



ART AND COLD CASH

Northern Economies and
the Luxuries of Cultural Exchange

Text by Jenny Western

The origin of contemporary Inuit art is often traced back to 1948 when art, economics, and transportation conspired together to plunk southerner James Houston onto the shores of Arctic Quebec. The young artist was offered a flight to Inukjuak while on a northern painting trip. During his visit there he sketched portraits of community members and exchanged these for a dozen small stone and ivory carvings that were not old, as one local trader corrected him, but newly carved. Upon returning home to the south, Houston became involved with the Canadian Handicrafts Guild in Montreal that was encouraging the development of a small northern carving industry. Houston assisted the Guild by going on a buying trip the following summer. Carvers whose pieces Houston acquired received Hudson's Bay Company chits in return, redeemable for purchases at the HBC trading posts.¹ Exhibitions of Inuit artwork in the south and the expansion of Houston's efforts to other northern communities brought great success to the Guild's project. By

1953 they were no longer able to handle the task of retailing and marketing alone and the Hudson's Bay Company was brought in for further support.² Scholar Ingo Hessel observes, "Inuit artists must have felt strangely empowered by the knowledge that they could make and sell objects that the dominant outsiders could not make themselves and desired so fervently." Hessel further specifies that a sense of relief existed among the Inuit as this business of art offered a way to support themselves beyond the instability of the dwindling fur trade.³ During its beginnings in the 17th and 18th Centuries, the economic structure of the early fur trade involved trading European goods for North American resources. According to Harold Innis, political economist and predecessor to Marshall McLuhan in media and communication theory, this reliance upon the exchange of commodities from Europe enabled the maintenance of cultural traits that European settlers were accustomed to and wished to retain. Goods that could be easily transported and traded with Europe were quickly located, produced, and sold to the European market at a price beneficial to the colony. This allowed European newcomers to acquire the wares that were crucial to the preservation and enhancement of their way of life while promoting the export of luxury items that could not be produced in Europe. Innis states that under the archaic conditions of a European agricultural lifestyle as well as the needs of the Catholic Church, the most desirable luxury items were gold, fish, and fur.⁴ The exchange of these items, especially those of the fur trade, did much for European expansion into North America along waterways and trails, and later by railroads and telecommunication lines.

By the mid-20th Century the fur trade began to wind down and a market for contemporary Inuit art was beginning to flourish. Is it possible that the development of a contemporary Inuit art market in the 20th Century represented a new form of luxury trade item within a modified North American economy? There are many reasons for the popularity of Inuit art after 1948, not the least of which was the fact that Inuit artists were producing artwork that, as Hessel points out, could not be made by southerners. Imbued with a sense of 'authenticity' through elements read as *naïve* and *exotic*, the value of Inuit

art had much to do with its differences from non-Inuit art. But what of Inuit art now, sixty years after Houston's first expeditions north? How are artists, from the north and the south reacting to the legacy of capitalism that informs the history of Inuit art and subsequent realities of northern economics?

"Art and Cold Cash" is an artistic project presented by the Art and Cold Cash Collective of Ruby Arngna'naqq, Sheila Butler, Jack Butler, William Noah, and Patrick Mahon, with Myra Kukiiyaut by invitation. While Arngna'naqq, Noah, and Kukiiyaut are Inuit who were settled in Baker Lake, Nunavut, the Butlers and Mahon are southern artists with connections to the north. Mahon's experience is that of an educator in Chesterfield Inlet in the late 1980s. Originally from Pittsburg, Jack and Sheila Butler were government appointed advisors to the artists of Baker Lake from 1969 to 1973, at which time the Sanavik Inuit Cooperative was established in order to facilitate the development, production, and dissemination of two and three-dimensional artworks for commercial markets in the south and overseas. While working in the community, and for several years after, the Butlers supported Baker Lake artists in a creative exploration of the ways in which Inuit society was being transformed in the late 20th Century. Curator Marie Bouchard contends that the artwork of Baker Lake in the 1970s "assumed a striking contemporary edge in its subsequent reconstruction of a politicized cultural identity" because of the influence of the Butlers.⁵ As a research project spearheaded by both southern and northern artists, "Art and Cold Cash" remains consistent with these early goals while offering a thoughtful consideration of the role of trade and money today in the art of the north.

For "Art and Cold Cash," Arngna'naqq presents a series of video interviews asking people in the north "Do you remember when you first used money?" The responses are varied, touching on details about first jobs, first paychecks, and indulgent purchases (a man named Martin Kreelak recalls buying the unlikely combination of ice cream, cigarettes, and boxing gloves); but also of moving to different communities, relationships with family members, all embroiled within the backdrop of language. On the Art and Cold Cash website each member of the

collective also responds to the question, offering answers that segregate a northern and southern experience only slightly.⁶ It is in the consideration of how artists make a living that the differences between north and south become apparent. As the collective points out, art production has offered a primary means of earning a living for artists in the north while southern artists are often left to subsidize their art practice with money from wage employment.

