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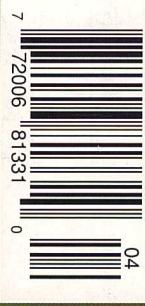
Engaging Communities

with Goll & Nielsen, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Candice Hopkins, Janna Graham and Kim Simon



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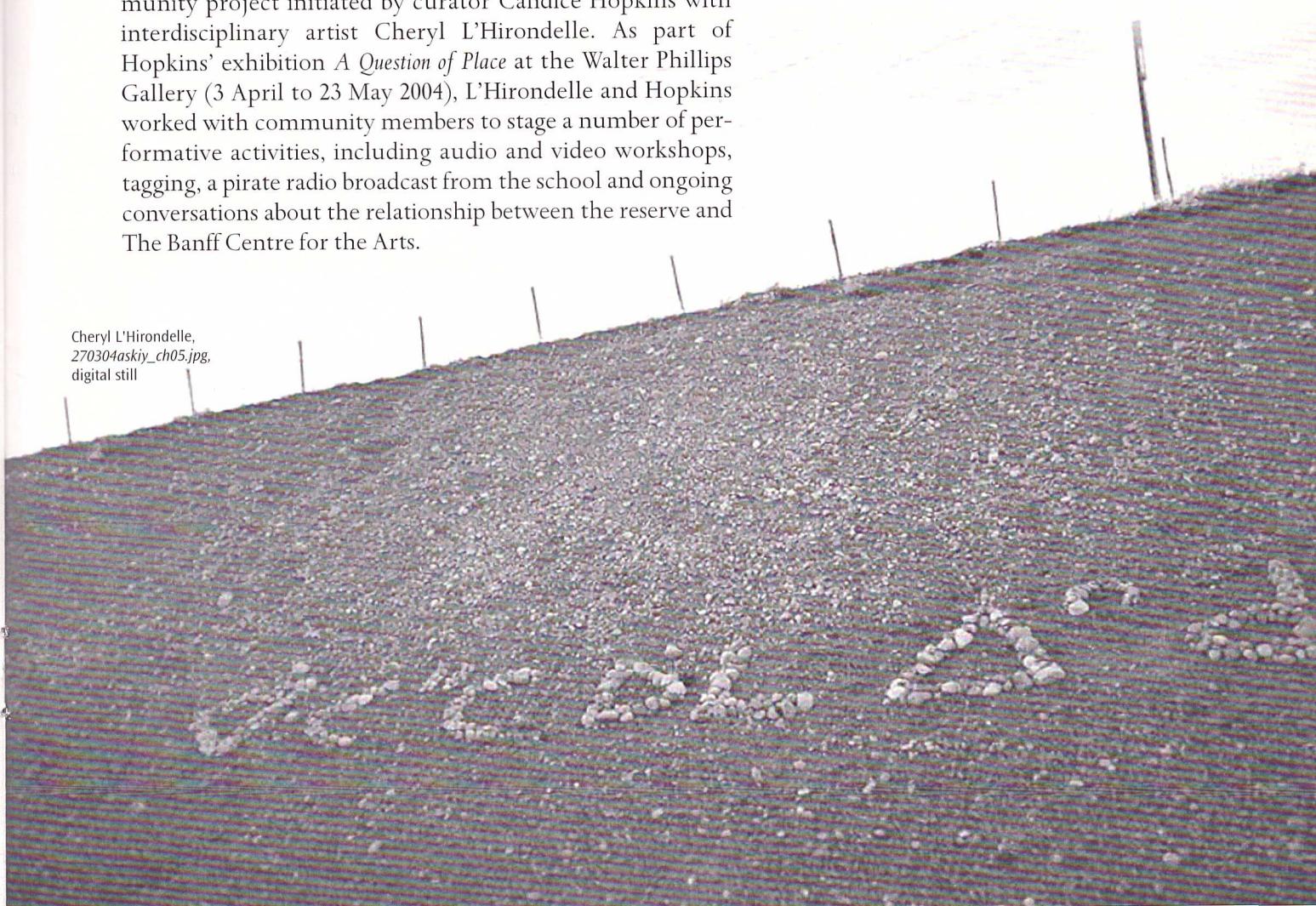
Sounding the Border:

It is a cold but sunny March afternoon and artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle is on the side of the TransCanada highway on the Morley reserve between Banff and Calgary. She is placing rocks in patterns that tag the phrase “*pimiyonakwan iskonikan askiy*” (“look at this leftover land”) in Cree syllabics. A trucker honks. She turns and waves. Two miles away, at the Morley school, a group of high-school students are rapping, breakdancing, mixing and broadcasting radio at ten watts — a pirate transmission according to Canadian regulations.

