

Repopulating Contentious Territory

Recent Strategies for Indigenous Northwest Coast Site-Based and Public Art

Gordon Brent Ingram

*I figure as long as we keep
speaking then we still exist.*

—Marianne Nicolson [1]

Despite the rising profile of indigenous [2] artists in contemporary Canadian art in recent decades, significant blind spots and conflict zones remain. On the West Coast of Canada, the direction of photographic portrayals of communities and lands by First Nations artists remains negligible, even after Vancouver's decades of photoconceptualism and that movement's theories of social engagement. Similarly, interventions in public space outside of reserve lands by First Nations artists, even where land claims are well articulated in the courts, continue to be rare and difficult on the West Coast. The fallout of lost lands, resources and livelihoods continues to dominate the lives of the generation previous to today's emerging First Nations artists. Documentation of and interventions in traditional territories outside of the Indian Act continue to be fraught with obstacles for First Nations artists on the West Coast. The exceptions are well-managed commissions that rely on traditional practices, with the effect of suggesting a modicum of social inclusion and respect for local indigenous cultures, while avoiding acknowledgement of unceded lands and stalled treaty processes.

[1] Marianne Nicolson, personal communication with the author, 3 June 2013.

[2] "Indigenous" is not capitalized in this essay and capitalization is reserved for

local groups or organizations that use "Indigenous" in their name or in self-reference.

An example of how difficult it remains for indigenous artists to engage in contemporary practices of transforming public space on the West Coast is the saga of the work *Native Hosts* (1988/91) by Cheyenne and Arapaho artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds. *Native Hosts* is, so far, the most widely viewed piece of contemporary public art by an individual indigenous artist permanently installed on the West Coast of Canada. Originally exhibited in 1991 at the Vancouver Art Gallery, its permanent installation on the University of British Columbia campus took another two decades and only thanks to the artist's *donation* of the work (as in, exceptionally discounted labour) to one of the most highly funded universities in the world.

Against this backdrop of chronic devaluation of and persistent obstacles to indigenous artists engaging around photographic investigations and site-based interventions in disputed territory, aesthetics of indefinite decolonizations involve engaging around communities, spaces and resources in ways that necessarily contest older notions of the public, of propriety and of the fair distribution of wealth. In order to envision new strategies of contemporary Northwest Coast indigenous art focused on reoccupation and ease for intervention, a phase of remapping, testing and repopulating has been necessary (especially after two centuries of extreme demographic declines). Over the last decade, some new practices and strategies, contesting obstacles to indigenous transformation of public space, have emerged at a time when many treaty negotiations, for local First Nations, have reached dead ends.

Rebecca Belmore, Terry Haines and Marianne Nicolson were based on the West Coast over the last decade, while exploring critical strategies for postcolonial interventions. Together, their selected works provide a sketch of the kinds of reassertion and testing necessary for the more ambitious and indefinite transformations of sites and the public sphere that could be considered occupation, or rather reoccupation.

The most influential and symbolic indigenous work produced in Vancouver in the first decade of this century is Rebecca Belmore's performance *Vigil* (2002), during which she evoked the names of dozens of murdered and missing aboriginal women. While reciting their names, Belmore repeatedly nailed a red dress to a telephone pole and tore it off down to her undergarments. As a first gesture of repopulating, Belmore acknowledged individuals and populations disappeared through institutional racism, misogyny and neglect. Belmore's subsequent *Launch A Feast For Scavengers* (2007), performed in Victoria, explored the cusp of land/sea art and the rich cultural tropes around European marine contact. As another strategy for repopulating public space, Belmore illustrated the deteriorating states of traditional fisheries and the respective precarity and deprivations around traditional foods. In *Launch A Feast For Scavengers*, Belmore literally waded into a tangle comprised of a raft, nets, herring roe as intended bait and a reticent seagull. The scavengers, in this work, were as much those who came through imperial intrusion as any seagull. One of the last of Belmore's performances on the West Coast, *Worth* (2010), alluded to a well-publicized civil claim by a Toronto-based art dealer. As another practice for repopulating, Belmore, who is now based in Winnipeg and closer to her traditional communities, confronted an economy of cultural production still largely stacked against the autonomy and prosperity of indigenous artists.

