the plains folks as a ceremony for a young girl who could not stop mourning her mother, she just couldn't stop mourning her mother. This ceremony came to her, and the community performed it with her to help her move her mourning into a space of celebration. I think about politics as an embodied activity—it's amazing to do public mourning and public celebration as a form of politics.

This is Adrian Stimson and Lori Blondeau, who I invited into the Art Gallery of Ontario to help deal with the kind of stereotypes that most people have when they come into the museum. People dress up in whatever outfits they want, then they get placed in a diorama and then the artists will play with you. Obviously. This is Buffalo Boy, who is really sexy in his buffalo corset and his long-schlونغ cover, and that is Belle Sauvage behind him, Lori Blondeau as Belle Sauvage, who is a trick-rope amazing cowgirl. The artists placed the cowboys in a position where they are blowing their brains out. It's the subversive humour of the image. Each person takes away their photo, and that's actually a big part of the piece: when they go home and stick it on their fridge, or they look at it, they're staring at their own desires, their own way of entering this Indigenous universe and the history of stereotyping that has informed those desires. It is a way to self-confront, in a really private and fun way.

This is a piece by Rebecca Belmore, that came out of a conversation between her and I. The middle piece was created in 2012, and the two side pieces were created in 1997. She was really impacted by a story of a Mi'kmaq guy who was taken—stolen—and forced to perform in a Victorian garden. He had to shoot a deer, kill the deer, and then skin the deer and eat the deer for all these hoity-toity Victorian people, as their private entertainment. Then, at the end, he proceeds to defecate, like humans do—again, these bodily processes—which is very offensive to a Victorian sensibility.

She said to me “that is the first Indigenous performance artist”, in that moment, that really impacted me and changed the way I think about how I would do a performance art history—or where I would start histories, in terms of how we talk about art history. It also makes me think about the museum, and its implications in power and control and prison; and the imprisonment of art inside the museum—and where the audience fits in. Everything that we do has to break colonial desires in some way, shape or form, or we are just those Victorian ladies. It is about the fact that museums have a class, and that's the one thing that we never talk about: is that it's very much about an upper-class attitude towards life, and it is about money.

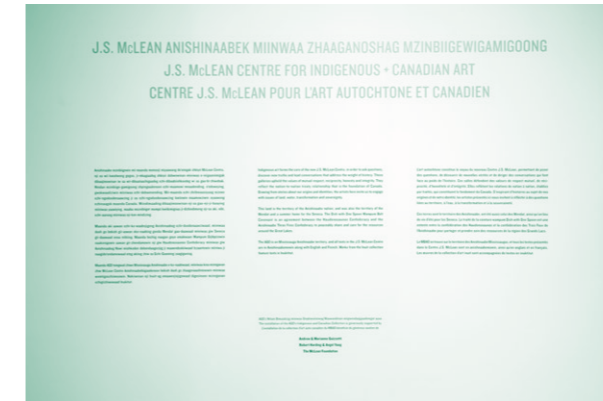
You may know this one, which is Shelley Niro. This is one of the first works that I brought into the collection, it's called *The Shirt*. “The Shirt. My ancestors were annihilated, exterminated, murdered, and massacred. They were lied to, cheated, tricked and deceived. Attempts were made to assimilate, colonise, enslave and displace them. And all's I get is this shirt.” But really—she doesn't get the t-shirt: she is naked, and her white wife ends up with the t-shirt! This is a lightbox series, but it is flanked by land on both sides—which anyone who writes about it, never talks about. The piece is actually about land and the colonial aspects of carving up land for commerce, but also for housing and cities; and that a woman's sensibility might interfere with that—a fluid sensibility.

When we decided to rethink the Art Gallery of Ontario and their relationship to Indigenous art, Georgiana Uhlyarik and I decided to base our understanding in an Indigenous sovereignty space: a visual metaphor and a governance structure—which is the wampum treaties. They exist all the way across Canada, but the most well-known ones come from the Haudenosaunee. The Two Row Wampum is one of the most influential and this is a later version of the Two Row Wampum done in 1764, when 24 more First Nations signed on to it. This is why we chose it, because it actually governs the land that the AGO was on; it is one of the original treaties of that place, and the Treaty's philosophies fit with what we were trying to do.