We are at the apex of *Echoes and Transmissions*, an ongoing community project initiated by curator Candice Hopkins with interdisciplinary artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle. As part of Hopkins' exhibition *A Question of Place* at the Walter Phillips Gallery (3 April to 23 May 2004), L'Hirondelle and Hopkins worked with community members to stage a number of performative activities, including audio and video workshops, tagging, a pirate radio broadcast from the school and ongoing conversations about the relationship between the reserve and The Banff Centre for the Arts.

Echoes and Transmissions from the Morley Reserve

Janna Graham in conversation with Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Candice Hopkins about piracy, performance, community process and autonomy



Cheryl L'Hirondelle,
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digital still

JANNA: (via speakerphone from an office in the Art Gallery of Ontario) Hi from Toronto!

CANDICE: (from the office of the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff) Hi there.

CHERYL: (with Candice) Hello. Do you mind if I ask the first question?

CANDICE AND JANNA: Not at all.

CLH: Candice, what was your interest in doing an outreach project at Morley?

CH: My initial interest was to try to engage with the local Native community. Over the years the Banff Centre has put on many Aboriginal exhibitions, performances and residencies. My question was: who would be the audience for these initiatives? As I was curating the exhibition *A Question of Place*, I wanted to make a bridge between the gallery space and the local community. Rather than going to Morley in a teaching capacity, I was interested in learning from their experiences of the Morley reserve, so that I could understand more about community from their perspectives.

JG: How did you contextualize this project within the exhibition?

CH: The project was an important extension of the exhibition as a whole. The exhibition, which included works by Jimmie Durham, Zacharias Kunuk, Brian Jungen, Truman Lowe, Faye HeavyShield along with Cheryl L'Hirondelle, was an attempt to investigate ideas of place and community from Aboriginal perspectives. The works in the exhibition addressed this theme in diverse ways—something I intended from the start. Jimmie Durham's film "The Pursuit of Happiness," for example, speaks to a degree about his place as a Cherokee artist in exile from the United States and how this position—living in voluntary exile—is, in a sense, a Cherokee tradition. It didn't make sense to have an exhibition on this theme and not incorporate the voice of the local in some way.

JG: Cheryl, the projects that you undertook and are continuing to develop at Morley seem to draw from earlier process and performance-based work that you have undertaken with communities. These were projects that you developed on your own initiative, such as *cistemaw iyiniw ochi* (for the tobacco being). How did you approach this kind of work in the context of an exhibition and an institutional initiative?

CLH: I tried to forget about the institutions and instead, concentrated on the people inside them. I am more interested in relationships.

While *cistemaw iyiniw ochi* (for the tobacco being) did not take place in an institution, it was institutionally supported. It was sponsored by Tribe Inc. and was also supported by Meadow Lake Tribal Council. It was the last project I did as part of a two-year co-storyteller-in-residence at Meadow Lake First Nations (including Flying Dust, Makwa Sahgaiehcan, Island Lake, Waterhen Lake, Buffalo River, Birch Narrows, Clearwater River, English River and Canoe Lake First Nations) with Joseph Naytowhow. *cistemaw iyiniw ochi* was a completely different process. In that case I was exploring questions I had about contemporary artistic practice and relationship to community. I worked across the community—with radio stations, artists and elders. I did an artist talk



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, 270304askiy_jg08.jpg, digital still

for the high-school students. Their willingness to listen and give feedback on how they wanted to engage made me realize just how much the community wanted to participate and collaborate in a very direct way. These encounters ultimately manifested themselves in a performance in which I ran across the reserve while traditional stories related to the performance were broadcast on radio and a website.

