

### Making a Puncture

In 2009, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954, Wichita, Kansas), a contemporary artist and enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, installed a temporary public artwork titled *Beyond the Chief* on the campus of the University of Illinois in Champaign. Heap of Birds's artwork comprised a series of twelve commercially printed steel panels, each eighteen by thirty-six inches, deployed around the campus and looking very much like official signage posted by the university's administration. *Beyond the Chief* was based on Heap of Birds's signature series of public installations, *Native Hosts* (begun 1988), which name the displaced indigenous nations that once enjoyed sovereign ownership of the lands now claimed by settler nations such as the United States and Canada. *Beyond the Chief* greeted visitors to the campus: "FIGHTING ILLINI" (in backward type) "TODAY YOUR HOST IS" followed by the name of a tribe with traditional territories in Illinois, including Peoria, Kickapoo, Myaami, Meskwaki, Kaskaskia, Potawatomi, and six others. Today there are no federally recognized Indian tribes residing in Illinois; nations listed on the panels in *Beyond the Chief* had been relocated to Indian Territory—present-day Oklahoma—and other far-flung places in the nineteenth century.



1.1 Edgar Heap of Birds, *Beyond the Chief*, 2009. Twelve commercially printed steel panels, 18 × 36 inches each. Installed at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Photo: Durango Mendoza. Artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds. Heap of Birds was invited to create *Beyond the Chief* by the university's American Indian Studies Program, which collaborated with other campus organizations including the African American Cultural Center, La Casa Cultural Latina, Asian American Cultural Center, Department of African American Studies, and Asian American Studies. The installation included panels with text in English, Spanish, and Chinese, with the names of twelve Native tribal nations with traditional territory in what is now the state of Illinois.

Heap of Birds has been an influential presence in the contemporary art world for over three decades. Based in Oklahoma, where he is a professor of Native American studies at the University of Oklahoma, he is sought after as an artist, lecturer, and visiting critic. Since completing his art studies at the University of Kansas, the Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, and the Royal College of Art in London in the late 1970s, he has traveled the world producing site-specific artworks and gallery exhibitions including numerous locations in the United States and Canada; Sydney, Australia; Derry, Northern Ireland; Cape Town, South Africa; and Hong Kong, China. He has participated in major international art exhibitions such as Documenta 8 in Kassel, Germany (1987), and the Fifty-Second Venice Biennale in Venice, Italy (2007). He has maintained a

disciplined practice in multiple genres: public art installations, both temporary and permanent, in multiple media; the abstract landscape paintings of his ongoing *Neuf* series; large-scale, text-based drawings; and prints and multiples. Taken as a whole, his body of work comprises a trenchant and thoroughgoing critique of the loss of land and autonomy endured by Native North Americans under the heel of settler colonial expansionism. His art also embodies a distinctly indigenous epistemology as regards place, nation, and identity.<sup>1</sup>

*Beyond the Chief* exemplifies Heap of Birds's practice in many ways. The sign panels installed throughout the campus were not labeled as artworks. There were no explanatory plaques or didactic text other than the credit line "Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds 2009" at the bottom of each panel. The panels were left to be encountered by passersby, like other official notices and directional signs. Heap of Birds has explained that he intends for his artworks to create a "puncture." His public projects are not explicitly identified as art because, as he explains, he is interested in making psychic inroads before a viewer has time to cordon off the experience as just an artwork. The intervention has already commenced its work as the viewer begins to wonder about the unfamiliar message she has just read. As Heap of Birds explains, "The idea of it being art or not being art . . . well it's too late to worry about that."<sup>2</sup> His works are less a political statement than a platform for discussion; they need to be completed by an engaged public. These unannounced interventions into shared spaces, he hopes, will engender a critical conversation and allow new understanding to emerge.

Heap of Birds first appeared in the contemporary art world alongside a cohort of radical artists such as Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos, who installed advertising placards reading "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation" on public buses in San Diego during the Super Bowl in January 1988, introducing the issue of labor exploitation in the border city's hospitality industry; or the artist-collective Gran Fury, whose public posters sought to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation* played the part of an unlikely local chamber of commerce campaign of truth telling; Gran Fury's well-designed productions appropriated the look of public service announcements in the years before government and the nonprofit sector took action to address the growing epidemic.



1.2 Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, commercially silk-screened posters mounted on one hundred San Diego Metropolitan Transit buses, January 4–31, 1988. Photo: Elizabeth Sisco. Sisco, Hock, and Avalos created a site-specific and time-specific public art ambush that exploited the relationship between two notions of public space: physical space (the streets of a city) and informational space (the mass media). As intended, during the month of San Diego's first Super Bowl, the bus posters provoked enough political and media controversy to enable the artists to gain access to informational space and stimulate dialogue and debate about the exploitation of Mexican immigrant labor by the city's tourist industry.

The stern appearance of Heap of Birds's panels masks their subversive intent. His public artworks have avoided the slick look of advertising, instead adopting a bare-bones layout and text set in Helvetica or Avant Garde—typefaces favored by government agencies and other bureaucracies because they convey essential information transparently, without calling attention to their artifice, their presumptiveness. Such objects speak with an authority that appears natural, partaking of the anonymous authority of the state and institutional power that art historian Benjamin Buchloh, describing an earlier generation of conceptual artists, termed the “vernacular of administration.”<sup>3</sup> An official-looking sign hails viewers, enlists them



1.3 Gran Fury, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, 1989. Color postcard, 8½ × 4 inches. Gran Fury Collection, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Gran Fury's postcard, an easily circulated multiple, depicts the 3 × 12-foot posters that the group installed on buses in New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco.

as obedient subjects. Information presented in this format seems beyond question; signs announce that we are on the campus of the University of Illinois, for example, or that parking is prohibited between the hours of eight and ten in the morning. There is, apparently, no reason to question such simple directives. But whereas institutional signage demands compliance, Heap of Birds's projects aim to provoke critical thinking. As he explains of his choice to assume the mode of official signage: "People tend to believe a sign. I ask them to also learn to question other 'official' signs, which they may see in the future. All signs, laws, and histories are editorials."<sup>4</sup>

