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Artist-Run Organizations and the Restoration of Indigenous Cultural Sovereignty in Toronto, 1970 to 2010

Adrian Foster

Introduction

During the last four decades, Toronto has become a profoundly different place than it once was. Cultural change has permeated the society at every level. The arts have been a crucial locus for this change, simultaneously fostering and reflecting the growth of the society as a whole. Aboriginal people have been involved throughout this development and the main goal of this history is to trace their participation in, and contribution to, that change. As part of that larger project, this paper focuses on artist-run organizations as both creative venues and allies in the process of change.

In the late 1960s, contemporary Canadian society's taste for culture still preferred stories from abroad, almost exclusively Britain and the United States, and accordingly deferred in cultural judgment to those critics and other cultural authorities that shared that perspective. The "crisis of identity" produced by this situation is well documented. Canadian artists responded to these remnants of colonial identity by pursuing the somewhat radical idea that Canadian stories were worth telling, that Canadian ideas and responses to the world were valid and worth listening to. In doing so, they were moving beyond the romantic nationalism of the generation before to fashion a new and robust cultural nationalism.

Aboriginal artists experienced their own renaissance at this same time. Stories and art practices that had gone underground re-emerged and voices that had been silent began to speak out again. One of the most (if not the most) well known of these early leaders was Norval Morisseau. Along with Jackson Beardy, Alex Janvier, Daphne Odjig, and the other members of Professional Native Artists Inc., (popularly called the Native Group of Seven), these artists brought contemporary Aboriginal arts back to the Canadian popular imagination on their own terms. While there were mainstream specialists and experts who had never really stopped paying attention to the work of Native artists, from the 1950s even these began to change their outlook from the limited boundaries of anthropology to the wider scope of the curator and fellow artist. The Massey Commission, for example,

received sixteen briefs and presentations on Indian arts and crafts. One submission included the Sculptors Society of Canada. They indicated a projected activity of theirs was the “development of relations with Indian and Eskimo sculptors as colleagues, and the encouragement of their Native talents in ways not possible from the paternalistic handicraft or museum points of view.” (McMaster 1989, 215)

Canadian nationalists’ struggle for identity involved a conscious awareness of the need to include Aboriginal voices, or to at least address the Aboriginal fact in trying to come to a new understanding of Canada. Some Canadian experts in specific disciplines kept one finger on the pulse of Aboriginal arts and were active proponents of this inclusion, whether directly, as in Jack Pollock’s gallery representation of Norval Morrisseau from 1962, or indirectly, as in John Coulter’s 1950 play about Louis Riel performed in the basement of the Royal Ontario Museum, among other examples. Change moves slowly, however, especially in a society resistant to critical examinations of its own identity. In academic circles, Northrop Frye reminded readers that “as late as 1989/90 there was still a need to explore beyond limits of established modes of thinking and to pay attention to Aboriginal thought,” almost thirty years after James Reaney had expressed a similar call for critical innovation (McKenzie 2007, 12–13). The contestation about those voices is ongoing, and has continued to evolve as Canadians have learned more about Aboriginal people, and more about themselves, over the years. Those years have seen the creation and development of many organizations to explore and pursue these identity projects. They have seen nurturing; they have seen conflict and divergence; they have seen rebuilding of alliances and growing respect.

These years have also seen the development, by Aboriginal people, of arts organizations created to serve the interests of Aboriginal peoples. Over decades, as a result of their resilience, perseverance, and remarkable talent, Aboriginal people have retained the direct control of these Aboriginal arts organizations. This raises powerful questions: Does this constitute a level of self-government? Does this amount to cultural autonomy? For some, there is just one clear answer to these questions. Marjorie Beaucage, responding to the 1993 founding of the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance (AFVAA), drew the connection between art and autonomy:

To govern ourselves means to govern our stories and our ways of telling stories...[The alliance]...is committed to this work of taking care of stories and of creating anew. That is self-government...Art is the desire to see through the illusions that we create for ourselves. In the recovering of the Grandmothers’ voices within us, we know ourselves as strong and powerful. That is self-government. (Beaucage 1993, 32–36)

Governance is a topic that has garnered considerable attention in recent years. The right, capacity, and responsibility of a community to exercise decisive control over its own affairs is a condition that Aboriginal people have sought to restore (in some contexts) for five hundred years. In Canada, this restoration has been a conscious goal with an increasing possibility of realization since the “softening” of *Indian Act* regulations in the 1950s. Some of the clearest articulations of Indigenous conceptions of self-governance are found in deputations to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), produced in 1996: “In its most basic sense, [governance] is the ability to assess and satisfy needs without outside influence, permission, or restriction” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996, Vol. 2, Ch. 3, Sect. 1.1).