Echoes and Transmissions was like condensing all of those different ways of working. Instead of being regimented, we maintained fluidity, so that we could respond to what was going on at the school and in the community. We were learning as we went along; exploring process and media, but definitely not focused on fixed ends.

CH: Across these two projects and others in which you have worked with community, you have used radio. What draws you to this medium, as opposed to other traditional visual formats?

CLH: Radio fit in Morley because it is something that exists at Morley. I had met Margaret and Terry Rider from Morley's Siktoge Ja Radio a few years earlier at the *Aboriginal Streams* workshop at Banff. They were a great connection and thankfully were interested in participating in this project. What I know about reserve radio

from my time in northern Saskatchewan is that everyone uses it, everyone knows it, everyone honours it. Margaret and Terry run Siktoge Ja as a business, but also as a service for the people. Because my work is process based — more about exploration, collaboration and site specificity and less about visual representation — I like to use what is already there.

I also see this as being about expressing points of view. I often use the analogy of a bird on a branch expressing itself. While that mental image might lead to a visual representation quite easily, for me it is the voice that frames my perspective. Radio is like that bird's song — those who have radio have the ability to voice their point of view. Because I was being asked to think about place, I was thinking about the beautiful valley at Morley and the kinds of echoes that might emanate from there. I was interested in what kinds of transmissions one would make to the land there. Radio was the bridge between what I do and what exists on the reserve.

In the Morley project, I wanted community members and especially the young people to be exposed to the whole open-source and DIY mentality involved in pirate radio; that not everything that is not purchased or licensed for individual use is stolen or illegal.

However, I also wanted draw out some relationships between rez radio and piracy. On reserves in Canada you can broadcast without a license up to about fifty watts, so you do not need to have a CRTC license. This follows from a logic that is present within many Indian communities: the air was not mentioned in treaties so there is no need for it to be the jurisdiction or domain of a Canadian governing body. No one can own the air. So on reserves people don't really think of this as pirate radio. Pirate has a more European connotation. To translate the concept of piracy in *Nehiyawewin* (Cree language) one could say, *nacîyaw sîkiwak* (to sneak up).

JG: Cheryl, in what you've described there is an obvious interest in moving beyond a visual notion of land (like those indications of jurisdiction and limit found on



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *iamcdn.jpg*, digital still

maps) and toward the more ephemeral quality of radio that exceeds the reach of these boundaries. When you orchestrated the pirate broadcast from the Morley school, however, you simultaneously placed yourself on a perceived and visible border, on the side of the Trans-Canada highway, an edge of Stoney territory where you tagged messages in Cree syllabics. This political boundary was dissipated by the radio waves that reached beyond but it was also reconstituted by your presence. Was this intentional?

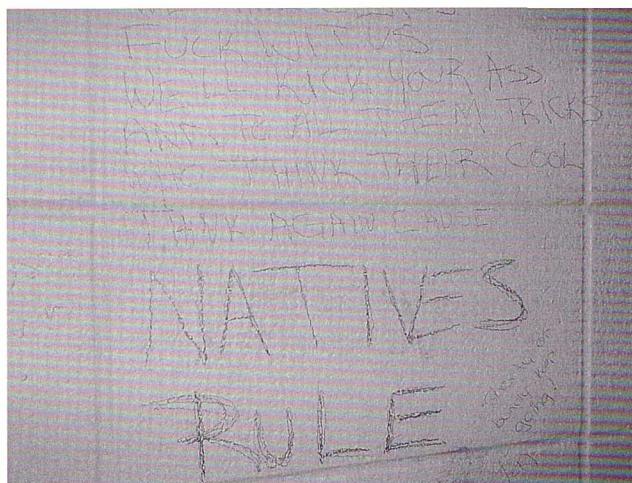
CLH: As Indian people this is our reality. We are partly within a Canadian paradigm, but so much of what we do falls outside of that domain. We are still exploring our freedom of movement, our different connections to land based on this mobility and new forms of communication. From my perspective, language is gauged by the land. For example, *Nehiyawewin*, or Cree language, means the “sounding” of the Cree worldview. This worldview is referenced to where one is situated. Cree dialects change as you move from shield to swamp to plains, from Quebec to BC. Values, lifestyle and point of view also change along the way.

