

**Imagining Drumbytes and Logging in Powwows:  
Exploring the Production of Community in Canadian-Based  
Aboriginal New Media Art**

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This paper explores Canadian-based Aboriginal new media art's production of community. Aboriginal new media art is a network of artists, practices and institutions involved in the making and distribution of online artworks. Drawing on Howard Becker's notion of "art world" and Raymond Williams' concept of "lived form," I develop a theoretical frame to study the production of community within and beyond the artwork. This framework is not only useful to map an almost unknown chapter in the history of Aboriginal art in Canada, but serves to investigate the relationship between sociocultural identities before and after cultural production. To this end, I will focus on two moments of over sixteen years of Aboriginal new media art production in Canada: the imagination of the *Native Net* and the launch and development of *CyberPowWow*.

Cet article étudie une production artistique communautaire du réseau canadien "Aboriginal new media art." C'est un réseau regroupant des artistes aborigènes, des pratiques et des institutions, qui réalise et diffuse de l'art en ligne. Je m'inspire de Howard Becker et de sa notion de "art world," ainsi que de Raymond Williams et de son concept de "lived form." À partir de là, je développe un cadre théorique qui me permet d'étudier la production communautaire au sein même du travail artistique, et aussi de l'extérieur. Ce

cadre théorique est utile pour documenter un chapitre méconnu de l'histoire de l'art aborigène au Canada. Il se prête aussi aux recherches sur les rapports entre identités socioculturelles, que l'on se place avant ou après la production culturelle. À cette fin, je me concentrerai sur deux moments sélectionnés dans une période de seize ans d'art mis en ligne par des artistes aborigènes au Canada: il s'agit de l'invention du *Native Net* et du lancement et développement de *CyberPowWow*.

For more than sixteen years, Canadian-based Aboriginal new media artists have imagined, discussed and produced community. This imagination involves both the translation of tradition, stories and collective experiences online and a network of cooperation among producers, curators, resources, critics and audiences that gather around works and production facilities. However, while Aboriginal new media artists have claimed to build Aboriginal territories and community online in various manifestos and essays, little has been said about the network of offline practices, people, discourses and material resources that sustain the production of community online.<sup>1</sup> This paper intends to fill that void by exploring the relationship between community practices within and beyond the artwork and before, during and after cultural production.

Aboriginal new media art produces community both online and offline. The goal of this paper is to explore this production by focusing on two landmark events in the history of Aboriginal new media art in Canada: the imagination of the *Native Net*, a nation-wide computer based multimedia communication network, and the development of *CyberPowWow*, an online gallery and chat room produced by the Aboriginal collective *Nation to Nation*. These events illustrate the complex network of actors, resources and discourses involved in what Georgina Born deems the “projection of socio cultural positioning through strategies of production.”<sup>2</sup> This paper argues

<sup>1</sup> The most important documentation about Aboriginal new media art in Canada is the publication *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*. The book –published by The Banff Centre’s Walter Phillips Gallery, the Art Gallery of Hamilton and the Indigenous Media Arts Group, introduces essays by well-known Aboriginal new media art practitioners such as Maskegon-Iskwew and Steven Loft.

<sup>2</sup> Georgina Born, “Music and the Representation/Articulation of Sociocultural Identities,” in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation*

that the cultural production of collective sociocultural identities, in this case “community,” is an active process that occurs in and beyond the artwork, and engages discursive strategies as much as people and material resources. The projection that Born refers to then is different from a passive reflection of prior sociocultural identities. In fact, as I discuss in this paper, over more than sixteen years of ephemeral interventions, Aboriginal new media art has not only generated a series of technological strategies and a repertoire of images to represent community online, but also has triggered routines of production and affective alliances among artists, curators, critics, funding bodies and cultural forms. These alliances would prove crucial in the survival of the Aboriginal new media art world.

At a theoretical level, this paper proposes to work through two well-known concepts associated with the sociological study of cultural production: “art world” and “lived form.” Howard Becker defines an “art world” as “the network of people whose cooperative activity organized via the joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of artworks that the art world is noted for.”<sup>3</sup> Art worlds encompass people, conventions, discourses and works of art. The term allows for the mapping of symbolic and material relationships between people, conventions and resources that are engaged in the making, reception and production of art. However, in the context of this paper, Becker’s notion is restrictive because it does not sufficiently explore how artworks may produce community at a semiotic level. Raymond Williams’ “lived form,” on the other hand, counters this limitation by proposing the work of art as “a specific cultural technology

*in Music*, edited by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), ix.

and a specific form of practical consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> “Lived forms” preserve the material and semiotic specificity of the work of art while highlighting its social function. The unorthodox combination of these two theoretical positions is articulated here to explore community-building within and around the work of art.

### **The Beginning of the Aboriginal New Media Art World:**

#### **The Imagination of the *Native Net***

In April of 1991, a group of Aboriginal filmmakers, media artists and activists formed the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance during the “New Visions” Canadian Aboriginal Film and Video Makers Symposium in Edmonton, Alberta. The goal was to

provide support to individual Aboriginal media artists and to regional Aboriginal media arts organizations in their pursuit of self-determined opportunities to reclaim our histories and reinforce the health of our cultural expressions for the future of the media arts.<sup>5</sup>

Since its inception, the Alliance considered “self-government in the arts” its primary concern, making evident its view of Aboriginal media art as an artistic practice and a means toward social action. To this end, it sought the development of venues and resources for Aboriginal artists and the recognition of the non-Aboriginal media arts community through workshops, festivals and collaborations with alternative and mainstream art institutions.<sup>6</sup> The Alliance did not rely on a hierarchical structure but was organized, in the

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 140.