For artists, these questions can be doubly potent, transforming the creative realm into a consciously political realm, potentially undermining the creative vitality of the community and thus sapping its true political and healing strength. If we allow ourselves the indulgence of standing back for a moment to consider the political consequences of these developments, we may conclude with a cautious optimism that some progress has been made toward the reclamation and restoration of Indigenous cultural sovereignty in the arts community and in the city.

The risk of dwelling for too long on the political consequences of these developments is that it may distract from the relationships that make them possible, and even further, from the values that are so vital to the health of those relationships. While discussing the history of these organizations within the arts community, it is important to remember that it is the artists’ work that is truly important, rather than the organizations themselves. Just as we do not pursue healing so that we can have hospitals, the organizations are a vital conduit, but are not an end in themselves.

The values reflected in these organizations can be described in many ways, and in framing them here there is certainly much room for discussion of their meaning and even significance. For a historian from the mainstream pursuing research relating to Aboriginal people and our shared history, the ethical responsibility to neither perpetuate nor reproduce the unconscious racism and intellectual colonialism of the past weighs very heavily. A new way of approaching history is still wanted, one that does not merely re-inscribe conflict in different terms. There is little in mainstream academic literature to provide an ethical framework from which to conduct either a non-colonizing or counter-colonial discussion of our shared history or an analysis of that history. Euro-Western ethics are simply not equal to the task. While thinkers such as Tully and Fanon have done admirable work and substantially challenged mainstream academics to consider alternate points of view, we now have a wealth of Indigenous academics whose insight and eloquence should increasingly be the principle resort of any inquiry into matters relating to the living traditions of Indigenous thought—in this case, governance traditions.

Drawing on ideas and ethics deeply rooted in their own intellectual traditions, Haudenosaunee (or Iroquoian) people created the *Kaswentha*, or two-row wampum belt, to formalize their diplomatic relations with newcomers. Accepted first by the Dutch in 1664, then by the British and subsequent governments of the Crown, it can be seen as a foundational document for Indigenous-settler relations. It is simultaneously appropriate as an ethical framework and an analytical tool, since it governs the conduct of signatories on both sides. It applies both to the historian's ethical responsibilities and research practice, and to understanding the relations of the organizations being examined.

The metaphor expressed in the belt¹ (depicted by two parallel lines of purple on a white field) is of two separate nations co-existing in the same space or place without interfering in each other's autonomy and sovereignty (hence, the lines never cross). Often overlooked, and vital to the present analysis, are the three rows of white beads woven between the two purple rows. This "Kaswentha space" specifies the conditions of communication and interaction between the two parties to the agreement. Simply put, the three rows are representative of peace, respect, and friendship. The simplicity of these words in English should not lead one to dismiss these concepts as trite or idealistic. It is not the words, but our history that has undermined their significance.

In Dale Turner's reading of the *Kaswentha*, these terms are profoundly linked to the presumption of sovereignty inherent in the belt as a diplomatic agreement. Taiaiake Alfred also emphasizes this theme in his work, clarifying the use of the English word "sovereignty" as an imperfect translation for Indigenous understandings of the political condition being described and preferring the Mohawk word, *tewatatowie*, or "we take care of ourselves" (Alfred 2009, 135). A further explication of this point is found in the RCAP discussion of governance:

For the Mohawk, as for many other Aboriginal peoples, sovereignty does not mean establishing an all-powerful government over a nation or people. It means that the people take care of themselves and the lands for which they are responsible. It means using political power to express the people's will. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996)

In the context of the *Kaswentha*, none of these terms are conditions to be checked off on a list, but each is a premise of behaviour intertwined with the others. While we generally define peace in the negative, as an absence of war, hostility, or resentment, and a condition in which one does not suspect or presume to be attacked, it may be more instructive to examine it in the positive. In this way, we can describe peace as a condition of trust, of acting in good faith.