The video work, "Trading the Past in the Present: Recalling the Barter Economy" (2004–2005) further explores the exchange between northern and southern artists and the value of objects offered for trade. With five hundred photographs taken by Jack Butler between 1969–1973, the collective proposed to trade these images of Baker Lake's past for images of its present. The community responded positively to trading photographs of younger looking friends and family in exchange for photos drawn from their own meaningful collections. Baker Lake residents also suggested alternative trades with fellow artist, Silas Aittauq, acquiring a drawing by Mahon; Noah contributing a self-portrait as artist / photographer; and Silas and Lucy Arngna'naaq offering a pork chop dinner for trade. In exchange for a photograph of the late carver George Tatanniq, Tatanniq's nephew Luke Arngna'naaq sang his uncle's personal song. The video footage of the seventy-something Arngna'naaq captured by the collective is particularly poignant as the man is brought to tears while delivering his performance.

Jack Butler's piece "My earliest memory of money was selling flowers door-to-door" (2007) uses gouache drawing, a drafting table, and a series of MP3 players connected to touch-response points in order to relay the ongoing changes to life in Baker Lake. When fingers contact the drawing's surface, texts are spoken in Inuktitut and English. As Butler points out, "When multiple texts are touched simultaneously, one experiences a kind of glossolalia reflective of the rich, conflicted and often confusing cross-cultural life in contemporary Nunavut."⁷ The piece includes sound bites of stories, songs, and a "complaint about the proximity of the garbage dump to the settlement."⁸ Considering the efficiency of traditional nomadic life, where all that was acquired

was used in one way or another, and the proliferations of mining (uranium, among other natural resources) coupled with the transplanting of fast-food chains in this now settled community: Waste, like luxury, is an issue of excess originating in the south, and now mirrored in the north.

In the face of its history as an art of acculturation, the Art and Cold Cash collective have addressed the key role of capitalism within contemporary Inuit art and its surrounding northern art practices. While not operating dogmatically on the subject, the artwork of "Art and Cold Cash" attends to an important dialogue surrounding the current state of art in the north. Many of the pieces in the exhibition, whether pen and ink or gouache on paper, video and audio or installation, deal with the exchange of personal stories from community members in Baker Lake regarding art and economy, trade and barter, the past and the present, the north and the south, and even the use of the Inuktitut and English languages in a way that has not often been the focus of Inuit or southern art. With this in mind, perhaps the exhibition begs the question—If we now live in an age of global communication brought about by the inherited systems of historic trade routes, has the exchange of information about the realities of northern life now become the most desirable luxury of contemporary Inuit art?

Jenny Western holds an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Winnipeg and a Masters in Art History and Curatorial Practice from York University in Toronto. In 2006 Jenny received a Fine Arts Award from the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation to complete research on contemporary art and cultural hybridity for her final MA research paper "Trading Post: Cultural Convergence in Contemporary Canadian Art." Jenny currently serves as the Art Collections Coordinator at the University of Manitoba and as Adjunct Curator for the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. She wishes to thank J.J. Kegan McFadden for his insight and editorial contributions while writing her response to Art and Cold Cash.

1. Hessel, Ingo. *Inuit Art*. Vancouver/ Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1998. (29) 2. Hessel, 30 3. Hessel, 35 4. Innis, Harold A. *The Fur Trade in Canada*. Yale: Yale University Press, 1930. (384) 5. Bouchard, Marie. "Negotiating a Third Space." *Marion Tuuluaq*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2002. (25) 6. www.ca/visarts/projects_sites/artcoldcash/index_project.html 7. Butler artist statement 2009. 8. Ibid

Ruby Arnagna'naaq is an Inuk from Baker Lake, Nunavut, now residing in Ottawa. Ruby co-produced "Inuit Myths and Legends" for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, and has worked in the Inuit cultural sector as a political activist and a representative on arts boards. **Sheila Butler** is an artist and teacher, working primarily in drawing and painting. She has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in Canada and abroad, including in the national touring exhibition, "Just My Imagination," 2005–07. **Jack Butler's** hybrid practice uses the means and methods of visual art to produce research in three domains—medical science, collaborations with Inuit artists, and money. Jack exhibits internationally and his work is included in public and private collections. **Patrick Mahon's** work as an artist includes print-based projects that engage with historical and contemporary aspects of "print culture" and involves responding to gallery and museum collections through artistic and curatorial gestures. He lived in the North from 1986 to 1988. Today Patrick is a Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Western Ontario, and is currently Chair of the department. **William Noah** was born in a traditional Inuit camp on the Back River in the Canadian Arctic. The youngest of thirteen children, he moved with his mother, the artist Jessie Oonark, into the settlement of Baker Lake in 1958. As a way to earn money in the settlement, Oonark encouraged him to draw. Now exhibiting internationally, William's drawings, prints and paintings reflect the progressive urbanization and Westernization of Baker Lake.

EXHIBITION

13 February–4 April 2009

RECEPTION

7–10 PM, Friday, 13 February

PANEL DISCUSSION

3 PM, Saturday, 14 February

In association with Art and Cold Cash, **Video Pool Media Arts Centre** presents the work of **ARNAIT VIDEO PRODUCTIONS**, 2 PM, Saturday, 4 April, at Cinematheque. Discussion to follow.

media arts centre
VIDEO POOL

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