The tagging again reflects my interest in unauthorized youth cultures and subversive activity, the intersections between Indigenous experiences and cultures like

hip-hop. Graffiti, tagging and bombing are meaningful forms of communication. I have been trying to relate this to the existence of pictographs, petroglyphs and early mark-making done by Aboriginal people on the Plains that I heard about from Connie Dieter Buffalo (a writer from Saskatchewan). She once related a story to me about how one of her relatives, her uncle I think, would go into Regina (when Indians were finally being let off reserves without passes) and make marks on buildings that were part English, part symbol, part syllabic. These were little glyphs outside of buildings to send each other messages like: “don’t go here,” “they’ll give you water here,” “you can go into this store,” or “good place to rest.” This was apparently a common practice among hobos, but, in using syllabics, legible only to other Native people in the city. It was a way of communicating with each other in the alienating constructs of the city. When kids are tagging they are also trying to make meaningful messages to each other. I wanted the young people we were working with to understand that tagging, or even the doodles in their notebooks, could operate within a non-authorized artistic space.

JG: And why the side of the highway?

CLH: Ha, ha — what seems like an edge is actually in



Cheryle L'Hirondelle, *nativesrule_tag.jpg*, digital still



Cheryle L'Hirondelle, *peacelove_tag.jpg*, digital still

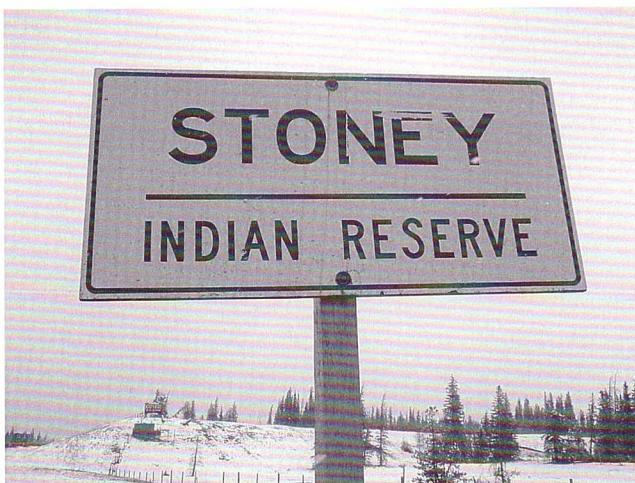
the middle of Stoney territory. I think many people aren't aware that they are going through reserves on highways all over the land now called Canada. It was fun to be doing performance activities and making marks using syllabics to draw attention to this fact. I have been thinking about the notion of random audiences, without any sense of hierarchy; witnesses who may or may not engage. On the side of the Trans-Canada, there have been these tags, but they are very touristy, messages like "I am Canadian," and "Ben loves Amy." Candice has spoken with the writer Maria Campbell in Saskatchewan about the road allowance people. Candice, why don't you talk about this ...

CH: There were times when Métis people were not living on reserves and didn't have the means or the right (or in some cases, the will) to purchase land. Groups of Métis people lived on what are called road allowances, the slim strips of land between the road and titled territories. It was essentially "no man's land." The space is left in the event that the government wants to alter or expand the highway. I found the story fascinating because of the resilience of people who would build temporary structures that they could leave very quickly. In a sense the land on which they lived also signified their place in society, which was an unresolved border zone.

CLH: My mother was a road-allowance person. If they took script, which disenfranchised them from being Aboriginal, they were entitled to some of the same rights as settlers. But there were all of these stipulations on script. If you didn't clear the land that you purchased with script money in two years and if it didn't have a certain number of crops growing on it, you lost it. As a result, Métis people often became rock and root pickers, or tree-stump pickers on what would become pioneer land. They often had neither the money, equipment or lifestyle for farming.