Instead of creating an Indigenous art department, we decided to use a Nation-to-Nation model for a joint department where we shared power. The Two Row Wampum was originally signed between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch and by 1764 it gave birth to the Treaty of Niagara between the British and the 24 First Nations who signed. How do we come together? The Treaty says that we are in two separate rivers, two separate boats, and it has at the basis of it the principle of non-interference—which means that “I will not place my laws on you, you don't place your laws on me.” Obviously, that was broken. In a radical imaginative exercise, we perform that it exists as something to be followed, and honoured it in all the work that we do in the museum. We are separate but equal. We have things to offer each other—but First Nations art does not have to fit into the container of Canadian art. Indigenous is not the right word when talking about treaties but it is used for convenience to mean all First Nations, Inuit, Metis and international First Nations in terms of the mandate of my position.

It seems so simple, but the order of Indigenous and Canadian was extremely important. They said Canadian and Indigenous: I had to work to get that switched. Because we're first;

we should always be first. It means that the land that we stand on, the sovereignty of that land is First Nations sovereignty. Canadian sovereignty derives its existence from ours. It is a way of reversing the way that we were traditionally trained and taught to think about sovereignty. I think museums never talk about sovereignty—we try to avoid it—because they are usually nationalist institutions meant to serve the nation state, that is a colonial state. This was a way to infiltrate and put the most radical ideas of sovereignty straight on the walls.



Introductory wall text, *J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art*, June 30, 2018–ongoing. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

This is the gallery wall where we have the value system that is contained within the Treaty: mutual respect, mutual responsibility, sharing, working from honesty, integrity. We think we work by these things; we do not, and actually they are not even important when you come into a job. What's important is the rules and regulations that we have to follow. When you follow these values, it actually interferes with contractual things that you do in the museum. It interferes with everything that museums are used to doing.

And then we translate everything into Anishinaabemowin, which is the language of the Anishinaabe, which is the land that the AGO is on. Part of that was to expand our language. I was really interested in where the gaps would be, so I chose an elder that I had always admired, Shirley Williams—who went to residential school, I want to talk about that for a minute.²

² “For over a century, generations of Aboriginal children were separated from their parents and raised in over-crowded, underfunded, and often unhealthy residential schools across Canada. They were commonly denied the right to speak their language and told their cultural beliefs were sinful. Some students did not see their parents for years. Others—the victims of scandalously high death rates—never made it back home. Even by the standards of the day, discipline often was excessive. Lack of supervision left students prey to sexual predators. To put it simply: the needs of tens of thousands of Aboriginal children were neglected routinely. Far too many children were abused far too often.” The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They came for the children: Canada, Aboriginal peoples, and residential schools*

This is Adrian Stimson's work. This is a light from the residential school that he went to, and then there is steel forming a kind of a healing lodge, but the light actually projects the Union Jack onto the buffalo robe that is on the base. It's this really complicated layering of the trauma but also the processes in which we need to heal from that trauma. It's called *Old Sun*, who was Stimson's ancestor who fought the paper treaties, who fought the reserve system—he fought everything colonial that was happening in the 1800s—and then they named the fucking residential school after him. They are not stupid people: they are doing this on purpose, to break our power. This is one of his ways of having an object from that place but taking it back and re-imbuing it with a kind of healing power.

Shirley, when she was young, she went to residential school, and her father said to her “If there's one thing you can do, don't lose your language. Hold on to your language”. She ended up holding on to her language so hard that she became one of the people at the forefront of language teaching in the universities and schools, developing materials. I wanted to work with her because she is the best and the translations are done by somebody really expert at grappling with the ways in which there are ideas in Western art thinking that do not exist in our language. Simple things: the word ‘poetry’, the word ‘unconscious’.

It's also about the ability to read it back the other way. To start from the Anishinaabe and say, what is actually different. Then we can re-develop a new art history from within our languages. We sat under those drums, Robert's drums, and we wanted to activate them so we had dancers come in and activate them and fill them with spirit. Then we had elders sit in the front and talk about art in our language, without translating anything for the audience; and they, the audience—it was amazing—they sat for three hours listening to a language that they did not understand. No one moved.

I think that's the kind of encounter that art gives us: this ability to stay with something that we don't understand, something we don't know, something that makes us uncomfortable, something that challenges our vulnerable spaces. I think museums are going way too far to make everything safe and palatable and comfortable, when that is not what art's role in life is.

The other thing we're doing is trying to pay attention to the material and the word for it in the language. In Inuktitut, the word for stone actually means that it has spirit; it means that

(Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012), http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/resources_2039_T&R_eng_web11.pdf, 1.

it has to breathe. We are trying to take all of this work out of the ethnographic spaces and make them breathe again.