*Beyond the Chief* also exemplifies the serial nature of Heap of Birds's practice. In Illinois, he adapted the format of his ongoing series *Native Hosts*, much as he has produced abstract paintings and text drawings in new situations and varied locations throughout his career. While the formula is spare and simple, unchanging in layout and design, each installation is attentive to its context, requiring time on the ground for research with local informants and other resources and collaborators. *Beyond the*

*Chief* differed from previous installations of *Native Hosts* in important details. In other locations Heap of Birds has used place names, generally states or provinces—“NEW YORK” or “BRITISH COLUMBIA,” always in backward type—to address passersby. In Illinois, in collaboration with students and faculty, Heap of Birds chose to break from this pattern and make an artwork that engaged with the university’s recent decision to retire Chief Illiniwek, a costumed performer whose half-time dances in ersatz Plains Indian regalia had made the University of Illinois’s Fighting Illini sports teams (named for a powerful regional confederacy of indigenous nations in the upper Mississippi valley) the subject of some controversy.

Heap of Birds’s project in Champaign, Illinois, also resonates with what art historian Miwon Kwon has termed “site-oriented” art, in that it operates outside the gallery and art’s conventional institutional spaces, outdoors in public spaces. The content of the work merges with the physical site itself—the university and its charged history—revealing voices and perspectives that have been obscured by official public representations.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this and all of Heap of Birds’s public works have been exemplary of what artist Suzanne Lacy has termed “New Genre Public Art,” a movement that might best be described as a social interventionist practice, in which artists use varied forms to engage diverse audiences about the meaning and function of shared spaces, and the often turbulent histories of those spaces, as well as the notion of the “public” itself.<sup>6</sup> Hailing passersby as “FIGHTING ILLINI” (backward) implicated all who viewed the piece in the university’s troubled culture of sports fandom. The public placement and deliberate address encouraged viewers to think about the complex history of a shared space, as well as their own investment in and attachment to the institution and state.

Addressing the viewer in backward text is one of Heap of Birds’s signature artistic strategies (along with his use of commercially printed signage), and it has several effects. Critic Jean Fisher has written that the “use of mirrored English words . . . disrupts legibility, forcing us to relinquish our mastery over language and read it ‘otherwise.’” Lucy Lippard locates an indigenous precedent: “The reversed words,” she writes, “also recall the historical ‘Contraries’—Tsistsistas [Cheyenne] warriors who rode their horses backwards, said hello for goodbye, and washed in the mud.”<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this links an indigenous trickster practice to a warrior tradition—which has relevance for what Heap of Birds calls his “insurgent messages.”<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Heap of Birds describes the use of reversed text as an embodiment of an imperative that viewers and readers learn to see and think historically—an injunction against cultural amnesia and forgetting. Indeed, it is not just the address to the viewer—a proxy for the occupying state or offending institution—that is reversed. Heap of Birds’s text also reverses expectations. It is commonplace to speak of indigenous peoples in the past tense—as an artifact of a lost culture, denizen of the historical museum—but *Beyond the Chief* is insistent in its use of the present tense: “TODAY YOUR HOST IS POTAWATOMI.” Here the *Native Hosts* live beyond the chief, outlasting the obsolete colonial stereotype, demanding recognition and deference. But as the reception of *Beyond the Chief* would demonstrate, not everyone in Champaign was willing to take up Heap of Birds’s challenge to think historically. The backward text in this case might be seen as a metaphor for irreconcilable viewpoints.

Heap of Birds’s historical imperative links his practice to other contemporary artists who share what art historian Hal Foster has termed “an archival impulse.” Foster describes a number of artists, including Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, Sam Durant, and others, whose projects since the 1990s have explored historical experiences that have been forgotten or actively suppressed, offering “counter-memories” that might offer salutary “points of departure” in the present.<sup>10</sup> Heap of Birds’s projects, including *Beyond the Chief*, which make available a history of indigenous struggles for homeland and sovereignty and provide historical background for a dialogue about the uses of images of Native peoples, might be seen to offer such a point of departure—an occasion for critical conversation about the burden of the past and the power of representation. If the artists Foster describes as embodying an archival impulse have explored alternative histories in a moment when the notion of a shared historical inheritance seems outmoded or reactionary, Heap of Birds’s work, which makes use of indigenous knowledge and oral traditions, challenges ideas of what comprises history and who claims the right to define it—what histories matter, as it were.

The controversy over the use of Indian names and images bespeaks a deep divide between Native Americans and non-Native people—a fundamental and incommensurable disagreement about the meaning of history and the right to use and control symbols and Native American heritage. Heap of Birds has argued that “no human being should be identified as



1.4 Sam Durant, *Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions*, Washington D.C., 2005. Thirty monuments and one architectural model: MDF, fiberglass, foam, enamel, acrylic, basswood, balsa wood, birch veneer, copper. Dimensions variable. Installation view from Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Artwork © Sam Durant. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Exemplary of contemporary art's archival impulse, Durant's artwork comprised a proposal to relocate a selection of monuments erected across the United States to commemorate massacres—from the colonization of the Americas to the end of the Indian Wars in 1890—to the National Mall in Washington, DC, making a grim demonstration of the foundational role of violence in American history. Durant noted that the overwhelming majority of the monuments memorialize white deaths, even though the toll for Native people was far greater. In his conceptual proposal for redeploing the historical markers to Washington, DC, Durant planned to separate the memorials to whites from those memorializing Native American dead—a vivid demonstration of the bias inherent in national histories.



subservient to another culture. To be overpowered and manipulated in such a way as to become a team mascot is totally unacceptable.”<sup>11</sup> Yet many non-Native sports fans have argued that Native team names such as the Indians or the Braves, logos, and costumed performances are intended not as insults, but as honorific celebrations of America’s Indian culture. Indeed, throughout the Midwest and across the country, Native names and other references to indigenous culture and people are an important part of non-Natives’ sense of place and history—instilling feelings of rootedness and community for many.