The road allowances often had no roads in them. In many cases they were lands slated for road development, thin strips of land between authorized territories where frequent mobility was the norm. There were times these houses were burned out and would have to be rebuilt.

Occupying this space during the project really spoke to me about who I am. It seemed appropriate that the highway, which was the road allowance of the Morley reserve, was a place for me because of my background. But it was also important for me to acknowledge that I was not from Morley, that I needed to be aware of where I positioned myself. As an artist entering into the Morley community, I could not have prime real estate. I felt, and still feel, that I have to earn a place in the



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *stoneyindianreserve.jpg*, digital still



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *270304askiy_jg01.jpg*, digital still

community. I was honoured to be there. For me, the more derogatory notions — that we are “the good for nothing” living at the side of the road — were replaced with this honour; to be in a position where I was welcomed to make a contribution and a commentary.

JG: Speaking about the “inside” and “outside” places of the reserve and the gallery, I wondered if we could revisit the term outreach that you used at the beginning of the conversation, Cheryl. The way that you both have talked about playing with notions of audience, of community and of governed and autonomous ideas of space, it seems that the standard dichotomy — the inside of the gallery and the outside of the public — was remapped. Did your roles and the language that you used around the project change as a result?

CH: We saw all of our roles as equal. What we brought to the community and what they brought to us had equal value. Cheryl and I saw ourselves as collaborators, with one another and with the community. There wasn’t a single author of the project. What I was interested in achieving was not to bring the institution “out” into the community, but to learn from members of the community and, by exhibiting student work within the larger exhibition, to weave their perspectives into the institution, from the inside.

JG: How did this reshape your roles as curator and artist/educator?

CLH: The way that I entered into this situation reminded me of when I was one of two storytellers in residence with the Tribal Council in northern Saskatchewan. I spent a lot of time with elders in the community. They told stories and I tried to figure out what to do with them. I started to realize different things that were going on in the community.

In the Morley project, there were many grey lines: between the piece on the side of the highway that would become net art and our interactions at the school working with kids, bringing in other artists who

could work with us. It got very blurry between the projects and between our roles. It became very relational. When things were discussed or decided upon they had to touch on all of these aspects of the work and we all had a role to play in this. The ability for us to work discursively and to continue to build relationships over a longer period of time, rather than being dropped in for a month, was really important to both of us.

CH: When we started working with community members, we tried to create a different dynamic. We weren’t the “art experts,” we wanted to build longer lasting friendships. Since the exhibition has closed we’ve been invited to round-house dances and sweats. The people in the community don’t see us only as representatives of an institution. This is an important point. I don’t think that this project would have created lasting relationships if our roles had been defined within the strict terms of the gallery. We came as collaborators.

JG: This shifts the usual temporal parameters of gallery and museum outreach work, extending beyond the length of an exhibition or a set number of workshops negotiated with a teacher. This is very rare in the current neo-liberal climate that both arts and educational institutions operate in, at least in a Toronto context. Was there friction in doing so?



Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *uronnnndnland.jpg*, digital still

CH: Surprisingly there was not much friction in expanding the usual boundaries, time-based or otherwise. The Morley Community School is a unique environment because of the amount of freedom we had while working within the school and the freedom that we have in continuing this relationship. I think that this stems in part from the different ideologies that exist in the school, both in the way that the students are taught and the idea that culture and identity are at the forefront of the curriculum.

JG: The project's ability to exceed these kinds of institutional boundaries seems to address a critique made of "new genre public art" by people like Miwon Kwon — of artists parachuting into a perceived community to address a social issue over a very short period of time. Beyond the issues of time, you, Cheryl and the community are using a very different idea of public culture. How do you describe the notions of public and community that you and your collaborators on the reserve were working with?

CH: I believe that there is a different notion of community arts practice in Aboriginal communities. Art in Aboriginal communities hasn't been defined by terms like new genre public art (coined by Suzanne Lacy), because this kind of art practice isn't something that is new. We are working within a much longer trajectory, from which Cheryl's work generally follows. With this project I was interested in seeing if there was a new definition of community arts practices that might be presented from Aboriginal perspectives. I think that another difference with this project is that Cheryl and I didn't go into the community with the idea that we could solve a problem or would even have the capability — or right — to locate what the problems are. Reserves, as with any community, are very complex. I think that the idea of artist as social worker creates a very problematic relationship as it immediately sets up hierarchies between the artist, the curator, the community and the participants. This was exactly what we were trying to disrupt.