Respect, the second concept, is crucial to the whole as it reinforces the principle of non-interference on which the entire agreement rests. No force or coercion is implied, no ultimatums are made, advice is offered obliquely, and decisions are

deliberate and considered. The inherently mutual nature of respect means that we are prepared to listen, and that we expect to be heard. In Turner's words,

the notion of respect goes to the core of Iroquoian religious thought; but in a political context, respecting another person's intrinsic value means that you recognize that they have the right to speak their mind and to choose for themselves how to act in the world... But respect also functioned in a communal context; that is, individual respect was reciprocated. This form of reciprocity is what gave rise to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. In many Indigenous communities it was considered disrespectful to speak for another, and it was certainly forbidden to choose for another how to act. The freedom of speech gave everyone the right to speak his or her own mind, but it was embedded in the context that everyone else possessed the same right. (Turner 2006, 49)²

Friendship, the third concept, is the reminder that this is an agreement between persons who are entering into a relationship. These three terms are not separate components in an equation, but rather a combination of ideas braided together to form an understanding in the mind of the underlying premises of the agreement. This is more comprehensible in light of its derivation from an oral tradition. Since the agreement describes an action or a way of being, these premises are expressions of intention, of what we "mean" by this action. We, the participants in the agreement, are thus much more than merely our roles, positions, or identities. We are persons, and the bond between us is not a system or a set of rules to regulate our behaviour. It is a relationship, a living thing to be cared for and kept healthy.

It will be readily apparent, as organizations are discussed in greater detail, how their operating principles are consonant with the principles of the Kaswentha. We could certainly conduct a similar examination of other fields of human endeavour using the same analysis, though it is effective to demonstrate the case of artists since, for artists, regardless of ethnicity, these principles are vitally important. Creative control, artistic freedom, and the positive, liberating aspects of what is often described as a "bohemian" lifestyle all hinge on an individual and group sensitivity typified by mutual respect, honest intention, and acceptance of others' vision. This consonance of principles can be seen to have created fertile ground for the growth of potent alliances and the flourishing of Aboriginal artists.

Artist-Run Centres

As one element of a larger study of arts organizations in Toronto, this paper focuses on one aspect of these historic developments and their significance for urban Aboriginal people working in the arts, and for the city as a whole. During this period, a unique form of organization emerged throughout the wider arts

world to become a crucial support for artists in general. In the Toronto context, these organizations have continued to support Aboriginal artistic visions and Aboriginal success. Distinct from established and independent arts bodies, these organizations can be described generally as “artist-run” and demonstrate several common characteristics. The observation being made in this paper is that the operations and interactions of artist-run centres epitomize the respectful alliance relationships that have contributed so significantly to Aboriginal success in the arts. I have chosen to examine a cross-section of these organizations in several fields. Further, I have limited my focus to the context of Toronto, primarily to create parameters for a manageable research project, but also to draw parallels between the city’s present-day reputation as an arts centre and its pre-colonial heritage as a site of Indigenous cultural expression.

Mandates and Philosophy

Clive Robertson recently characterized the artist-run movement not as an art movement but as a “production of network affinities” (Robertson 2006, 26), which is to say that they are as much about an innovative approach to organization as they are a new approach to art.

Artist-run organizations, both mainstream ones such as A Space, the Theatre Centre, and V-Tape, and Aboriginal ones such as Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA) and the Centre for Aboriginal Media (CAM), were created with a mandate to serve the community working in their specific media, whether visual art, theatre, or film and video. This “mandate to serve” is not merely an identification with a particular sector of the arts. It stipulates genuine service to that sector in light of wider goals, recognizing the need for a society to hear its own stories to remain healthy, and the need to actively nurture a culture in order for it to remain a living thing. Their consistency in adhering to these mandates is remarkable. These are organizations that have held onto and demonstrated the same principles for thirty and forty years, reflecting a philosophical stability that represents transparency and trust to their communities.

These centres share an emphasis on work that is, for the most part, eccentric: the avant-garde, the overtly political, the grassroots, the counter-commercial, and the innovative. Rather than entertaining an affinity for one particular kind of work and tolerating the others, the underlying philosophy is one that embraces openness, whether it is openness to new ideas and new ways of working, or openness to dissent and difficult questions, or openness to creative risk and innovation. It is an outlook that is comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Their organizational models are eccentric. They do not fit rigid models, but are consistent with similar sets of principles. They are non-profit, mostly charitable organizations with volunteer boards. They advocate for artists and support artists’ visions, preconditioned by the principle of non-interference, and a deep respect for a multiplicity of views of art-making and meaning. All of these

organizations are conscious of their reliance on the healthy professional relationships they have maintained, both within their boards and their broader communities. Ultimately, their underlying philosophies and mandates share mutual respect for diverse voices among their central tenets. While none are explicit or conscious expressions of the principles of the *Kaswentha*, the stated principles of these organizations have made them welcoming places for Native artists.