Many other universities, responding to protests by Native American activists and their supporters, had quietly relegated their cartoonish Indian mascots to the dustbin of history. However, the University of Illinois kept Chief Illiniwek on the field until 2007, longer than most of their peer institutions, bowing to pressure from sentimental alumni. (A number of professional sports franchises, including the Kansas City Chiefs, the Washington Redskins, and the Cleveland Indians, have persisted in using Indian mascots and stereotypes, although newspapers in cities including Minneapolis, Portland, Salt Lake City, and Seattle have editorial policies against publishing “Indian” team names, referring instead to the team by city.) The controversy continued to mount; several schools in the Big Ten Conference would no longer allow Illinois’s mascot to perform at their home games, and an accreditation report for the university recommended that the chief be retired out of respect for Native Americans who found the image offensive. Ultimately, the university retired the chief—but retained the name Fighting Illini for the sports teams—when faced with increasing public pressure, lost revenues from the athletic programs, and the threat of being banned from conference play.

In creating *Beyond the Chief*, Heap of Birds sought to highlight an authentic, historical indigenous presence in Illinois. When Heap of Birds’s panels appeared on campus in the winter of 2009, they touched a nerve that was still quite raw. The panels became targets for multiple incidents of vandalism—they were defaced with permanent marker, the metal bashed and creased at the corners—prompting Heap of Birds to have the panels refabricated with heavier-gauge material. Melissa Merli, writing in the *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette*, linked the incident to the university’s recent retirement of the mascot, and a popular backlash in some quarters. She quoted Heap of Birds’s explanation of the artwork and the public re-



1.5 Edgar Heap of Birds, *Beyond the Chief*. Sign panel defaced in spring 2009. Artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds.

action. “It’s really a memorial to the tribes that are gone,” the artist said. “People . . . take it as a sort of an affront to the sports team. The signs are self-referential. When natives make memorials to themselves or their losses that’s more important than a college mascot or other issue. Everything doesn’t have to be about the dominant white culture.”<sup>12</sup>

The vandalism revealed a divided campus. Commentators linked the incidents of vandalism to what they described as a climate of racism on campus, citing fraternity parties with ethnic slurs as themes, as well as other incidents of threats and intimidation of minorities. Moreover, Chief Illiniwek managed to linger even after his official retirement in 2007. Die-hard fans still brandished chief paraphernalia as a sign of solidarity with the former mascot; their tenacity was taken as an affront by those who struggled to end the use of the chief. Teresa Ramos, a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at the University of Illinois, penned an editorial critical of the continued appearance of the image after the university’s official retirement of the chief, arguing that the “lack of response to the vandalism



1.6 Yard signs in support of *Beyond the Chief*, 2009. Photo: Sharon Irish.

contributes to a culture of tolerance of racist action.” Ramos wrote, “Upper administration’s management of these incidents displays similar ethics to CEO’s who are more concerned with profit than their responsibility to their clients and the people they serve.”<sup>13</sup> Heap of Birds returned for an open campus meeting on Wednesday, April 29. Robert Warrior, the director of the American Indian Studies Program at the university and one of the project’s sponsors, was quoted in the *News-Gazette* linking the incident to a larger pattern of institutional racism: “This meeting will provide an opportunity for people on campus to discuss the significance of the recent vandalism and other crimes directed toward American Indians and other people of color in an open forum.”<sup>14</sup> But the incidents of vandalism continued unabated in the summer; two panels were stolen in the early morning of Saturday, June 13, 2009. A group of local artists and activists started a campaign, concerned by the lack of a public response from university administrators. The group printed free yard signs with the text “RESPECT NATIVE HOSTS: WE A, PEORIA, PIANKESAW, KASKASKIA,” the names of the tribes on four of the damaged panels.<sup>15</sup>

An anonymous tip left on the Crimestoppers hotline led police to a recent graduate who was identified as the early morning thief, but nabbing

one vandal did little to repair the rift in the university town that Heap of Birds's artwork—and puncture—revealed. The thief was arraigned on a single misdemeanor (rather than a felony) charge, as the combined value of the two panels was placed at less than \$300.<sup>16</sup> Heap of Birds and several supporters voiced concerns that the vandalized artworks were undervalued—appraised only for the cost of their fabrication, rather than as artworks. Previously, a similar installation of twelve *Native Hosts* panels in British Columbia had been valued at \$10,000 per panel (for a total of \$120,000) by two independent art appraisers.<sup>17</sup> One of the appraisals had been furnished to the Champaign County state's attorney's office. However, state's attorney Julia Rietz disregarded the art appraisal and based her charge on the costs to manufacture the pieces—\$88.65 per panel, which Heap of Birds paid to American Logo and Sign, Inc., in Moore, Oklahoma, who produce most of his panels. Of course appraised values of artworks are never based solely on cost of materials and fabrication, but rather on other factors, not least of which is the value of other comparable work by the artist. John McKinn, assistant director of the American Indian Studies Program, interviewed in the *News-Gazette*, linked this latest insult to a climate of institutional racism, and also university officials' ignorance of contemporary art. "We see it as a pattern of behavior of treating American Indians as second-class citizens, both on campus and in the community," McKinn argued. "It's just another attempt to devalue American Indians and their experience. It also speaks to the lack of education we all have for what constitutes art."<sup>18</sup> Travis McDade, writing for the *News-Gazette*, noted that Illinois law considers "fair market value" in determining charges for theft and property destruction and reasoned that perhaps state's attorney Rietz calculated that she could not win a felony conviction: "In central Illinois, in this economy, it's not a stretch to think a jury of local folks would have a hard time believing that what appears to be a collection of street signs could be worth anywhere near six figures." McDade also suggested that if the thief, for example, "had stolen an Anasazi pot or vandalized a Hopi petroglyph, for instance, he would be in real trouble," under the provisions of federal Cultural Heritage Resources Guidelines.<sup>19</sup> For his part, the thief sent a letter to the editor of the *News-Gazette*, in which he apologized for the incident and said he had been drinking and "made an extraordinarily bad decision." He was fined \$200, sentenced to one year of court supervision, and ordered to perform one hundred hours of community service

and to submit to a substance abuse evaluation. No conviction will appear on his permanent record.<sup>20</sup>

## Sharp Rocks

As *Beyond the Chief* illustrates, Heap of Birds's public art practice—grounded in local history and context, critical and at times antagonistic—is also generative of dialogue and engagement. The agonistic and hostile responses to the artwork when it was installed at the University of Illinois revealed a public not merely unprepared for a concept-driven and political art, as John McKinn argued, but also in some quarters unable to fathom the fact of living, contemporary Native people. Heap of Birds's text-based works are insistently in the present tense (“TODAY YOUR HOST IS . . .”), rather than focused on nostalgic representations of Native people in the past—gone and no longer threatening. Native people continue to claim the right to their lands, their cultures, and their images.