CLH: Years ago I noticed something in the difference between theatre and performance that might help to clarify this. In theatre, if you want people to look at certain gestures enacted on the stage, you use blocking to direct their attention to the right location. In performance it is much more acceptable to believe that, whatever your point of view, it is valid. The way that I could understand this was through my own family gatherings, where my relatives are all musicians: talented jiggers and fiddlers and guitar players. In this context it was just as important to see my uncle stamping his foot to the beat as it was to hear him singing or watch the smooth foot patterns of someone dancing — you saw and enjoyed what you saw. There was a sense of a fuller experience. So this idea in performance art was for me, already part of who I was.

Later I moved to northern Saskatchewan and there were no galleries or clubs for gigs. There were not venues for having a codified art experience, but you could create art and it was all around you. Amazing storytelling happened around kitchen tables, performance was part of everyday. As an artist, your practice becomes very different depending on who is witnessing or interacting with the piece. There, it was very apparent that art making was about building relationships, building a sense of trust. There is a belief that everyone has a gift to share and that you give and share what you have with a community.

CH: I don't want to generalize, but it seems that the modernist idea of a single author is not consistent with the kinds of creative processes that have existed in Aboriginal communities for so long. When art is being created, when stories are being told, it's not necessarily your story. The storyteller is not a singular voice, there are many who take on the story. It is kept alive by sharing and repetition, not necessarily through the celebration of ownership. Thinking about community art from this perspective is very interesting because the idea of collaboration, the loss of the author, is not considered to be avant-garde, but just the way that things are.

CLH: Yes! This was the moccasin telegraph, a sense of information being conveyed through the story, of sharing information rather than holding on to it or developing expertise.

CH: Non-linearity and an awareness of intertextuality are things that have always existed in Aboriginal communities.

JG: Was there a tension in trying to work with this non-authorial, non-linear framework (and across jurisdictions, definitions, community sectors, disciplines and factions), even if the roots of this kind of practice run deep within Aboriginal cultures?

CH: There is tension. In Morley things are becoming more and more divided into the three bands: Wesley, Chiniki and Bearspaw. It was interesting to work at the school because it was the only place on the reserve where people from all three bands came together. There is no other community meeting-place. The markers dividing each community are very visible, there are signs indicating each band's territory and the divide is coming to a head. Wesley, Chiniki and Bearspaw are each in the process of developing their own buildings, structures and infrastructures, like rodeo grounds and elder's houses. Working at the school was a way of working across those tensions, though we were very aware of them.

CLH: Yes, and it was very important to us not to privilege or sensationalize that story within the work and interactions with community. They live with this every day. As Aboriginal people, we live with our tensions and our legacy and we can't escape that. It was important for us to acknowledge this but to also enable experience beyond these tensions.

JG: Candice, your comment on the school as a community meeting-place is very interesting. In speaking with others on the reserve, it seems that there are multiple learning frameworks in place at the Morley school: those developed by elders, that of the Alberta Learning

curriculum and those arising from community happenings and celebrations. Did you sense this as a tension between values or an opportunity to work between them? The Alberta art curriculum, for example, places great emphasis on visual understanding and not on inter-disciplinary work.

CLH: There are tensions around the dominance of the visual in the curriculum. Instead of being oppositional, we worked around this tension. We used other means to look at and experience things.

The school is a space where there is a great deal going on and a lot of things coming together. In previous work I've looked for a narrative, and I did not want that story to be about the tensions. I wanted to do work about other ways of seeing.

By using pirate radio, there was a sense that our activity was meant to fly under the radar. We did not want to become part of the politics. We wanted the project to occupy and replicate the somewhat autonomous space of the school.

JG: This is a very interesting shift in the use of the idea of autonomous space — not just autonomous from the mainstream but also a space for creation and the formation of a meta-community across the individual communities. How will this work continue?

