Acting Up: Performing the Indian

Lori Blondeau, Larry McNeill, Kent Monkman, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson, Jeff Thomas, Jackie Traverse, and Hulleah J. Tsinhahjinnie
with photographs of performances by Esther Deer (Princess White Deer), Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), and Molly Nelson Dellis (Molly Spotted Elk)

Photography has a very ambiguous place in the history of Aboriginal peoples. Most often, the camera has been used as a tool of colonization and oppression, a means to create thousands of images that depict Aboriginal peoples as colonizers wished to see them. This history, representative of the tyranny of colonization, has also created another type of subjugation: it has silenced the Aboriginal peoples standing before the camera who had their own thoughts on their circumstances and who perhaps in their own way, wished to convey something beyond those of the needs of the colonizers. This exhibition proposes a slightly different take on the role the camera has played in Aboriginal history. I wish to show how Aboriginal artists both in the past and the present have used what I call the “performative space” of the camera to “act up” as a way to communicate their own needs and concerns. Works by contemporary artists Lori Blondeau, Larry McNeill, Kent Monkman, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson, Jeff Thomas, Jackie Traverse, and Hulleah J. Tsinhahjinnie have been brought together with historic representations of Esther Deer, or Princess White Deer as she was known, and Pauline Johnson as well as Molly Spotted Elk, to show an extended engagement of Aboriginal peoples with the camera.

Through this mixing of past and present Aboriginal performers for the camera, I want to show how the concerns of modern depictions done by Aboriginal artists are related to those of Aboriginal peoples in the past. I wish to grant both a measure of agency when dealing with the camera. At first glance, there appears to be an obvious difference between past and present depictions; in terms of the latter, it is the Aboriginal artist who controls the camera. However, although this fact is representative of the strides Aboriginal people have made in self-determination over the past century, I also want to consider how historic depictions communicate personal concerns. While Aboriginal people in the nineteenth and early twentieth century did not, for the most part, own cameras, they were not ignorant of photography and its consequences. Moreover, the fact that another culture used photography to depict Native life and values in its own terms does not preclude the very real possibility that in some cases the Aboriginal subject was an active participant in the session and portrayed aspects of his or her values through the final image.

Looking back at historic photographs, one of their most oppressive aspects is their portrayal of Aboriginal life through stereotypes. Such depictions confirm how much culture, in this case that of the colonizers, shapes pictorial conventions especially in terms of women, minority groups, and Aboriginal peoples. The challenge is to contest stereotypes, and redefine one’s own identity and role from one’s own perspective. In the case of Aboriginal artists, this also means addressing an extended and complex history of subjugation through photographic imagery.

The history of Aboriginal stereotypes is long and complex, beginning with the early contact period. For my purposes, what is of particular importance is the relation of the camera to the broader economic, cultural, and social factors underlying what can now be termed an entertainment industry founded on myths of the “frontier” and “Wild West,” and how Aboriginal life and values became caught up in various types of spectacles. By the late nineteenth-century, with the last of the Indian Wars behind them, the non-Aboriginal public was curious about what remained of the Indian way of life. Exhibitions were created to demonstrate what was thought to be a quickly disappearing existence. Instead of venturing into remote areas to take pictures of Aboriginals, as
previous photographers had done, both commercial photographers and the general public thought they could experience and photograph Aboriginal life through simulation in displays and exhibitions. These racist characterizations of the Aboriginal as a noble savage and murderous villain persisted, often played out in dramas about famous battles, such as the Little Bighorn. Yet, inadvertently, such exhibitions provided opportunities for Aboriginals; more and more began taking part in dramas and “re-enactments,” either because it was their only means of survival or, in the case of renegade warriors such as Sitting Bull and Geronimo, a condition of their prison sentences. The relation between expositions, the midway, the Wild West shows, and modern day powwows is worthy of investigation as Aboriginal peoples, throughout the twentieth century, gradually took command of the public arena to express more complex and private notions of Aboriginal life.