While the formal strategies that Heap of Birds employs in his artwork—from text-based conceptual and public works to painterly abstractions—do not draw from indigenous aesthetic traditions, his art continues a warrior tradition specific to the Cheyenne and other Plains peoples.<sup>21</sup> For Heap of Birds, art making is a kind of symbolic or semiotic warfare, undertaken for community protection. Heap of Birds has compared his art to the “sharp rocks” or flint-knapped arrow points that are easily found on the ground of the Cheyenne reservation and elsewhere in North America—physical evidence of historical indigenous presence on the land, and of the struggles to sustain and defend Native homelands. In an early essay, Heap of Birds noted that these “sharp and strong weapons” were used traditionally as weapons by the Cheyenne people. They were instruments of self-defense in warfare against human aggressors, and as “tools of preservation” in the hunt, which brought sustenance to Native communities: “The sharp rocks idea came to me from living out here on the reservation land. I find stone arrowheads hunting as we have arrows within the tribe that are very important throughout our history.”<sup>22</sup> In contemporary times, however, the strategies of community protection have shifted from armed resistance to struggles in the symbolic realm. “At this time, the manifestation of our battle has changed,” Heap of Birds wrote. “The white-man shall always project himself into our lives using information that is provided by learn-

ing institutions and the electronic and print media. . . . Therefore we find that the survival of our people is based upon our use of expressive forms of modern communication. The insurgent messages within these forms must serve as our present day combative tactics.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Native Artist in the Contemporary Art World**

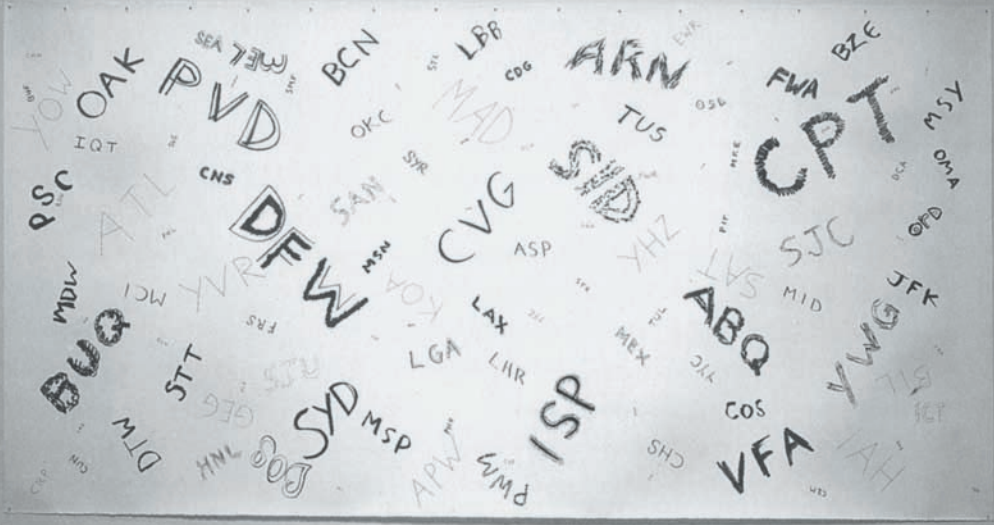
To date, Heap of Birds’s work has been discussed primarily in relation to Native American art history. Notwithstanding his background and education in mainstream institutions, the situation of Heap of Birds and other Native North American artists resonates with Néstor García Canclini’s critique of interpretations of artworks created in sites peripheral to the metropolitan centers of the contemporary art world: “While works created in the centers are looked at as aesthetic deeds, the works of African, Asian, and Latin American artists are typically read as part of their visual culture or cultural heritage.”<sup>24</sup> This is somewhat understandable given that his work in large part addresses the experiences of Native North American peoples, and he is best known as a member of a cohort of contemporary Native American artists including Rebecca Belmore, Bob Haozous, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Jimmie Durham, George Longfish, James Luna, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Shelly Niro, and others, who first garnered acclaim in the 1980s and early 1990s, and who were included in a spate of exhibitions mounted in 1992 to counter official quincentennial commemorations of the European discovery of the New World. Moreover, Heap of Birds has spoken of being mentored by Native artists including Blackbear Bosin while growing up in Wichita, Kansas, and he attended Haskell Indian Junior College (now Haskell Indian Nations University) in Lawrence, Kansas, before enrolling at the University of Kansas and pursuing graduate studies in art in Philadelphia and London.

But like other Native American contemporary artists, Heap of Birds has pursued a career in the wider contemporary art world at a key moment in its history. He is a member of a generation of artists who, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, broke from the strictures of late modernism, and who, driven by the social and political movements of the 1960s, pushed beyond formalist explorations to address issues of power and identity. Heap of Birds’s works, as art historian W. Jackson Rushing III has noted, “helped define their moment in time.”<sup>25</sup> The generation of

artists that came of age in the era of pluralist postmodernism—and was influenced by Black Power, the Chicano movement, the American Indian movement, feminism, and gay liberation—produced the multicultural art of the post–civil rights era, a period of contemporary art history that was crystallized in such watershed exhibitions as *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (mounted in 1990 by the New Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, and in which *Heap of Birds* was featured) and the controversial 1993 Biennial Exhibition of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Moreover, since the early 1990s and coinciding with the emergence of a global contemporary art world, critical attention and not a little commercial energy have been expended on a cohort of artists who, as described by the editors of a roundtable published in *Art Journal* in 1998, “travel widely to create and exhibit their work, much of which derives from their experience of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile.”<sup>26</sup> Indigenous contemporary artists certainly fit this description, and they have, to an extent, engaged with the new institutions of the transnational art market, exhibiting in venues including the Venice Biennale and pursuing careers as what Miwon Kwon describes as “itinerant artists.”<sup>27</sup> Since the late 1990s, new support structures and Native-led critical and curatorial efforts have been launched to advocate for Native artists on the global stage. Yet, with few exceptions, Native artists are absent from most accounts of global contemporary art. Notably, Terry Smith’s otherwise expansive classroom textbook *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (2011) fails to address a single Native North American artist.<sup>28</sup> In *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, Shari M. Huhndorf identifies a similar lack of attention to Native North America in the larger project of cultural studies. Huhndorf argues that this invisibility has the effect of “extending the colonial erasure of indigenous peoples” even as the historical experience of indigenous peoples in North America might otherwise be seen as a key example and implicit critique of imperialism.<sup>29</sup>