The Centre for Aboriginal Media (which produces the *ImagineNATIVE* Film and Media Arts Festival) fits this artist-run model too, as does the organization it sprang from, the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA). What makes these organizations and their success particularly interesting are the implications of freestanding, Aboriginal-run and mandated cultural institutions for questions of self-governance, especially with the further implications of current processes pursuing the indigenization of governance structures.

Art

In structuring this history, I have endeavoured to work from broad, loose categories, which can then be explored in greater detail. The umbrella category of “art” encompasses mainly the visual arts, painting, and sculpture, but also embraces performance, video, and installation art. While these latter art modes may seem to some to be too new to bear historical assessment, their innovation parallels precisely the innovation of the artist-run centre. Indeed, our notions of historical assessment must be equally open to re-examination if we are to understand the work of Indigenous artists and the development of Aboriginal arts organizations. As curator Steven Loft (2010) has said,

An Indigenous Art History constitutes a trajectory of adaptability and cultural connectivity, perfectly in keeping with Indigenous world views and customary as well as contemporary artistic practices. It is tied up in histories that include both pre-and post-contact epistemologies. It is customary and contemporary, reserve-based and urban, tribal and hybrid, empirical and cosmological. It is living, dynamic and in constant flux. It rejects categorization through the lens of Euro-Art-Historical analysis. It does imply a differing contextual environment in which work by Indigenous artists must be viewed, disseminated, and written about.

In addition, Loft (2010) has stated:

Language as cultural signifier evolves and changes, constantly redefining a culture’s existence. Likewise, artistic production by Indigenous artists is transformative and transformational: a shape shifter. It is an act of proprietary self-definition and cultural self-determination.

A Space

In recognizing the need for a more robust art “scene” in Canada, several early proponents set out to fill that need, bypassing the contemporary arts establishment, initially in Vancouver, and then across the country, by creating new networks and institutions,

battling gallery/museum expectation to create simply a space, ...that’s what they called it: A Space. This was the first artist-run centre in Canada we say, and why do we say that? There were of course others: Intermedia in Vancouver, and short-lived spaces in Winnipeg and London, Ontario, and perhaps others, all burnt out by premature birth and/or premature ejaculation...Let us think of Intermedia as transformed into a young couple, ritually killed, embraced in a sacramental love death. Now these sacraments were coming to fruition. And A Space was the first fruit. And the first exhibition at this new space A Space was of course work from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the eastern node on this network of becoming. (Bronson 1983, 4–5)

Ultimately, by creating, and perhaps even more by administering and managing their own collaborative organizations, artists participated directly in the institutional culture supporting the art they themselves were making, rather than existing peripherally to it. In doing so, they overcame an artificial and conflictual relationship of opposition regarding cultural institutions (at least with those within their influence) and came to a balance though autonomy and self-governance.

For A Space, this evolution has continued to the present day. As an organization, it continues to be board-governed, electing volunteer members for two-year terms at its annual general meeting. The sole change in mandate has been the decision in the 1980s to present a minimum of 50 percent of programming by Aboriginal artists and artists of colour; “Since 1982, the gallery has maintained an inclusive programming direction focused on work that is politically engaged, oriented around non-dominant communities, and supportive of innovative curatorial and technical practices” (A Space 2010). This direction has been enacted through specific policies around anti-censorship (1984), anti-racism (1985), and access (1993). In a recent organizational review, the board reaffirmed its commitment to these values (McGowan 2011).

A Space’s programming policy remains strictly collaborative. It programs in collaboration with other organizations or with individual members; it is not a rental space. Program selections are made through a programming committee that strikes juries drawn from board members and the membership-at-large. This has been the case for about eighteen years, prior to which, programming was done solely through committees composed of communities of interest within the membership (McGowan 2011). Proposals accepted by a jury receive a range of

support through the gallery. A Space ensures that fees are paid to artists, curators, and writers; they provide return shipping of exhibition materials; promotion, distribution, and advertising for the exhibition; documentation; technical support for the installation; and an opening reception.

Collaboration with other organizations is a long-standing tradition at A Space, reinforcing a philosophy that understands the benefits of sharing audiences, resources, and funding, and challenging the scarcity consciousness that often operates in other spheres. These collaborative relationships have allowed other organizations, such as the Music Gallery, to develop and emerge as separate entities pursuing more specific interests. This approach has also allowed the gallery to support the widest range of projects possible. This includes its long history of large collaborative group exhibitions with Aboriginal artists. Highlights of the gallery archive going back to the early 1990s describe shows dealing with a broad range of social issues, responding to crises at Oka and Kanehsatake, and cross-cultural collaboration with other groups of artists, as well as the True Colours Film and Video Festival, a precursor to the ImagineNATIVE Festival. A Space's long collaboration with ImagineNATIVE goes back to 2004, and these annual exhibitions have become a vital part of the festival calendar, exploring festival themes and celebrating featured artists. The partnership of A Space with Aboriginal curators has supported the expression of critical dialogues and perspectives that move beyond the silos of modern and Western art historical views and a robust assertion of Indigenous self-determination and cultural sovereignty. In doing all of this, the gallery has nurtured a set of long-standing relationships, without interfering in artistic vision.