We redesigned the galleries thematically. Chronology generally favours colonial art history, and also favours nationalism, so we don't do chronology. But I would say more than not doing chronology, is that in this idea of the Treaty what is missing from re-enacting that is the actual history of asymmetry and power. You actually have to correct that. It meant that we can't pretend like we're equal. We actually had to say no: we are going to centre Indigenous art, we are going to start with contemporary Indigenous art and our ideas, our attitudes, our philosophies—and Canadians are going to have to try to fit into that. And that until we are in a space where there is actual equality, then we might be able to revisit that attitude and idea.

In the first theme, Origins, you have Norval Morriseau, who is one of the most famous Anishinaabe artists. These are origin stories, and I purposely chose origin stories that were about migration, because Toronto is the most diverse city in the world and everyone has migrated there in some way. I think our philosophies dovetail with other cultures, and other things going on in the world. We are not just talking about Indigenous ideas; we are talking about everything all the time. There is a real pushback against refugees and people coming into the country and a global re-asserting of borders, and I really felt it was important that we say that the Anishinaabe are on the side of the migrants and the refugees.



Installation view, *J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art*, June 30, 2018–ongoing. Artworks shown (left to right): Joanne Tod, *Chapeau Entaillé*, 1989; (upper) Anishinaabe, *Bandolier Bags*, c. 1850; Rebecca Belmore, *Rising to the Occasion*, 1987–1991; Kent Monkman, *The Academy*, 2008. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

That's Rebecca Belmore, again. This is called *Rising to the Occasion*, it's the central piece that the whole room is designed around but it is also a piece that was performed as a protest in the streets. It has this embodied character to it; it has a history of being worn in protest to some royals who came and canoed and did colonial bullshit stuff and totally ignored the actual reality of what's going on in Indigenous communities.

You can see there's contemporary art mixed with historical. We always start from the art and the artist. I think that one of the things where I bristle up against other Indigenous curators who work in the same field as me, but who are more interested in the fight about making our historical belongings considered as art—that's not the fight that I have decided to join. I actually believe that everything is contemporary, so we have makers of everything today. I am much more interested in what impacts communities right now and what impacts our future. I don't think that they are mutually exclusive projects, it's just I choose the one that impacts living people the most.

Starting from thinking about what contemporary means: what is the future we can see in the present and what are the ways in which artists are pushing us there? What is it that artists see, feel, experience; and what kind of difference are they bringing into the world that can change everything from the vantage point of an Indigenous artist, from the vantage point of an Anishinaabe being, from the vantage point of a Haudenosaunee world view? I want this respect for what artists do, and for what they make, to be the centre of a museum. That is what it's there to do, in a way. If I wanted to do something else, I would use a space that's actually better equipped for that. I am a little conservative in that sense.

Each space is centred around a contemporary artist. This is the land room and in the land room are these landscapes. On the labels for these beautiful landscapes by Lawren Harris—which are the centre of Canadian nationalist art history—there is the territory of the First Nation whose land it is. The label says the Nation's name, if the land is unceded territory, or it says what the treaty is. That's our subtle way of marking Indigenous land and sovereignty without colonising artists. I do not believe that artists are merely actors of ideology, and I will not reduce art to ideology either. I can't reduce this amazing painter to the ideology of nationalism. He was more than that. But at the same time, I can't let a landscape stand that makes it seem like Canada was uninhabited by First Nations. Now people are talking about always looking for what the treaty is. They are learning our names, our languages and our treaties—and the treaties are theirs too, they're not just ours.



Installation view, *J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art*, June 30, 2018–ongoing. Artworks shown: (foreground) John McEwen, *The Distinctive Line Between One Subject and Another*, 1980; (rear, centre) Robert Houle, *The Pines*, 2002–2004. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

The centrepiece of this room is *The Pines* by Robert Houle, that green and blue painting you see in the back of the photo. It's central because it refers to one of the central events in First Nations art history: the Oka Crisis, or the Kanehsatake Resistance of 1990. It's one of the moments when the Canadian government sent in the army against a small group of Haudenosaunee, who were trying to save their pines. These pines are where they had their burials and did their ceremonies. Robert went about a year after the conflict had ended, in terms of its face-to-face violence. It didn't end until recently when they finally got the land back last year. He said that you could feel the spirits in the place, you could see the spirit of the False Face masks. He painted this for himself, not for a public audience; so, it's truly a First Nation perspective uncorrupted by audience expectations.



