

Cheryl L'Hirondelle

## red giveaway: linking butterflies and all my relations

I spend countless hours a day online and in front of a couple of computer monitors. Whether at home or on the road, I'm always connected and looking for something personal, meaningful, and transcendent from this daily repetitive interaction. To keep it real, an image of my mother and aunties adorns my desktop to further remind me that I am not alone but connected and related to real beings. Catching their gaze as they peer at me around an open browser window, I know I am safe and am cognizant of what, who, and why I am here.

I am hunting when conducting research on the internet and enjoy the challenge to relocate a particular web page I have visited while using a computer that is not my own. It's not that I'm ignorant of browser capabilities or too lazy to write down the url, but it's sometimes an exciting virtual portage where memory and the senses are engaged to recall sights, sounds, and signs — all clues on a path towards deeper connectivity and locativeness — albeit virtual.

The internet is simultaneously a portal to, and a place where things are kept: information, memories, relationships, opportunities — a transactive memory device. It is also simultaneously a tool for expression and a medium where our unique Indigenous worldviews, concepts, and continued existence can be sounded; and where our identity and languages can be shared dynamically with the other beings of the world.

Since the invention of html<sup>1</sup> by Tim Berners Lee and the public release of the first browsers in the early 90's the term 'links' (not to be confused with the text browser of the same name) has come to commonly refer to the assortment of other websites a developer and/or net.artist wants to associate themselves with, either as a way of referencing like sites content-wise or as a camaraderie with developers, artists, etc. I think it's a good way of also showing the arc of a project from an idea/concept to the research, and then on through to its fruition. Links pages, therefore, are a standard way of making a mind map combined with a relational family tree.

In 2004, when invited to present my net.art work at the Dakar Biennale in Senegal, Africa, I decided to track my path and bring my relatives along in a similar fashion. Firstly, I wanted to talk about source code by making a spoof site of artengine.ca, but altering the name and look to become artinjun.ca. Secondly, I wanted to use the project to feature many colleagues who were making pages/sites that had some degree of interactivity and/or artistry — or concretely, something more than just an online resume with images. I also wanted to make the project without asking permission of artengine.ca or any of the artists who I would link to. I did this as a sort of 'sneak-up' or hunt, where I was actually not stealing but conversely paying homage.<sup>2</sup>

Poor upbringing? Maybe ;— but to me it is the reality of the internet (and thanks to search engines) that once a page is published/uploaded, it becomes virtually locative and hyper-public. Artinjun.ca became my way of talking about the giveaway we are all engaging in by voicing and sharing our existence in this new virtual domain. And



Portrait of Mike MacDonald on the river at St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, 2000, Photo credit: Sheila Spence



Butterfly Garden (detail: butterflies), Mike MacDonald, 1998, [http://snac.mb.ca/projects/butterfly\\_garden/](http://snac.mb.ca/projects/butterfly_garden/)

importantly, I love these sites — going back time and time again to visit, to see new versions, and to find out what's new (I am ever on the lookout to add more to my ndn net.art family tree ;-).

In April 2005, during a residency in Halifax at Centre For Art Tapes (where I was working on artinjun.ca version 2), I had the pleasure of an afternoon with (the late) Mike MacDonald and James MacSwain. The two took me to Peggy's Cove where we had a delicious homemade lunch (a Mike and James collaboration) and afterwards we toured the area. Though early in the season, Mike showed me all the butterfly gardens he had been creating and caring for. We intermixed this with all the galleries and other points of interest — beautiful harbours, historic buildings, and stopping randomly to appreciate the crocuses just springing from the earth.

I was also in Mike's Butterfly Garden at Banff the day he passed away. My long time collaborator Joseph Naytowhow and I sang him songs for his journey to the other side. I had been speaking about him to colleagues there for a few days prior to his passing thinking about those in our communities who have gifts and visions and who lead by example.

As a maker of videotapes, multi-screen installations, net.art projects, and most importantly medicine gardens, Mike was truly an excellent leader — someone whose practice was firmly grounded in this burgeoning technology, but ever mindful to bring the earth into the realm. Or maybe for him it was really the other way around... Dana Claxton writes of his work stating, "MacDonald's integration of natural beauty with video takes nature inside, while his work seamlessly moves outside through a series of native plant gardens that grow plants for medicine and food."<sup>3</sup> Mike was masterfully able to bridge worlds and remind us of mother earth and all her beings whether in a gallery, at a video screening, or sitting in front of our computer.

What I love about his online Butterfly Garden<sup>4</sup> is both its simple design and mimicking of his video monitor installations as well as the references to a simple gardener's layout of their plot. In his own words, "before contact, the Aboriginal people had no word for art — no concept of it as anything separate from everyday life."<sup>5</sup> Even his use of simple animated gifs to provide proof of the relationship between butterfly and medicine is poignantly utilitarian.

If Mike was still alive and I had the pleasure of his company again, I would suggest that he make a new version of the piece to remove the frames and fix up some of the outdated coding. I would also try to convince him to make the site into an online store where people could order the seeds and instructions on how to make and care for their own garden. Extra pages could be created of the names of the plants in a variety of Indigenous languages, a blog of his year-round work in preparation for the short east coast summer season could be added, an rss feed to other relevant sites about gardening, butterflies, and medicinal plants; and importantly, adding links to the many relations who followed his lead in creating medicine gardens all over this land now known as Canada.

### Welal'n nigamuj (thank you my friend)\*

\*Mi'kmaq translation courtesy of Mr. Fred Marshall

#### NOTES :

1. hyper text markup language
2. For a great alternative list of Aboriginal artists resumes, please see Todd Baker's [nativeonline.com](http://nativeonline.com) project.
3. Dana Claxton, Re:wind, from *Transference, Tradition, Technology* (Banff, Alberta: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2005) 21.
4. [http://www.snac.mb.ca/projects/butterfly\\_garden/](http://www.snac.mb.ca/projects/butterfly_garden/)
5. Mike Macdonald quoted in *Revisions* (Banff, Alberta: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1992), 16.