A possible explanation for the lack of visibility of Native American artists in the contemporary art world—of their lack of standing vis-à-vis the discourses of contemporary art and contemporaneity—is the lingering stereotype of Native Americans as a people of the past. But perhaps more critical is the failure on the part of the institutions of the art world to engage with issues of land and sovereignty, language and culture, and



1.7 Edgar Heap of Birds, *CPT*, 2002. Marker on rag paper, 6½ × 13 feet. Artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds. A 2002 text drawing created for *Eagles Speak*, a traveling exhibition mounted in collaboration with indigenous artists from New England and artists from South Africa, Heap of Birds's drawing is an accumulation of the three-character codes for the many international airports through which he has traveled in pursuing his career as an artist. The code CPT stands for Cape Town International Airport in South Africa. For the exhibition, Heap of Birds installed the drawing with bottles of blackstrap molasses, to reference the triangular trade in sugar, rum, and slaves between New England, the Caribbean, and Africa, a previous and far more tragic history of the traffic in human bodies and commodities, which ironically prefigures the global itineraries of contemporary artists.



the burdens of history in terms employed by Native artists. To be sure, Heap of Birds's artwork, like that of his cohort of Native American contemporary artists, needs to be considered in light of indigenous cultures, histories, and epistemologies. The work of indigenous artists and critics such as Jolene Rickard as well as important indigenous writers such as Vine Deloria Jr. and Gerald Vizenor is crucial to understanding his work in this context, and this book is organized thematically to illuminate Heap of Birds's practice in this light.

But just as important is an attention to the work of Native artists vis-à-vis the practice of art today globally, and of the theories and debates that animate the wider contemporary art world. Moreover, such an approach must also recognize the problems of attempting to engage Native artists solely as contemporary artists, that is, in terms of a set of discourses and institutions that have misrepresented and disadvantaged indigenous and other marginalized peoples, even as the art world has sought to open up and redress its past exclusions and erasures. Indeed, one of the challenges faced by Native artists and other artists from marginalized communities is the fact that they have often been accorded only a delimited space within art history and criticism, appearing primarily in museums and galleries devoted solely to Native art, or included in mainstream institutions only in occasional surveys of "multicultural art" or engaging in issues of "primitivism," or in exhibitions such as those mounted in 1992—worthy endeavors, of course, but critical typecasting is inherently damaging. As performance artist James Luna recounted of the attention he received in the build-up to the quincentennial year, "Curators want a certain kind of Indian and a certain kind of Indian art. . . . They want you to be angry, they want you to be talking it up. So when people call me I have to ask 'Why didn't you call me before? You're calling me now, but will you call me in '93?'"<sup>30</sup>

The most relevant question to ask about Heap of Birds's connections to contemporary art—or about the work of any indigenous artist in the contemporary art world—is how his work grapples with those discourses and institutions, and how they are challenged and transformed in his practice. It is not so much a matter of lobbying for Heap of Birds's inclusion in a familiar history—arguing that he too was a participant in key moments and that he too has made works in recognizably contemporary modes and in conversation with contemporary theories of art, although this is certainly true. Rather, as was the challenge for the first generation of feminist art his-

torians writing in the 1970s and 1980s, the question concerns the inherent problems of seeking to add neglected figures to a received canon, which in its structure—its assumptions and key terms—has perpetuated exclusionary habits of thought. Heap of Birds’s work, in bringing new perspectives to bear, suggests other key terms for a critical history of contemporary art: an attention to place, land, and sovereignty, which suggests a different take on the contemporary art world’s fascination for works that thematize global itinerancy; questions of language and power, which illuminate still-unfolding postcolonial and neocolonial histories; questions of historicity and notions of history (or histories), which should inform current thinking about the meaning of contemporaneity in global context; and a commitment to a notion of renewal, which suggests a different model of futurity from that traditionally associated with artistic modernism, but also distinct from ideas of being-in-the-present that have informed much of the thinking on contemporary art—particularly relational aesthetics or other modes of social practice that currently command critical and institutional attention. In describing a 2009 artwork, *Please the Waters*, which, in part, referenced the spectacular emergency landing of a commercial airliner in the Hudson River near Midtown Manhattan after a flock of Canada geese flew into an engine of the Airbus A320, Heap of Birds has suggested that the downing was a result of “the birds asking the plane to land.”<sup>31</sup> US Airways Flight 1549 was brought down, remarkably, without human injury; perhaps this is a metaphor for the present project. Not geese, but another Heap of Birds asks us to ground the plane, rather than add names to the passenger manifest—to reimagine the work of art history and art criticism as platforms for discussion of and across differences.<sup>32</sup>

## Renewal

A significant and critical point of difference for engaging with Heap of Birds’s work is the degree to which his practice is grounded in Cheyenne ceremony. Heap of Birds has been a participant in the Earth Renewal—or Sun Dance, as it is more commonly known—an annual event undertaken during the summer solstice by Cheyenne and other Plains people. Over the years, Heap of Birds has assumed greater responsibilities within the ceremony, taking on the role of headsman of the Elk Warrior society and, having completed numerous cycles as a dancer, as an instructor for new

participants. The philosophy and iconography of the Earth Renewal ceremony resonate throughout Heap of Birds's art in all media—from the repetition of elements in multiples of four, to specific personages such as Lizard and Eagle, to the description of songs and phrases as offerings. His works echo the ceremony's message of the individual's responsibility to the community, land, and universe.