Since 1971, A Space has provided "a space for different readings or experiences of culture and identity, and... multidisciplinary projects that create a forum for dialogue and collaboration between diverse communities, including youth cultures and communities in transition" (A Space 2010).

Theatre

In setting out this category, I have relied on straightforward parameters of dramatic performance, dance, and playwriting. The antecedents of artist-run theatre in Toronto are slightly more complex. The long history of theatre and performance in Canada has always been characterized by a significant interchange of Canadian theatre artists with communities in New York and London for training and show-going, allowing them to carry home inspiration and innovation. As new and experimental theatre began to emerge in other centres in the 1950s and 1960s, Canadian exponents of these movements emerged at home as well, transposing new approaches to Canadian contexts. This can be seen in parallel with the impulses that gave rise, at roughly the same time, to the artist-run gallery movement discussed above.

The Theatre Centre

The circumstances that gave rise to the creation of the Theatre Centre in 1979 can be seen as a “counter-revolution” in Toronto’s Theatre scene. Denis Johnston has called it a “third wave,” albeit one that “has proven more durable than the second” (Johnston 1991, 219), a characterization necessitated by his own description of the failed theatre companies of the mid-seventies as a “second wave.” Nevertheless, whether “wave” or “ebb,” the theatre shore of the late seventies was mostly calm as the four major alternative theatres (Factory, Passe Muraille, Tarragon, and Toronto Free) were becoming increasingly like the “establishment” from which they had set themselves apart a decade before.

In this hazardous context, six small theatre companies determined “that they had better group together for support and survival or face extinction” (Hallgren 1980, 23). Two of the prime movers in this group, Actor’s Lab (led by Richard Nieoczym) and Autumn Leaf Theatre (under Thom Sokoloski), had organized successful experimental festivals in 1976 and 1977, respectively: “The success of both rested on a high energy intermingling of theatre artists involved in exploratory research as well as exposure to internationally influential theatre figures like Jerzy Grotowski and Charles Marowitz” (Hallgren 1980, 23).

By June of 1979, Richard Soichet (A. K. A. Inc.) had joined the initial pair, and by August, the original work group of artistic directors and other artists had been assembled: Cynthia Grant (Nightwood Theatre), Richard Rose (Necessary Angel), Sky Gilbert (Buddies in Bad Times), Michael Macina, and Andrew Scorer. The Theatre Centre quickly earned a reputation as a welcoming home for alternative theatre, indeed as “Toronto’s only artist-run performance space with a mandate dedicated to the development of new theatre” (Theatre Centre 1985. 2). The philosophy animating this mandate is unequivocal. From the very beginning, there was a clear adherence to the broader goals of the organization, and a commitment not to undermine them:

Legally, the incorporation of the centre will be as a non-profit society with a charitable tax number, but, practically, the day-to-day tasks associated with the running of the centre are divided among a work group of eight individuals who operate more as a cooperative or a collective than a corporate board. The rejection of hiring a centrally paid administrator, like many other key policy decisions, is the result of dialogues, monologues, and dramatic conflict spanning hours of embroilment in issues like alienation, spontaneity, formalism, atmosphere, and other equally difficult philosophical and political concerns. No topic is taboo in administrative discussions, but, miraculously, the work does get completed, and, wisely, group criticism of each other’s artistic endeavours is strictly avoided. (Hallgren 1980)

Here we see the principle of non-interference expressed in action, and it can be seen in very much the same values expressed in the present: “The Theatre Centre provides artists—from a range of disciplines—with the space, funding, mentorship, profile, and a sense of community in order to explore an idea and develop new approaches to performance creation” (Theatre Centre 2010).