Installation view, Ruth Cuthand, *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, 2016, 112 vessels with glass beads and resin, hand-beaded blue tarpaulin tablecloth, and 10 MDF "gas board" panels, installed dimensions variable. Purchased with funds from Karen Schreiber and Marnie Schreiber through The American Friends of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Inc., 2017. © Ruth Cuthand. 2016/432. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

Sometimes the works we exhibit bring attention to modern-day colonialism. The water room is centred around Ruth Cuthand's work *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*. Cuthand is a Cree artist from Saskatchewan. These are 94 glasses and baby bottles with beautifully beaded bacterium and parasites cast in what looks like water, for the 94 First Nations communities that don't have access to clean drinking water. Nearby is a historical work named *Sea Captain Figure*, from the 19th century by a Haida artist.



Installation view, Haida, *Sea Captain Figure*, c. 1840, argillite, ivory, overall: 46.8 × 13.5 × 8 cm. Purchased with Funds from the Estate of Mary Eileen Ash, 2008. 2008/43. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

Another change I instituted was how we name historical works of art. On the label, which you can't see, is where we've renamed things. It says "Haida artist once known"—as opposed to what it used to say, which was "unknown Haida". This change says they had a name and they have a community. It points to the reason for the lost name in colonialism. It also hints that proper research on these works needs to be done in the communities they come from where the name might be returned to the work. We have a lot of Indigenous philosophy everywhere in the building.

Another aspect of this is to recontextualise artists who slipped through the historical gaps labelled as white artists because no one bothered to ask who they were, or their work didn't look Native. As you can see, nothing I do really looks Native, but is deeply and profoundly based in a language and philosophy. That's where I want to get to—that's where I think we need to be.



Installation view, *J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art*, June 30, 2018–ongoing. Artworks shown (left to right): Rita Letendre, *Daybreak*, 1983; Tim Whiten, *Metamorphosis*, 1978–1989; Leslie Reid, *Cape Pine: The Station*, 2011. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

This is artist Rita Letendre. She was one of the first abstract painters—Abenaki woman, 1940s, working with intense French men who became part of the canon. She was becoming well known by the 1950s and had to face an immense amount of racism. I wanted to bring her back into the conversation with other First Nations artists. She was the first solo artist I chose to do a show on, and we translated her text into Abenaki. I also wanted to do it because she was going blind and would never see a solo show of hers if we waited another year. It was about honouring our senior artist even if her Abenaki heritage went unacknowledged by museums for most of her life.

I have a two-pronged approach, which is to make sure that Indigenous art is in conversation with other artists; and, also, we need our own spaces, spaces where we can write our own art histories, speak about our own pasts, talk to each other without circulating through Western art history or Canadian art history. In Canada we are still caught in this lame argument between if we have our own spaces then we are segregating ourselves; if we integrate, we can never talk on our own terms. Let's just do both then! Let's do it all! I try as hard as possible to listen to all the fights that artists have had for the last 70 years and try to figure out how I can create a space that actually attempts to answer a lot of those criticisms.

Speaking of Indigenous-only space—I want to show you this because I think it is funny. You see this hallway, that was the Indigenous art gallery when I started. I decided to take my politics into the museum and do a land claim inside the museum. It was about expanding real estate everywhere I turned. I am always doing that with shows, with rooms: trying to take over more space, more space, more space. I guess it's reverse colonialism—just kidding, you can't reverse anything.

There are now four spaces devoted solely to Inuit art, and two of them are devoted to solo exhibitions. There are more spaces for Indigenous art in general. This large gallery here is called “Indigenous2Indigenous”. In this gallery my strategy was to focus on the multiplicity of Indigenous art in terms of practice. The majority of our million-a-year audience, if they come into the building for Indigenous art, they want to see beadwork and they want to see carvings and that's it. For contemporary work they think about Norval Morrisseau. One of our early painters who painted what some people would call tradition, or philosophy, or ceremonial imagery; he got into trouble for it from elders, but he always said, “there will come a generation”—he also went to residential school, but only for four years. He always said “there will come a generation that's lost, that needs to find their way back. They are going to find their way through my paintings, not through your birch bark scrolls—they won't even know where the scrolls are or how to get there”. Eventually the elders relented, and he was totally right: we really needed those paintings. I'm not degrading what he did, I'm just saying that it is now the most desired representation by non-Native audiences of who we are as a people.

This is not what they expect: one of the earliest new media artists in Canada was an Indigenous person, he was Mi'kmaq, a nation on the east coast of Canada—but we think of him on the west coast, because he just went west and never came back. This is his work *Seven Sisters*, it's a mountain range but done as a sculpture with televisions. This was made in 1989. He was talking about the land and what was happening—like clear cutting. He was a huge environmental activist through his art, and a documentarian, but also a new media artist and widely respected in North America. Showing him confounds people's ideas of Indigenous art.

