

Here and Now: Indigenous Canadian Perspectives and New Media in Works by Ruben Komangapik, Kent Monkman and Adrian Duke

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ABSTRACT

Examining the use of new media in works by Ruben Komangapik, Kent Monkman and the Wikiup Indigenous Knowledge Network reveals the diverse ways in which technologies are used to disrupt linear time and Western visions of history. New media works challenge those misleading stories that have been told about Canada's indigenous peoples and assert indigenous presence in both the digital and physical landscape. These artists employ QR codes, video and augmented reality to push artistic boundaries and create representations of the past and present.

Situated in the Inuit Gallery of the National Gallery of Canada, Ruben Komangapik's *Sedna* holds her legend (Fig. 1). Framed by the curve of her hybrid human torso and sweeping seal tail, the Inuit goddess of the sea extends a small QR code towards the viewer. Carved from stone containing fossilized shells, the material of the work emphasizes Sedna's existence since time immemorial. While the sculpture's form appears to draw on traditional practices of stone carving, *Tigumiaqtuq* displays the goddess enacting a gesture that powerfully locates her representation and her legend in the digital age.



Fig. 1. Ruben Komangapik, *Tigumiaqtuq*, 2014, stone, silver, mussel shell, ivory, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (© Ruben Komangapik)

New media is employed in indigenous art to disrupt linear experiences of time and visions of history, enabling indigenous artists to share their own representations of the past and present. In writing a genealogy of indigenous new media practice it is possible to look to the history of indigenous art and to the history of new media art, yet it remains vital to acknowledge that both histories have largely been constructed from a Western perspective and through Western systems of knowledge. Historically, symbols of indigenous artistic authenticity were created through processes that essentialized and homogenized indigenous art and identity. Indigenous new media art challenges the categories of “traditional” and “modern” that are frequently applied in histories of indigenous art. Technologies ranging from video to Augmented Reality are employed by artists, not only to preserve or re-present the past, but also to imagine the future from indigenous perspectives. The use of technology locates these practices in the “here and now” and asserts that indigenous new media artists are contemporary artists. New media works by Ruben Komangapik, Kent Monkman and Adrian Duke engage with indigenous identities and histories, demonstrating the various ways in which new media can be employed to tell stories and address complex indigenous issues.

In his practice, Komangapik creates QR codes from traditional materials such as ivory and sealskin, fusing traditional processes with new media to create storytelling devices. While emphasis is often placed on how new media translates traditional stories for a digital age, Komangapik's work does not simply digitally preserve Inuit stories; it enables them to be told and accessed anew through technology. The mechanism of the QR code in *Tigumiaqtuq* allows the viewer to retrieve a video of Komangapik telling Sedna's story. The work enables a kind of participatory performance between sculpture, data and viewer; the viewer holds out their phone toward Sedna so that her myth may loop between the

digital sphere and the active, participating viewer. The artist himself speaks through the transmission of data in the present, employing new media as an extension of the oral tradition of storytelling. As Candice Hopkins highlights in her discussion of indigenous aesthetics, these stories inhabit both the past and present: while replicated and reproduced, each enactment is nonetheless original [1]. Re-presenting the past in the present through a looping mechanism is one strategy used by new media artists to challenge conventions of linear narrative time, and to represent the ways in which indigenous stories and histories are simultaneously of the past, present and future. Indigenous new media theorist Steven Loft highlights that this “circularity of thinking and concepts of time/space and continuity” are intrinsic to an indigenous perspective of the world [2].

The disruption of linear time through a dynamic blurring of boundaries between past and present allows indigenous new media artists to challenge established Western linear narratives and colonial histories. Indigenous art, cinema and media production have responded to negative stereotypes of indigenous peoples—misrepresentations that were based on visual conventions established during the colonial period. Indigenous new media artists work not only to reclaim and challenge colonial visual conventions, but to gain visual sovereignty over the images of indigenous people that are now disseminated globally. Digital and new media enable the sampling and quotation of stereotypes, which are then subverted through editing processes, montage and reframing. Processes such as montage are historically linked to political commentary, and while no longer considered new, they are employed by indigenous artists in conjunction with new media to subvert colonial visions of history in dynamic and novel ways. Control over the representation of indigenous peoples may also be gained by indigenous artists employing the Internet to produce and globally disseminate their own representations of indigenous identity [3]. Kristin Dowell has theorized visual sovereignty as building on the concept of indigenous political sovereignty [4]. Dowell argues that the idea of visual sovereignty could be used as a wider framework within which media and art practices could be linked to broader indigenous political movements [5]. New media is therefore perceived by Dowell and indigenous new media theorists as a medium that allows indigenous artists to respond to the politics of representation, as well as to contemporary political movements.