Actor’s Lab moved on to independent status before the Theatre Centre’s incorporation in 1981. Other founding companies, such as Buddies in Bad Times, moved on to separate status, and board reorganization followed in 1984. Prior to this time, roughly 75 percent of the centre’s productions were the output of the founding companies. After reorganization, the centre was able to serve an even wider diversity of new and emerging artists. It is from this point on that we can see increasing support of Aboriginal artists and, later, Aboriginal companies. (It was at this time in the mid-eighties that Native Earth Performing Arts experienced remarkable growth, success, and international recognition.) Remaining true to its original mandate, the centre continued to support and present an incredibly wide range of work, and created ongoing programs and annual festivals. It was in 1984, the first year of the R+D Program, that Tomson Highway’s *Aria of Sassumap Arna* was first staged, with Native Earth Performing Arts’ production of *Give Them a Carrot (For as Long as the Sun is Green)* being presented the following year.

In 1994, the twenty-seventh edition of R+D was specifically “designed to support the development of the work of First Nation artists” (Theatre Centre 1994). Featuring five different shows, the program was led by a creative training team that included Dennis Maracle, Daniel David Moses, a choreographer, a designer, and an ensemble cast of five actors. The event met with significant press attention (from Toronto publications *Eye Weekly*, *NOW Magazine*, and the *Toronto Star*) and strong audiences.

In that same year, the Theatre Centre began producing another development program, *Under The Umbrella*, which in 1996 supported new work by Jani Lauzon, as well as new choreography by Sandra Laronde. In 1998, Laronde began a year-long artist residency (Theatre Centre 2010). She went on to found Red Sky Performing Arts in 2000.

Recent years have seen co-productions of *Uqquaq, The Shelter* with Native Earth Performing Arts (2007); *The Only Good Indian...* with the Turtle Gals (2007); Terrance Houle’s performance piece *Portage* (2008) at the Free Fall Festival; and Tara Beagan’s radical adaptation of Strindberg’s *Miss Julie: Sheh’Mah* with Kick Theatre (2008), followed by her development of her new work, *Free as Injuns* (2009). In 2011, Native Earth’s festival of new work by young artists, Weesa-geechak Begins to Dance, saw its twenty-third year.

This long-standing relationship between the Theatre Centre and the growing Aboriginal theatre community bears witness to an alignment or concordance of goals and values. During the span of the study period, the nature and needs of the theatre community have evolved in many directions simultaneously, and yet the alliance has remained healthy. This may be due to a continued flexibility and

respect for changing needs. In the early 1980s, an institution like the Theatre Centre could provide essential services to most of the alternative theatre artists who needed them; in 2010, many of those artists and groups are well-established, and some have even having developed their own training and development programs. Younger artists still find a welcoming and supportive community at the Theatre Centre, as well as established networks and connections to the broader theatre establishment. As the community and the city change and grow, the Theatre Centre remains consistent in its mandate and in directing its energies to fulfill it.

Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts

The Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA) is “Canada’s oldest Aboriginal arts service organization, providing support to Canadian Aboriginal artists in Ontario and around the world” (ANDPVA 2009). In 1972, founding director James Buller’s vision was of an organization that would become the voice of Aboriginal artists, “to demonstrate the rich traditional heritage of Aboriginal people and to ensure that Aboriginal art was recognized as contributing to the cultural fabric of Canadian society” (ANDPVA 2009).

Any attempt to consolidate a comprehensive historical overview of ANDPVA’s activities over its lifetime of almost forty years will bring even an experienced historian face to face with a daunting task of monumental complexity. The patient archivist could begin to organization the wealth of material by production type—publications, schools and training programs, referral services for actors, representation services for artists of all kinds, festivals, conferences, youth camps and programs, database and research support, community development projects, representation to national and international arts bodies—but it would still be an immense project. Despite its small size and volunteer workforce, ANDPVA has produced, coordinated, and participated in between a dozen and two dozen projects and events annually, some single or stand-alone, some ongoing multi-year endeavours, some structural establishments that have gone on to become free-standing independent entities.

ANDPVA’s long history has left a significant legacy in the Aboriginal arts community. Its early establishment of the Native Theatre School was the basis for its theatre and training programs. Beginning as a summer training program, the theatre school later became year-round, and organized Native theatre festivals and operated a touring company. It was later reorganized and renamed the Centre for Indigenous Theatre. ANDPVA was the foundation for the Aboriginal Music Project (AMP), its consequent summer Aboriginal Music Series at Ontario Place, and the annual Aboriginal Music Week, combining a performance series with an industry conference (Diamond 1999–2000, 402).