One way of discussing Aboriginal performance in this early period, as it was directed to both the public and the camera, is to consider how performers manipulated their largely non-Aboriginal audience’s expectation of Indianness. This strategy allowed them to communicate their ambiguous position of engaging with modernity while safeguarding aspects of their traditions and heritage. For example, certain writers have argued that the Mohawk performer and poet Pauline Johnson was very aware of her largely middle class white audience's expectations of Indianness. In order to deal with the sometimes contradictory identity expectations such a position in her community demanded, Johnson learned to take on multiple roles; she could just as easily play the Indian Princess as the “earnest member of the Church of England.” Johnson had little use for a singular identity. Rather, in her public and private life, she had the ability to combine a number of cultural expressions and expectations, and by so doing, demonstrates how individual identity is comprised of multiple, and sometimes inconsistent and contradictory subject-positions.

What is perhaps even more critical is that Johnson’s mixed heritage placed her in an ambiguous relation to the Mohawk community. Johnson, who was born and grew up in the Six Nations territory, was of mixed race and cultural heritage. Her mother, Emily Susanna Howells was born into a well-established British family. Her father George Johnson was a key figure at Six Nations due to his mother’s position as the hereditary clan mother of the Wolf Clan. Yet, Johnson maintained a difficult position vis-à-vis the Aboriginal community. Although she took the name of Tekahionwake, the name of her grandfather, it appears that she did not legitimately receive this name according to Mohawk custom. Her family history indicates that they had distanced themselves from Iroquois culture, and thus naming ceremonies. Even though Johnson was an advocate of Aboriginal rights, the majority of her poems do not address political struggle; rather they engage with common themes of late 19th century Canadian literature such as nature and canoeing. While Johnson’s Indianness, combined with her choice of this type of subject matter, supported Anglo-European stereotypes of the so-called “innate” link of Aboriginal peoples with nature, it can also be argued that this depiction was truthful to Johnson’s circumstances; she was a person in-between cultures, and attempted to articulate aspects of her condition through the filters of colonized identity.

The life and career of Pauline Johnson is useful for examining how the processes of racism and oppression become articulated through typecasting and stereotypes. She also provides an example of how individuals attempted to gain agency within such constraints. Another Aboriginal performer who dealt with much these same issues was Esther Deer who performed under the name of Princess White Deer between the 1890s and mid 1930s. Deer, a Mohawk from Kahnawake combined both aspects of modern dance and Aboriginal costume and customs to create a complex statement about her circumstances as a modern Aboriginal woman. Rather than disparaging Esther Deer for adopting various Aboriginal stereotypes in her performances, I believe we should look closely at how she created a complex statement about her particular circumstances expressing, again, her position in-between modern and traditional cultures.

As a renowned Aboriginal dancer, Deer travelled extensively to Europe, South Africa, and Russia. In the United States, she became part of the famous Ziegfeld Follies troupe, creating dance routines that combined aspects of Aboriginal tradition with new music forms, such as jazz. That she was very aware of her ability to transition from rural reservation to modern urban life is evidenced in a
performance she created and performed in 1925 titled "From Wigwam to White Lights." Deer was extremely proficient at expressing and subverting stereotypes, moving adeptly between her roles of Indian maid, Iroquois ambassador, American patriot, and twenties flapper.

Molly Spotted Elk, or Molly Nelson Dellis (1903-1977), was a Penobscot from Maine. At the young age of fourteen, she joined a vaudeville troupe and traveled throughout New England, pausing at times to return home and continue her education. In 1924, she attended classes at the University of Pennsylvania, studying anthropology and English literature. A year later, she joined the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Wild West show. Throughout the twenties she danced in New York City, San Antonio, Chicago, and, in 1928, met William Douglas Burden, a filmmaker who hired her for his film "The Silent Enemy." Filmed entirely in northern Ontario, with an all-Aboriginal cast, the silent film depicts Ojibwa struggling through a winter under the constant threat of starvation. In 1931, Molly joined the United States Indian Band, a group that performed as part of the American component of the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, France. Although these expositions were extremely racist, promoting the colonizer's so-called "superior" culture over those of others, Molly understood her position well, and worked it to her advantage. After the exposition, she remained in Paris to work independently. She continued to develop her dancing style using modernist techniques and frequented Parisian artistic and intellectual gatherings. Her self-awareness is evidenced in her diary where she maintained a sober commentary on her circumstances as an Aboriginal woman in the city of one of the world's greatest colonizers.