In July 2010, I traveled with my wife, Kelly, to Oklahoma, to be with Edgar and his family as he danced in the annual Earth Renewal on the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation, thirty miles west of Oklahoma City. Edgar invited me to attend the Earth Renewal ceremony when we first began discussing this book. The ceremony is practiced widely among Plains people, although the Cheyenne may have originated it. They have traditionally referred to the ceremony as the New Life Lodge; the object of the ceremony is to make the world new again each year. The ceremony takes place over four days, during which time participants dance to a cycle of four songs, repeated four times. For the duration of the ceremony, dancers (traditionally male) fast and take no water. The ceremony is a feat of endurance—a sacrifice, even though Cheyenne dancers no longer pierce the skin of their breast as a flesh offering as part of the ordeal. Daytime temperatures can reach one hundred degrees or more; humidity is high, and afternoon thunderstorms are not uncommon in the summer on the Southern Plains. Participants commit to dance each solstice for four years, and at the end of a four-year cycle earn a “paint,” a sequence of body adornment in which the dancer embodies an animal spirit or totem, which grants them the right to instruct others in the correct protocols of the ceremony. As the participants dance to renew the earth, they also earn the privilege to maintain and perpetuate the ceremony. The renewal is thus renewed.

Over the course of the ceremony, Kelly and I drove each morning from our hotel in Oklahoma City thirty miles west to Concho, on the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation north of the historic railroad town of El Reno (and nearby historic Fort Reno) on U.S. Route 81, which follows the old Chisholm Trail, used for cattle drives from Texas, across Indian lands, to railheads in Kansas in the years following the Civil War. Northwest of the tribes' smoke shop and the busy Lucky Star Casino, along Black Kettle Boulevard, we pulled into an open field that is part of the rangeland on which the tribes' herd of bison is grazed, but which serves each year as the campsite for one of three Earth Renewal ceremonies held on the reservation. We

were taken aback by the beauty of the setting: a high hilltop surrounded by rolling hills; individual farm plots defined by rows of trees planted as windbreaks; trees growing along Turtle Creek and the Washita River in the distance. The drama of the gathering thunderstorms, which always seemed to skirt the campsite; the breezes which, for the most part, made the hot summer days tolerable and the nights lovely. By day, the buzzing of insects, and the pungent smell of the fire and the sage; at night, in the distance could be seen the lights of houses and farms beyond the casino, and above it all a full moon in a clear sky. At the center of a circular gravel drive rose the lodge, rebuilt each year with freshly felled timbers arranged in a circle—a cosmic diagram linked through the generations to the ancient medicine wheels, marked with stones in the landscape by the ancestors of the Cheyenne and other Plains people. Heap of Birds referred to the lodge as a “spacecraft” or a “time machine” that carried the participants through the universe and through the generations in the course of the ceremony.<sup>33</sup>

Through his participation over many years in the Earth Renewal, Heap of Birds has earned four paints: Cheyenne, Eagle, Lizard, and Deer. These spirits appear regularly in Heap of Birds’s work—a clue to how deeply the experience of and commitment to the ceremony inform his art. As we sat with Edgar’s family and friends, I was struck by the realization that this ceremony—this place—is at the heart of Edgar’s identity as a Cheyenne and as an artist. The Earth Renewal and the reservation ground his sense of himself and inform his practice as a contemporary artist. Heap of Birds has cautioned, “Being indigenous should not be a curious fantasy open to the public.”<sup>34</sup> However, it is undeniable that this identity, and the perspective it affords, is foundational to the work that Heap of Birds has created for over three decades.

As a non-Native scholar, my focus for many years has been on writing and teaching about indigenous art, and on modern and contemporary art in terms of intercultural exchanges and multimedia practice. Building on my earlier work, in which I argued that Native American art in the twentieth century was an important story within the histories of American modernism, my initial plan in undertaking a book on Heap of Birds’s work was to argue for his place in the history of contemporary art generally, and in particular in terms of developments in the global art world of the 1980s to the present.<sup>35</sup> And while this is very much the case here—and absolutely true to Heap of Birds’s career in the contemporary art world—time

spent in dialogue with the artist and with his work has led me to write a book that foregrounds Heap of Birds's practice as grounded in Cheyenne spirituality and local indigenous knowledge. I have come to recognize that Heap of Birds's grounding in Cheyenne epistemology—through which he reckons his place in terms of the local and the global, and between past and future—is the crux of his contemporaneity.

## **Neuf**

This book is not a catalogue raisonné—I do not discuss or account for all of Heap of Birds's works. It is not organized chronologically, following his aesthetic evolution as an artist, nor are the chapters based on the media in which he has worked—although readers will learn something about these subjects and many of Heap of Birds's artworks. Instead, I have imagined the chapters in this book as interrelated essays, each of which focuses on themes that cut across Heap of Birds's practice—exploring in detail several of the major bodies of work that he has produced. For readers who are unfamiliar with Heap of Birds's art—or know only a few pieces—I hope the book will introduce a major figure in the contemporary art world and provide an introduction and background to his practice and the commitments that inspire his artworks. For those readers who are well acquainted with Heap of Birds's art, and with other Native American contemporary artists, I hope the book will suggest some new ways of engaging with his important work, in the context of contemporary art, but also in terms of how his practice explores critical ways in which indigenous artists' work can be understood as sharp rocks—weapons for community protection—as well as interventions in the institutions and discourses of the contemporary art world, openings to new and transformative dialogues about the meaning of art in a global culture.

Resonating with the importance of the number four in Cheyenne and other Plains Native cultures, the book comprises four thematic sections addressing the importance of land, language, history, and future generations in Heap of Birds's art. *Neuf*—the Cheyenne word for the number four—is a key concept in Cheyenne culture relating to the four sacred colors, the seasons, or the four directions, and to the process in which a ritual is performed four times, as in the commitment made to undertake the Earth Renewal ceremony for a cycle lasting four years. *Neuf* resonates throughout

Heap of Birds's practice. Elements appear in multiples of four, linking his diverse works in his varied artistic practice back to the ceremony, to the four directions that define a center and a homeland, and to the renewal of the earth and its inhabitants.