Through its publishing arm, ANDPVA Books, the association produced a number of mainly reference titles, for example, *Mukwa Geezis: A Resource*

Guide to Aboriginal Literature (Chitze, 1996), as well as a magazine, *The Runner*, which was later renamed *Aboriginal Voices*. This, in turn, lent its name to Aboriginal Voices Radio (AVR), which was a significant source of momentum for the founding of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN). This broadcast work also has deep roots in the association's role in artist representation through its Talent Bank, and its involvement in a syndicated TV series, *Spirit Bay*. ANDPVA has organized conferences on the arts, offered screenwriting workshops, and held a multi-disciplinary arts camp for Native youth (1997–2003), as well as cultural workshops and gatherings around Ontario.

ANDPVA has also, throughout its lifetime, “played a significant liaison role by participating in other related organizations” (Hummelen 1982, 24–25), reminding mainstream arts organizations, such as the Canadian Conference on the Arts and the Dominion Drama Festival, “that Native artists and performers are vitally interested in the present and future state of the arts in Canada” (Hummelen 1982, 25). At the same time, ANDPVA was an active participant in Native conferences, reminding “delegates and leaders that the arts are a vital part of the life of the people they represent, and that they should become aware of this fact, and concerned about the cultural needs of the people they represent” (Hummelen 1982, 25).

Perhaps the most remarkable fact in this long organizational history is that ANDPVA's mandate has remained virtually unchanged since the initial proposals for its establishment in 1972. Over the years, it has provided unflinching support to Indigenous artists in all disciplines as they preserve traditional knowledge, advance the diversity of Indigenous cultural identities, and reflect their “evolving cultural expression” (ANDPVA 2009). Indeed, as ANDPVA pursues a renewal of its governance structures on Indigenous models, it does so

as a means to (re)animate our original essence. As an Indigenous arts organization who serves its membership in an advocacy role, we believe that the assertion of an Indigenous “cultural match”...within our organizational governance structure, will act as a means of ensuring respect, and integrity from our constituents...The ANDPVA board has worked towards decolonizing our corporate structure in an effort to reassert our right to self-govern, according to our own Indigenous constitution. (Nielsen 2010)

ANDPVA continues to define its own future, as directed by the artists who form its board and membership.

Film/Media

During the study period, Toronto became a serious centre for film production and distribution, while many Torontonians became obsessed with cinema and

its pop-culture trappings. While we may think of film and video as newer media, their relationship with artist-run centres commences at roughly the same time. In keeping with the eccentric membership of organizations qualifying as artist-run in this study, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) is an unexpected outlier. Following the 1967 launch of the NFB's Challenge for Change (CFC) program, and following the premise that, "through engaging... communities in the process of filmmaking it was possible to make films *with* rather than *about* them" (Honarpisheh 2006, 81), CFC recruited seven trainees from Aboriginal communities across Canada to learn different aspects of filmmaking. Getting right to work in the spring of 1968, their training was largely on-the-job, with each member of the group taking turns as director, cinematographer, editor, interviewer, etc. This group became known as the Indian Film Unit, with Willie Dunn (Mi'kmaq) and Mike Mitchell (Mohawk) emerging as principal directors, along with Buckley Petawabano and Duke Redbird (de Rosa 2002, 330).

Together they produced several documentaries: *These Are My People* (1969), *Ballad of Crowfoot* (1968), and perhaps most significantly, *You Are On Indian Land* (1969). While this particular program was short-lived, and was later redeveloped into a training program, the organizational commitment at the NFB to letting Native people tell Native stories was maintained in the work of Mosha Michael, Gil Cardinal, Alanis Obomsawin, and Loretta Todd (White 2006, *passim*). The respect inherent in that initial, and subsequent sustained, commitment made room for Native voices to speak out, ensuring that "support" did not cross the line to become "interference." In June 1991, the NFB established Studio One, a division in which only Aboriginal filmmakers would make films. This evolved to become the Aboriginal Filmmaking Program (AFP) in 1996. In 2005, the English program began First Stories, giving a start to twelve young Aboriginal filmmakers in western Canada, and providing a follow-up opportunity in the Second Stories program to make a larger documentary (Cardinal 2009).

V-Tape

V-Tape, while unconventional in its pursuits, fits more easily into the conventional model of a non-profit, artist-run organization. V-Tape was founded in 1980 by a group of artists who withdrew their work from distributor Art Metropole to form a collective specializing in broadly defined video art and independent documentaries (Gibbs 1999). Their goal was not only to distribute films, but also to provide curatorial services, present programs and exhibitions large and small, create catalogues, act as a resource centre, and provide exhibition equipment to artists and other centres at artist-friendly rates. V-Tape's online digital archive provides access to the over thirteen thousand items in the organization's catalogue. Artists receive 75 percent of the fees from sales, rentals, and broadcast of their work. The ultimate aim is to connect audiences with artists. Once connected, the vital dialogue between artist and audience can begin.