BREAKING OPEN THE FRAME

My discussion of historic photographs shows their political basis and how individuals could use their imagistic space to display a number of cultural issues. In this way, the photograph is both unfixed and mutable in its meaning; it can communicate a variety of messages depending on who is looking and for what reasons. The legacy of historical depictions of Aboriginal peoples continues to inform the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists, both directly and indirectly. As Marcia Crosby has stated, "Every Native person who images themselves has these histories in their image, whether intentional or not." For Jimmie Durham, historic photographs are significant not only with respect to his own situation as a contemporary Aboriginal person, but from the point of view of his predecessors. He notes that images taken in the past are of people long gone. Moreover, for Durham, the idea that the photograph has "claimed" its subject, and somehow "frozen" them in the past is "understandable." However, Duram argues that photographs are open to other interpretations, stating that:

Geronimo, as an Indian "photographic subject," blew out the windows. On his own, he redefined the concept of photographs of American Indians. At least he did so as far as he could, concerning pictures of himself, which are so ubiquitous that he must have sought "photo opportunities," as eagerly as the photographers. Yet even when he was "posed" by the men behind the camera, he seems to have destroyed the pose and created his own stance. In every image he looks through the camera at the viewer, seriously, intently, with a specific message. Geronimo uses the photograph to "get at" those people who imagine themselves as the "audience" of his struggles. He seems to be trying to see us. He is demanding to be seen on his own terms.

To speak from Geronimo's point of view is not to deny the power relations and their consequences at play in his image. Nor is it a means to assuage guilt or colour history in tones more flattering to the colonizers. Rather, it is a way to address the subject as a thinking active being and to open up the image to new stories and other interpretive prospects. It allows the subject to breathe again for us in the present.

Rosalie Favell
Curator
EXHIBITION
Friday 21 January – Friday 04 March 2011

CURATORIAL LECTURE in conjunction with Focal Point, A Lecture Series
Thursday 20 January 7PM @ Aqua Books, 274 Garry Street

OPENING RECEPTION
Friday 21 January 7PM

ARTIST TALK WITH JACKIE TRAVERSE
Saturday 19 February 3PM @ PLATFORM

ENDNOTES
1. This text is drawn from my thesis proposal, and research done for the doctoral program in The Institute of Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture at Carleton University, Ottawa.

2. My inquiries are indebted to a number of researchers and writers, in particular Jeff Thomas. Thomas' investigations into historic imagery indicate the numerous interpretations that can be brought to the photograph. In projects such as "Conversations with Edward S. Curtis," he has reactivated and animated the figure of Curtis, and the subjects he photographed, in order to explore the relevance of his imagery to modern Aboriginal life. His exhibition "Emergence From the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives" (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 22 October 1999-6 January 2002) also used historical depictions as a way to articulate the past in terms of the needs of the present. As Thomas has said, the "historical image is [a] catalyst for telling new stories, stories that deal with the contemporary world that we are a part of" (Richard Hill, Jeff Thomas: A Study in Indian-ness [Toronto: Gallery 44 Centre for the Arts, 2005], 11). Thomas places great emphasis on story telling; he understands image and story as "processes of knowledge making" (Ibid., 18). History is not "objective facts strung out in a convenient chronology; rather it is a web of stories and images that are spun everywhere from the family to the state" (Ibid., 18-19).


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 37.