CLH: I think that language will be something that we explore at some point. I find it to be so amazing that the reserve is nestled between the mountain tourism of Banff and the city of Calgary and yet the Nakoda language has been so strongly retained. It's nice to know that this is something to build upon. I have been teasing the students about making some rhymes in Nakoda...

I'd like to end with a question to the two of you, if that's okay. Whether a school, an art gallery or a ministry curriculum — given both of your experiences — are there limits to doing this kind of work within an institutional framework? Can it actually provoke change?

JG: The Morley School seems to have a more flexible program that places values such as care, collaboration and community at the centre of learning. Your ability to weave your way through the school, to improvise curriculum, to involve the young people with whom you worked informally in community and gallery structures is very inspiring. Working in such a committed way within a community runs counter to the service-delivery model of the one-off class visit or exhibition-based outreach program that often happen in gallery-based education. It also speaks to the way in which professional designations and divisions in European-based institutions (for example, between that of curator, artist and educator) do not translate into an Aboriginal or, in fact, any viable community context. This is consistent with progressive thinking that has been happening around museum pedagogy in recent years by people like Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Declan McGonagle and places like the Gardiner Museum in Toronto.

The Walter Phillips Gallery seems like an ideal place to experiment with this kind of work. In larger galleries the economic demands imposed as part of the steady push to privatize public culture often creates pressure for education departments to become economically self-sustaining or even revenue generating on behalf of the larger institution. This can limit the kinds of community interactions that are possible. In large school boards these kinds of programs are also extremely difficult to realize and even harder to sustain, given the funding pressures and government policy guidelines that are facing both the education and cultural sectors.

CH: I think to participate in these projects you have to always go in with the mindset that change is possible. The degree to which this happens might not be immediately visible. A strategy in this project was to find ways in which we could operate across the limits of an institution — something that you pointed to, Cheryl, in your thoughts on the use of radio in the school. Radio, as you rightly stated, can fly underneath the radar. In regards

to the exhibition, I believe that even exhibiting work by Aboriginal youth in the gallery was a subversive act. They are not artists that would ordinarily be considered within this context. There is so much potential in these communities just waiting to be given space and voice.

Candice Hopkins is the Aboriginal curator in residence at the Walter Phillips Gallery. Her recent curatorial project, Every Stone Tells a Story: The Performance Work of David Hammons and Jimmie Durham, opened at the Berrie Center Art Galleries, Ramapo College NJ in November 2004. Her writing is featured in the periodical <http://www.horizonzero.ca> and the anthology Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture to be published by the Walter Phillips Gallery. Hopkins has lectured at the Tate Britain, Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, UK, Dak'Art_Lab, Senegal and in Canada at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle (waynohtēw) (<http://www.ndnnrkey.net>) is an Alberta-born interdisciplinary artist. Since the early 1980s, she has worked as an arts programmer, cultural strategist/activist, arts consultant, producer and director — independently and with various artist-run centres, tribal councils and government agencies. Recently, she was guest creative consultant for horizon zero's (<http://www.horizonzero.ca>) edition 17:TELL devoted to aboriginal digital storytelling. Her net.art database project treatycard (<http://treatycard.banff.org>) is part of Walter Phillips Gallery's November 2004 Database Imaginary exhibition curated by Sarah Cook, Anthony Kiendl and Steve Dietz. Her project, awa ka-amaciwet piwapisko waciya/climbing the iron mountains was presented recently in Toronto in the 7a-11d performance festival.

Janna Graham develops projects in the education department at the Art Gallery of Ontario in collaboration with youth, artists and community organizations. These have included Decked: A Ballet on Skateboards, Audge's Place, an installation by De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Group and Tauqijijit, a temporary media lab, exhibition and residency with artists from 7th Generation Image Makers, De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-jig Theatre Group, Yumi, Qaggiq and Igloolik Isuma Productions. She has presented at numerous conferences and contributed writing to the Journal of Visual Culture, Feedback: New Curatorial Strategies and a recent book on Knut Asdam. Janna is on the editorial committee at FUSE.