V-Tape's commitment to Aboriginal artists cannot be overstated. The 1990s saw tremendous creative and organizational development in the Aboriginal artistic and media community, exemplified by Marrie Mumford founding the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance (AFVAA) (Beard 2002, 332). V-Tape was an instrumental partner in this project and brought more and more work by Aboriginal artists into its distribution network and online catalogue, which is equipped with a specialized search engine for Aboriginal titles. This placed Aboriginal artists alongside colleagues in a broad international community of artists, rather than in a marginalized category. As the AFVAA evolved to become the Centre for Aboriginal Media, V-Tape continued providing resources and space, actually hosting the organization for a few years when it consisted of little more than a desk, some files, and one intrepid outreach coordinator (Vanderstoop 2011).

Centre for Aboriginal Media/ImagineNATIVE Festival

The Centre for Aboriginal Media (CAM) began in 1998 as an initiative to create a resource centre—similar to V-Tape in concept—for Aboriginal filmmakers. This followed the dissolution of its antecedent organization, the AFVAA (1993 to 1998). CAM was established with founding partners Cynthia Lickers, V-Tape, and the Woodland Cultural Centre at Six Nations, and founding patron Roberta Jamieson, to support the work of Aboriginal filmmakers and provide a base for distributing and promoting that work. For the first few years, ImagineNATIVE was merely a catalogue and resource guide, with Lickers conducting outreach into Aboriginal communities “to increase the profile of Aboriginally produced works,” (ImagineNATIVE 1998, iv). In a very short time, it became clear that filmmakers would benefit most from an annual showcase of their work and, as a result, the ImagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival was established in 2000. Its mandate was, and continues to be, “to showcase the talents of Indigenous artists in film, video, radio, and new media” (ImagineNATIVE 2009, 16).

ImagineNATIVE has a very active and involved volunteer board of directors and a deep commitment to artists. Submissions to the festival require that at least one member of the project's key creative team (writer, director, or producer) is an Aboriginal person.³ The board sustains committees on programming, finance, personnel, and marketing and promotion, remaining active in all aspects of management. This has been the case throughout the history of ImagineNATIVE. Between 2003 and 2007, following the exit of Cynthia Lickers from the executive director position, the organization was run by the board.

The ImagineNATIVE Film Festival continues to bring Indigenous filmmakers and media professionals from around the world to Toronto. Prior to 2004, submissions were fewer, resulting in a much higher acceptance rate. From 2005 to 2007, the festival saw a 20 percent increase in growth per year. It currently receives about four hundred submissions annually, of which it programs approximately 80. This reflects an emphasis on quality that cannot be overstated. While the organization is committed to the growth of the festival, it is also conscious of its role

in building a professional industry and sustaining a community. Programming objectives maintain a careful balance: alternative with mainstream, developed industry with youth and grassroots, international with local, and so on. These priorities are reflected in continued programming of features, shorts, and video art; workshops on pitching documentaries and dramas, writing, directing, accessing funding, and distribution; showcases for new and rising artists, and for featured international filmmaking communities; and collaborations with other organizations to support shared goals. It is the presence and reputation of the festival, and its premiere screenings of international, North American, and local work that contribute to making Toronto a vital gathering place for artists, industry, agencies, and audiences.

During the period of this study, artist-run organizations have collaborated with Aboriginal artists and free-standing Aboriginal arts organizations have been established. This has nurtured and supported the artistic freedom and growth of independent Aboriginal artists, and has cultivated their ongoing alliances with non-Aboriginal artists and organizations. The common characteristics of these artist-run centres allow them to work together without interfering with partners' creativity or artistic objectives. In doing so, they are demonstrating genuine respect, a necessary precondition for creating the cultural "elbow room" required for self-determination to flourish and thrive. The practical consequence of this liberty amounts to self-governance of cultural institutions, a reality that moves beyond theory towards concrete, operational cultural sovereignty. This front-line work has fostered these expressions of Indigenous cultural sovereignty and continues to enrich the broader cultural life of the city.

Endnotes

1. I am deeply indebted for my understanding of the Kaswentha to Professor David Newhouse of Trent University.
2. Much of our interpretation of historic actions needs to be seen through this lens of mutual respect to be comprehensible.
3. The engagement of board members and staff in the broader media community helps to ensure due diligence to prevent inclusion of any “straw-man” projects.

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