Kent Monkman’s practice exemplifies the use of moving image and new media to challenge representation and provide commentary on political situations. During Canada 150 events, one could view Monkman’s *Sisters and Brothers* as part of the National Film Board’s *Souvenir Series* [6] (Fig. 2). Archival footage that was itself employed as a medium to produce knowledge about indigenous peoples is recut and reclaimed by Monkman to construct a haunting critique of the residential school system. Monkman’s temporal



Fig. 2. *Sisters and Brothers*, directed by Kent Monkman, produced by Anita Lee, 2015, film stills. (© National Film Board of Canada Archive)

montage disrupts the colonial narrative by drawing parallels between the annihilation of the bison and the treatment of indigenous children. The work opens with a shot of an uninhabited and vast Canadian landscape. A group of settlers on horseback survey this land, followed by a shot of wild bison viewed through binoculars. In this short opening sequence, the work comments upon the view of Canada as an empty land available to be framed, claimed and settled. The subsequent footage cuts between images of bison being herded and indigenous children arriving at residential schools.



Fig. 3. Kent Monkman, *The Human Zoo*, 2015, HD monitor, media player. (© Kent Monkman)

Monkman's video critiques perhaps the most significant political policy that continues to negatively impact Canadian indigenous communities: the establishment of residential schools. Following a policy of aggressive assimilation, indigenous children were removed from their homes and placed in institutions where the use of indigenous languages was prohibited and punished. Many children felt the loss of their cultural identity and suffered moral, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of those responsible for their care [7]. The impact of the residential schooling

system on indigenous communities cannot be understated, and the effects of this trauma continue to be felt. Monkman often employs montage and juxtaposition to challenge the notion that sociopolitical indigenous issues are resolved in a "post"-colonial Canada. His recent series of video paintings speaks back to static historical paintings and European representations of indigenous peoples. Displayed on media players, works such as *The Human Zoo* introduce live performers into European landscapes to reenact the European past from an indigenous perspective (Fig. 3). The series explores the fraught relationship between indigenous peoples, primitivism and modern art, the impact of Christianity on indigenous notions of sexuality, and the commercial display of indigenous peoples in Europe.

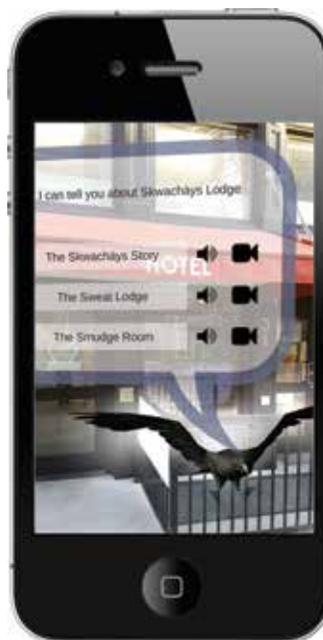
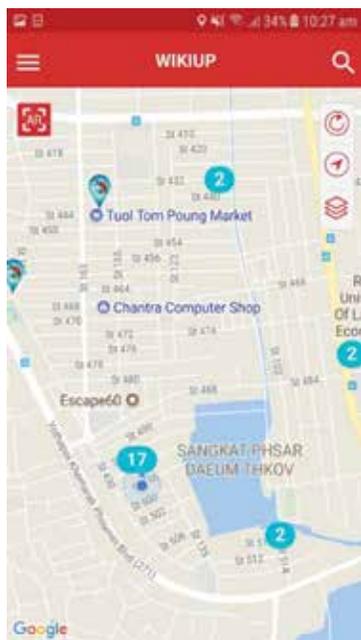
A broader concern for many indigenous new media theorists is where indigenous stories can now be located. Monkman emphasizes the importance of being able to disseminate his practice to a wider audience via the Internet [8]. Komangapik's QR code similarly allows Sedna's narrative to be disseminated through the digital sphere, allowing Sedna to inhabit cyberspace. Cyberspace is often conceived as a digital landscape, a landscape in which traditional conceptions of space and physical distance are collapsed, allowing artists to imagine new ways of being in the world [9]. While concerns are expressed over the imagined freedom that this space provides, the ability to locate indigenous stories and representations in cyberspace affords indigenous artists visual sovereignty.

Digital mapping and the use of geolocation are some of the ways in which indigenous artists can conceivably assert an occupation of cyberspace, and particular technologies enable this virtual presence in cyberspace to be overlaid onto real landscapes. The project *Wikiup* proposes to do this through Augmented Reality, an artistic medium that enables a merging of the digital sphere with lived reality [10]. Augmented

Reality (AR) works challenge conceptions of artist and viewer through the facilitation of new forms of participation. The existence of an AR work “is determined by the human presence,” as viewers must locate and activate these works [11]. The medium is often employed by those artists who seek to close the gap between artwork, life and user by bringing works into the physical space of the viewer [12]. Through AR, the sites and destinations of artworks have increased dramatically in scale. While traditional video installations were dependent upon the gallery, new technology and portable screens allow works to be mapped and accessed across entire landscapes. *Wikiup* is an AR project that seeks to superimpose individual digital augments onto the Canadian landscape. The work is produced by Adrian Duke and attempts to facilitate an interaction between elders as storytellers and those who can act as digital scribes, or “story catchers.” Traditional stories are transferred to cyberspace and avatars can be activated to access traditional knowledge about a specific location (Figs 4,5).