In chapter 1, "Land," I argue that Heap of Birds's art must be seen in the first instance as an expression of his Cheyenne-Arapaho identity and grounding in indigenous conceptions of place and identity. I focus on Heap of Birds's series of abstract *Neuf* paintings in terms of the particular resonance of the landscape for indigenous cultures and for understandings of indigenous sovereignty. I also describe *Native Hosts* and other text-based public art installations that address the history of Native land claims and a deeper view of environmental history, in particular as it relates to indigenous nationhood. Chapter 2, "Words," explores Heap of Birds's development of text-based strategies, such as large-scale wall drawings, prints, and public art installations and "insurgent messages" in relation to the history of conceptual and activist art, as well as to Heap of Birds's critique of the use of language as a weapon of domination—and its potential as a medium of expression and tool of resistance.

Chapter 3, "Histories," takes up a question asked by Heap of Birds in several artworks: "Who owns history?" It explores what his projects suggest about the meaning and power of history, and of competing notions of historicity. A concluding chapter, "Generations," brings the book full circle, as it were, exploring Heap of Birds's commitments—in his art and as grounded by his practice of the Earth Renewal ceremony—to a notion of "new growth," or a sense of time as distinct from Eurocentric historical thinking, investing in the next generations through creative processes that are collaborative and global, as well as insistently local.

This book, then, does foreground the extent to which Heap of Birds's practice is based in a Native way of seeing and being in the world. Rather than following a conventional chronology, the book traces a circular path; it begins with Heap of Birds at home, as a participant in tribal ceremony, then follows his work across multiple media and through the global spaces of the contemporary art world, and returns to the Cheyenne-Arapaho lands in Oklahoma to focus on the artist's commitments to new growth, which are renewed each year. I see this book's underlying narrative structure in terms of a circle, or perhaps a spiral, much as Heap of Birds's work is deliberate in its outward reach—engaging with other histories and senses of

time and place—even as it always seeks to return to a place of origin. The book begins with Heap of Birds’s profound sense of being-in-the-world, in terms of land, community, and sovereignty, and ends with a consideration of time, history, and futurity—with a practice committed to renewal and grounded, again, in place. This circular motion and concomitant conception of time in terms of a returning, rather than a departure, resonates with Heap of Birds’s work as an artist and with indigenous epistemologies and perspectives.

### **Ceremony, History, and the Contemporary**

But the significance of Heap of Birds’s practice is not limited to the embodiment and expression of Native perspectives, even as I argue that articulating that mode of seeing and being in the context of the contemporary art world is in itself a radical proposition. Indeed, Heap of Birds’s practice makes a puncture in the discourses of contemporary art and contemporaneity, and I hope that this book will make those stakes clear, as his work’s engagement with the discourses and spaces of the contemporary art world offers a critical challenge with the potential to transform those institutions and habits of thought. The historical project—the archival impulse—in Heap of Birds’s work also links to questions of temporality, which are current in contemporary art practice, as well as art criticism and theory, and the periodization of the contemporary as a historical epoch.<sup>36</sup> Heap of Birds’s engagements with history, and with notions of historicity and time as lived and imagined, should be read alongside the work of other artists whose practices since the 1960s have been described by Pamela Lee in terms of a prevailing anxiousness about being-in-time, or the work of Robert Smithson, whose fascination with “continuance” across deep time has been examined by Jennifer Roberts.<sup>37</sup>

Christine Ross, citing the proliferation of “time-based” practices since the 1960s—including performance, site-specific installation, film, video, and emergent media—notes a refutation by contemporary artists of “presentness,” or timelessness, as espoused and some would say fetishized in the criticism of Michael Fried and other late modernists. Ross describes what she terms a “temporal turn” in contemporary art, as works in various media thematize “endlessness . . . entropy, ephemerality, repetition, and real time; contingency and randomness . . . slowing down, condensation

or acceleration.” Moreover, she notes that many artworks since the 1960s have also sought to depict and embody experiences of different temporalities: “the unproductive—unrecognized—times of modernity (‘women’s time,’ the time of the ‘other’).”<sup>38</sup> With Ross, I argue that this is a crux of contemporary practice, as artists whose experiences and perspectives are formed by and embody nonnormative positionalities (feminists, queer artists, artists of color) express nonnormative (more than merely postmodernist) modes of being-in-time; and these modes foretell a notion that the contemporary (and isn’t foretelling an expression of being-out-of-time?) is characterized by “the coexistence of distinct temporalities, of different ways of *being* in time, experienced in the midst of a growing sense that many kinds of time are running out,” as Terry Smith writes.<sup>39</sup> For Smith, the contemporary “proliferation of asynchronous temporalities” is a product of relatively recent processes of globalization—largely understood through the discourses of political economy, that is, in terms of market liberalization and technological and communications breakthroughs since the late 1980s.<sup>40</sup> Heap of Birds’s works, and those of other artists who articulate “different ways of *being* in time,” expand Smith’s time horizon for the contemporary into the deep past and into a future understood as a cycle of return and renewal.

This sense of being-in-time from different positionalities raises the stakes of Smith’s and other writers’ periodizations of the contemporary and of the larger question of contemporaneity—as a mode of being-in-time distinct from modernist notions of time as history, and of postmodernist notions of the end of history. And it is here (deliberately figured as a spatial “here” rather than a historicizing “now”), with the temporal experience of difference—of different temporalities—that I argue the radical potential of Heap of Birds’s work in imagining contemporaneity is evident. Heap of Birds’s work allows us to imagine the contemporary not (or not only) as a moment of ascendant neoliberalism and always-on individualized connectivity, but in terms of nonnormative positionalities vis-à-vis temporality and historicity. Artists who embody and express these nonnormative positionalities create works of art that are at once repositories of and engagements with collective memories—of sovereignty and displacement, freedom and enslavement, genocide and renewal—and in which the past remains vital and alive in the present, through and across time. The contemporary might be figured as a spiral. Indeed, as Ross writes, contem-



porary art is “a pivotal site of temporal experimentation,” especially to the degree that art history (along with criticism, theory, and curatorial practice) seeks to engage with artists and art traditions that are not, as the tired stereotype would have it, “people without a history,” but who express other relationships to temporality and historicity.<sup>41</sup>