Over the last decade, video installation has been the least constraining venue for indigenous artists on the West Coast, especially for transforming public memory and reimagining public space where aboriginal sovereignty was fully established. *Coyote X* (2013) was completed earlier this year by Terry Haines, only weeks before he died. The work focuses on both the coyote in urban Vancouver, an

animal of great importance to the artist's Secwepemc and Tsilhqot'in communities of central British Columbia, as well as a range of experiences of insecurity and mortality, including living with HIV. At one point in the video, Haines spray-paints red "positive" symbols on rocks at a public beach near Vancouver. Here, the artist/video documentarian intervenes in the world, taking on the wily characteristics of the canine that is reasserting itself in Canadian cities. *Coyote X* is a koan for survival. The practices for repopulating in *Coyote X* are evocative of the nineteenth-century Witsuwit'en prophetic movements around Bini [3] in the Northwest Plateau territories of Haines's communities. But in contrast to the various ghost dance cultural movements that persisted in Far Western Canada, *Coyote X* is more about a symbolic renewal and persistence through the immortality of video.

The work of Dzawada'enuxw artist Marianne Nicolson of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation centres on her traditional territory in Kingcome Inlet. Over the last decade, Nicolson created a number of conversations in urban areas. Her site-based *Cliff Painting* (1998) contemporized traditional copper designs on a large surface above the sea as part of reasserting natural landscapes as spaces for Kwakwaka'wakw culture and sovereignty. The practices for repopulating in *Cliff Painting* are subtle and powerful adaptations for cultural renewal. A more urban step in these practices was developed by Nicolson in *The House of the Ghosts* (2008), installed for a month on the north side of the Vancouver Art Gallery. This large, site-based work was part of an intercultural conversation between two kinds of public space: that of Nicolson's traditional Dzawada'enuxw territory and the multicultural and globalizing Vancouver, which is on unceded territory. The repopulating in *The House of the Ghosts* was infused with the joy and expansive optimism of having access to and creative control over a large, highly visible swath of public space. Nicolson's 2013 video, *Welida Pala (The Flood)* explores the vulnerability of her family's village to disaster and climate change, combining documentary practices with an adjacent installation of orca whales, sometimes thought to have the power of prophecy. The repopulating in this installation loops back, both in the documentary and in the reworking of sculpture through adjacent edged glass installations.

Any kind of decolonial aesthetic anywhere in Canada must initially acknowledge the specificity and the full extent of the losses of local indigenous communities, populations, economies and cultures. These tentative beginnings of decolonial aesthetics on the West Coast have centred on the acknowledgement of the unresolved indigenous experiences of depopulation, displacement and loss of sovereignty, combined with still largely symbolic efforts to return to, intervene in and repopulate still-contested lands as safe and multi-cultural public spaces. Such emerging aesthetics acknowledge the specificity and multiplicity of contestations over traditional sites, resources and cultural spaces in the context of departures from traditional media and canons. What distinguishes the development of decolonial aesthetics on the West Coast of Canada, is how few indigenous public art interventions have been successfully carried out.

[3] See James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and Wounded Knee* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1896; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1973); and Wayne Suttles, "The Plateau Prophet Dance among the Coast Salish," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1957): 353–396.

Gordon Brent Ingram is Métis with family roots in northern British Columbia and the Yukon. He grew up in a primarily Salish community on southern Vancouver Island. He holds a BFA in Photography from the San Francisco Art Institute and a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley in environmental design extending to site-based art. He is part of an environmental design collaborative based in Vancouver that is often focused on urban interventions and proposals for public art that fully acknowledge indigenous legacies and contemporary First Nations.

Denyse Thomasos

Heidi McKenzie



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Photo

Denyse Thomasos's art is her vehicle of resistance to the global marginalization of people of colour. Her work voices her specific subaltern locus of enunciation – woman of colour, descendent of slaves, indentured workers and Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. Thomasos (1964–2012) was a Trinidadian-born, Toronto-raised, New York-based abstract painter, whose passion and rarefied zeal for life catapulted her and her work to international recognition and acclaim, and whose life was tragically abridged. This paper grapples with the context, both social and personal, that propelled Thomasos's artistic trajectory, using the Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo's theories on aspects of modern colonialisms and colonial modernity. [1]

Mignolo describes the coexistence of modernity/coloniality, where modernity, as constitutive of the Americas, does not exist without coloniality. [2] Mignolo offers us an alternative methodology for embracing a totality of paradigms, at once dominant and subjugated, mainstream and repressed, where all coexist at a crossroads of local histories enunciated from the place of the Other. The subaltern is the Other, as distinct from the merely marginalized, insofar as violent oppression is implicated by colonial difference.

Thomasos's work challenges the coloniality of power through local histories of modernity/coloniality that extend beyond her own ethnic heritage. Thomasos was born in the West Indies

[1] See Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 22.

[2] *Ibid.*, 43, 50.

[3] In 1997, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was invited into the stable of the Lennon, Weinberg gallery in New York, as well as the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto. Other notable awards include the Canada Council

Millennium Grant (1999), a Pew Fellowship, a Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant, and a travel residency at the American Academy in Rome.