The translation of traditional knowledge through new media poses several problems, and the scope of the *Wikiup* project presents several challenges. Duke engages with the issues of verifying stories, gaining permissions to tell stories and using the medium appropriately to tell stories from different First Nations [13]. What is demonstrated by this project is that the medium of AR appears particularly suited to activating invisible histories. Through the incorporation of video and audio the application extends the oral tradition of storytelling. The work requires the viewer to occupy the same space as the augment and experience the story in real time, with the aim being to merge the story told with the physical landscape and the lived experience of the viewer. These stories therefore inhabit real space, revealing the history and memory of a landscape [14]. They allow not only for an occupation of cyberspace but for a reclaiming of the physical environment. It is augmented reality’s ability to make the invisible layers of a landscape visible that will encourage viewers to reexamine the physical environment even after the application is closed.

Wikiup was launched during Canada 150 events, at the Kanata festival led by the Vancouver Native Housing Society. The festival saw the creation of an art installation on unceded land in a parking lot in downtown Vancouver, consisting of a map of Turtle Island populated by iconic indigenous housing archetypes. *Wikiup* and the Kanata festival received media coverage, which enabled the dissemination of



Figs 4 and 5. *Wikiup*, produced by Adrian Duke, AR Application screenshots, 2017. (© Vancouver Native Housing Society)

Duke's ideas to viewers outside of downtown Vancouver. Media coverage of another indigenous housing installation reinforces the politics at stake in the Kanata festival and Canada 150. In the early hours of 29 June 2017, a tepee was erected on parliament hill in protest of the Canada 150 celebrations. Art and activism reinforce the continuing struggle of indigenous peoples to assert their presence on the land and to have their stories told. AR activism currently has the advantage of allowing indigenous protesters to augment landscapes without the threat of prosecution, but as the technology becomes widespread, legislation may follow.

The question of access is often raised in relation to AR art, as the activation of the work is dependent upon both geographic location and the use of screen-based devices. Access to technologies within Canada is frequently determined by geographical, socioeconomic and political factors. It remains necessary to consider that many indigenous people still remain excluded from accessing new media art's means of production and viewing. Access to video and mobile technologies has proved fundamental to those new media artists pushing the definition of indigenous art. Digital processes and new media such as AR present numerous opportunities for artists to investigate issues of culture, memory and place. Works by Komangapik and Monkman emphasize that indigenous art is contemporary art, and that the binary descriptors of *traditional* and *contemporary*, which were previously applied in indigenous art's history, fail to reflect the complexity of indigenous practices. *Wikiup* demonstrates that new media may be used to establish an indigenous presence in both the Canadian and global digital landscapes. New media works therefore have the potential to challenge colonial interpretations of people and place as well as the history and categorization of indigenous art.

References and Notes

1. Candice Hopkins, "Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital Storytelling," *Leonardo* **39**, No. 4, 342 (2006).
2. Steven Loft and Kerry Swanson, ed., *Coded Territories* (Calgary: Univ. of Calgary Press, 2014) p. 177.
3. Judith Leggatt, "Material Connections in Skawennati's Digital Worlds," *Canadian Literature* No. 231, 216 (2016).
4. Kristin Dowell, *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2013) p. 70.
5. Dowell [4] p. 19.
6. *Sisters and Brothers* can be viewed at: <www.nfb.ca/film/sisters_brothers/>.
7. Heather Igloriorte, "Inuit Artistic Expression as Cultural Resilience," *Inuit Art Quarterly* **25**, No. 1, 6 (2010).
8. Julie Nagam and Kerry Swanson, "Decolonial Interventions in Performance and New Media Art: In Conversation with Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Kent Monkman," *Canadian Theatre Review* **159**, No. 159, 36 (2014).
9. Leggatt [3] p. 58.
10. *Wikiup* can be accessed via: <www.wikiup.org/>.
11. Horea Avram, "Self-Reflexivity as Self-Documentation: Some Thoughts on Augmented Reality and Relational Architecture," in *Documentation and Conservation of Media Arts Heritage* (2006) p. 8.
12. Important precedents for the work discussed include various AR history applications and artworks such as John Craig Freeman's *Border Memorial*, which allow viewers to activate invisible layers of landscapes in real time and encounter avatars at their viewing location: <<https://bordermemorial.wordpress.com/border-memorial-frontera-de-los-muertos/>>.
13. Carleigh Baker, "New Media Review: A Tradition of Evolution: The Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival," *BC Studies* No. 195, 153 (2017).
14. For a discussion of the risks and benefits involved in employing augmented reality to interpret history and cultural information see also: Shanlon Gilbert, "Explode the Museum: Echoes of the Explosion and the 'Wild West' of Interpretation," *iJournal* **2**, No. 3, 8 (2017).