My argument here resonates, deliberately on my part, with Keith Moxey’s discussion of “heterochrony,” or the possibility that there might be multiple temporalities, many different and incommensurable experiences of time. Moxey ruminates on the problem of art historical periodization as the discipline’s purview becomes ever more global. Recently, art historians have become aware of the multiple modernisms forged by artists in locations far from the metropolitan centers that have been conventionally seen as privileged sites of artistic foment, recombinant experimentation and innovation, and decisive break with tradition. Recognizing multiple temporalities, Moxey suggests that modernity’s clock, which has been assumed to be universal and unidirectional in its linear progress ever forward (to the “end of history” as some theorists of art and political scientists have argued), might not “run at the same speed and density” in all places.<sup>42</sup> Western Europe and the settler states of North America have been decentered, have lost their privileged pride of place vis-à-vis art’s histories, and might no longer be seen as the mean or standard time to which all clocks—all chronologies—can be set. Moxey conjectures, “Is the time of modernity the same in London and Johannesburg?”<sup>43</sup> We might also ask the same of the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho homelands: What time is it here? And what about an artist such as Heap of Birds (or indeed, any number of artists from locations formerly seen as peripheral to art history) who has accessed the temporalities of the contemporary art world yet still keeps his feet firmly grounded in the circular temporalities of indigenous ceremony?

But art historical narratives valorize primacy, and accord status, prestige, and value based on an assumption of history as universal and unidirectional—that while time moves in the same speed and direction everywhere, progress lags in some locations, which are cast as backward, or merely derivative of innovations made in those places that drive history ever forward. Geeta Kapur has pointed to art history’s problem with time lag across global spaces, citing temporal differences between Western Europe and South Asia, asking, “When was modernism in Indian art?”<sup>44</sup>

Kapur suggests that terms like “modernism” cannot be the same in all locations. Indeed the historical processes of modernization do not unfold at the same rate across frictionless surfaces, but make uneven progress over uneven ground, or may make idiosyncratic false starts and detours in varied contexts. And of course power matters. As Moxey writes, art historical attempts to account for multiple temporalities—other modernisms—have failed to account for and destabilize historical imbalances and inequalities, and the legacies of unequal power relations in the present. “What are the implications,” Moxey asks, “of such unequal power relations for historical narratives? Even if the historical record attempts to interlace the various narratives of global art in an effort to produce a richer tapestry of the past and the present, these threads will inevitably be woven together according to the idiosyncrasies of a particular loom.”<sup>45</sup>

Smith’s notion of the contemporary describes a congeries of “asynchronous temporalities” that might seem to promise a world in which the legacies of inequality are upended by a “pregnant present,” defined by the experience of “multiplicitous complexity,” and in which the “*constant experience of radical disjunctures of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world . . . in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities [are] all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.*”<sup>46</sup> But does contemporaneity—the pregnant present—ameliorate the inherent problem of modernity and the exclusionary ways in which the modern and modernism have been historicized? Heralding the contemporary in this way seems very much like diagnosing the present as the end of history, rather than as merely one possible point from which a story about time—and about people, power, and place—might be constructed. Perhaps, *Heap of Birds* might help us to see, the problem is with history itself, or rather, with modern (read: imperial, colonial) modes of historical imagining and in parochial notions of historicity.

Smith identifies the contemporary in a break with modernist historicism, and the modernist presumption that art—like time—moves ever forward, as exemplified by Clement Greenberg’s insistence in 1939 that the role of the avant-garde was to “keep culture *moving*.”<sup>47</sup> As Boris Groys has noted, this historicist project was future oriented. “Modern art,” Groys writes, “is (or, rather, was) directed towards the future. Being modern

means to live in a project, to practice a work in progress.”<sup>48</sup> The precise contents of that futurity might have been up for debate—consider the competing utopias proposed by twentieth-century modernisms—but modernism was characterized by what Smith terms a “contract with the future,” which contemporary artists have decisively broken.<sup>49</sup> And as Ross writes, contemporary art after the temporal turn “does not seek so much to provide a new content to the future. It doesn’t have that type of utopian drive. It rather activates the inconsistencies and vicissitudes of temporal passing to remove the future from its modern role—the role of initiator of change—and make room for the reimagining of the future. The temporal turn is non-progressive: its progressiveness lies in the reconsideration of modern progress.”<sup>50</sup>

To be sure, this book is not an attempt to definitively answer the question asked by Smith and others: “What is contemporary art?” However, I do suggest that close attention to Heap of Birds’s practice over three decades, and to the work of other Native North American artists, affords a unique purchase on the question. Looking at the question of the contemporary as framed from the perspective of the Earth Renewal lodge in Oklahoma—a position that is marginalized in most accounts of the contemporary art world and art historical narratives generally—suggests the importance of Heap of Birds’s practice. But, more important, the view from the Earth Renewal lodge—and recall that Heap of Birds called the lodge a “time machine”—prompts me to argue that the question of the contemporary might be framed differently as different histories and modes of historical thinking, other artists, and nonnormative perspectives are brought to bear. From the perspective of a hilltop in Oklahoma, indigenous thought, a grounded expression of another temporality, might be seen as a compelling example for the present moment’s critical investigation of notions of the past, modernity, progress, and the future.

Of course Heap of Birds was trained in and travels among the institutions of the art world. But he did not make the temporal turn out of a sense of modernity’s crisis—even though modernity’s crises have been felt deeply by indigenous people. Nor is Heap of Birds’s practice based in an anxiety about a crisis in art history’s narratives, or any narrative of crisis. From the perspective of the Earth Renewal lodge, it becomes clear that his practice is grounded in and embodies an altogether different temporality.

For Heap of Birds, there was no temporal turn but a sense of temporal return, a career-long commitment to Cheyenne cosmology and sense of time and histories as circularities: a spiral that reaches outward and back to the center simultaneously. A practice of renewal and new growth requiring respectful attention to ceremony. Looking outward from a lodge on a hilltop in Oklahoma to the global spaces of the contemporary art world, we might begin a different conversation about the contemporary.