This is Jeff Thomas, an Onondaga artist, who photographed the *Bear* series during his son's entire childhood. Starting from that side of the series and going in this direction, you can see him age. It's interesting because his son has become a famous artist with his music in *A Tribe Called Red*, so there's this beautiful intergenerational relationship in the photographs themselves. Jeff is one of the people who taught previous curators how to curate the museum through juxtaposition. In his photographs, he will juxtapose Bear against a colonial building or against a wall or whatever, to bring out an Indigenous story and Indigenous ways of being and thinking. Curators often don't acknowledge how much they learn from the artists that they work with, in terms of our methodologies; which is why I always start with Rebecca because she has taught me so much about how to use space, how to do things with an embodied presence,

how to think about affect and how to think about poetics as opposed to didactics.

Jeff Thomas is another artist that I have learned so much from and who is the kindest, gentlest human. On the wall it says “cultural revolution”—this is scrawled on a wall in Toronto, and he's like “Oh my god! Bear, stand up next to it”. On Bear's hat ironically there's an image of chief Two Moons, which comes from a very famous photograph by Edward S. Curtis, who is the king of creating Romantic Savage images. I am really interested in breaking this Romanticism—even if it hurts. I was asking myself what is the cultural revolution, what is happening in this photograph? From about the 1950s through to the 1980s this revolution happened as people were coming out of residential schools, and they were hitting art school, and they were painting, and they were making work and they were fighting so hard to get out of the ethnology museums, out of the history museums and fighting to get into spaces that I currently work in—and without their work I would never be in. I can't then put them back into that same frame, I have to continue their fight. That revolution that happened is continuous and ongoing, and I consider myself to be part of that revolution.

In the redesign of the department we were really careful that the treaty is not between white people and First Nations. It's between First Nations and the diversity of Canada today. That diversity has been there since the very beginning, it was just erased through the same structures of racism and colonialism that put us in residential schools and on reserves. The Chinese had the head tax, the way that the Sikhs were indentured servants, the colourism in immigration policy, I could go on. In that alliance, it's really important for us to look at and expand the collection beyond white male artists.

This is one of the first shows I did at the Art Gallery of Ontario, it was called *Toronto Tributes and Tributaries 1971–1989*—I purposely titled it this way, usually I'm much more fun! Looking at the collection from that time period, it's all white men mostly. There are some women and then a couple of people who snuck through. I wanted to do an imaginary thing: if I was standing in Toronto in 1971, who's doing what and where are they? As if I had no filters. I started gathering other artists and other names and all the artist-run-centre movement, magazines, everything I could think of; and then slowly building spaces around ideas, as opposed to by culture or ethnicity. There's no Black artists room, because I think that's a really dangerous way to do this work. I don't work on an inclusion model. I think inclusion is incredibly detrimental to cultural diversity and to the beautiful things that we could change about the world from our individual cultural spaces. I think that inclusion

doesn't actually allow the power structure to shift, it doesn't allow the culture of a place to change; all it does is add a brown face to a white thing. I am really intense about that.

But at the same time, you can't use that as an excuse to continue to ignore important artists who have been excluded due to the unfair racialisation of art history and collections. I have been doing a series of solo exhibitions of Black artists who have not come into the collection yet but who should have. Solo exhibitions allow an artist to speak on their own behalf through their art practice and have less of the representation conundrum of group shows.



Installation view, June Clark, *Formative Triptych*, 1989, three duratrans transparencies in lightboxes (each): 111.5 × 152.2 cm. Purchased with assistance from the Estate of P.J. Glasser, 2016. © June Clark. Photo of Bessie Smith © Carl Van Vechten Trust 2016/43. Image © Art Gallery of Ontario.

This is June Clark, who was an incredible uncanonised photographer. When I started doing interviews with all these photographers who were in the collection, they all named her. All of them talked about her and how they worked with her, they did this or they did that. She was exhibited in New York and in Paris. It was important to correct the institutional mistake that had excluded her work from exhibition and collection, thereby coming closer to canonisation.

I think the museum only exists because of artists: without the artists there's nothing, we are nothing. I don't even understand why we have to talk and argue for this, to privilege and value what artists do.

I am closing with an image of artists and friends hangin' out at my workplace. I joined them for a drink and invited Brook Andrew over, who is a Wiradjuri artist and artistic director of the Sydney Biennale. We are all just talking about how we get into the Biennale, how do we get you into the Biennale? This is also part of the art scene; we do sit around and talk to each other. We form relationships, and some of it involves wine and beer and food, and it's quite essential to the work that we do and the responsibilities that we have to each other.