<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, “Native Net: Its National Significance,” Working paper. The Banff Centre Archive, Banff, Alta., February 9, 1994, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

words of Aboriginal filmmaker Loretta Todd, as “a circle of people who really believe in the principle of collective action, who really have a relationship to their community, who want to preserve the power of the storyteller.”<sup>7</sup> In 1993, the Alliance partnered with the Banff Centre for the Arts, in consultation with Todd and thanks to the mediation of Sara Diamond, the Centre’s Television and Video Program director at the time. The partnership provided the Alliance with access to infrastructure, resources and a visible, physical location. Apart from organizing gatherings and workshops in Banff, the Alliance established a series of media arts organizations in the Prairies, British Columbia and Ontario that lasted throughout the 1990s. Another important contribution of the Alliance and the Banff Centre partnership was the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Program at the Banff Centre, which today supports the professional development of Aboriginal artists in a wide range of disciplines.

The development of a *Native Net*, a multimedia telecommunications network, became an Alliance priority in 1993, when the Banff Centre’s New Media Research Program committed resources and staff to set up and develop the project.<sup>8</sup> The primary role of the *Native Net* would be to serve as a communication tool to strengthen the Aboriginal media industry by providing users with a bulletin board and a distribution system (BBS).<sup>9</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> Loretta Todd as cited in Faye Ginsburg, “Resources of Hope: Learning from the Local in a Transnational Era,” in *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World*, edited by Claire Smith and Graeme K. Ward (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>8</sup> The Banff Centre began the research and development of artistic applications of virtual reality and multimedia in 1991. With the support of the Canadian Workplace Automation Research Centre, it developed a five-year strategic plan to investigate digital multimedia (i.e. virtual reality, networked communication, digital video and audio). See The Banff New Media Institute, “Banff New Media Institute: New Media Research 1993,” The Banff Centre. [http://www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/programs/archives/pre-1995?New\\_Me](http://www.banffcentre.ca/bnmi/programs/archives/pre-1995?New_Me).

<sup>9</sup> Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, “Native Net,” 2.

network envisioned would offer three instruments to the community: a skills bank, email and a computer-based catalogue. The skills bank would function as a job bank, connecting producers with artists, technicians and resources, while the email service would allow users to communicate with each other. The digital catalogue was conceived as a database of artworks and critical material. Finally, the “distribution system” was the network’s ability to transmit multimedia content to other Aboriginal media professionals and the Aboriginal community at large. Consistent with the rhetoric that framed other Aboriginal new media initiatives, the Alliance presented the *Native Net* as an instrument for community development: “The *Native Net* will play an important role in stimulating professional and economic development for both isolated and urban Aboriginal cultural communities.”<sup>10</sup> This community development model would not only inform future projects such as *CyberPowWow*, but would privilege collaboration as the main strategy of production of the future Aboriginal new media art world.

The community development framework was not limited to the discursive level. The imagination of the *Native Net* soon inspired a series of partnerships and working alliances that became the basis of the Aboriginal new media art world. These alliances emerged during the planning phase of the project. For example, from January 1993 to the organization of the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering in March 1994, the Alliance worked closely with the En’owkin Centre and the First Nations Technical Institute in the design of a network that could meet the needs of the Aboriginal arts community.<sup>11</sup> Alliance members were also in consultation with the Aboriginal media arts community and the Banff Centre for the Arts to establish priorities

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Murray Jurak, “Native Net” (Banff New Media Institute, April, 1993).

and resolve technical difficulties. Gary Trujillo, founder and main moderator of an American-based *Native Net*, and George Baldwin, a social psychologist who had investigated networking activities among Aboriginal communities also in the U.S., became advisors of the Alliance during this planning phase.

From 1993 to 1994, the main concerns of the Alliance were technical (e.g. system requirements, structural model, access), financial (e.g. funding sources and models) and cultural (e.g. the development of a technical model that respected Aboriginal values and priorities). Facing the strains of geographical distance and budget restrictions, the Alliance counted on the spontaneous collaboration of members via email.<sup>12</sup> However, it soon became evident that to enter the production phase they would need to gather artists, financial supporters and technical advisors at the Banff Centre.

In 1994, the Alliance was ready to host a think-tank to discuss the shape of the network. Todd, Diamond and the Alliance runner, Aboriginal media artist Marjorie Beaucage, became crucial facilitators of the event. In preparation for the gathering, the Alliance commissioned Aboriginal filmmaker Murray Jurak to report on the *Native Net* and, in consultation with Aboriginal media producers, to evaluate the benefits of telecommunications to the Aboriginal media arts community. Jurak's report reveals not just how the community envisioned the project, but how the planning of the *Native Net* helped in normalizing a view of the Internet as an instrument for community development that would affect future Aboriginal new media art practices during the 1990s. This view of the Internet was already popular among Aboriginal media and new media initiatives and was also the federal government's position vis-à-vis new media. Jurak's report concluded that

<sup>12</sup> These communication exchanges were often taking place on the Native-L list supported by Trujillo's *NativeNet* project.



there was a need for a “rapid, user friendly, non-linear communication system.”<sup>13</sup> It was still undecided, though, whether the *Native Net* would be organized around a central computer or as a series of nodes connected to the Internet. It also identified technical training as a major consideration.

According to the report, the benefits of the BBS in relation to print media, which until then was the preferred method to distribute information within and beyond the Aboriginal media arts community, were the creation and promotion of employment, the transfer of training and skills, efficiency and cost-effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> These benefits seemed to be a natural consequence of adopting a technology assumed to enhance communication. Given the “evident” advantages of the new medium, the ambitious plan of the Alliance was to “propel the network to prominent position within the industry by fall 1995.”<sup>15</sup> To this end they needed to bring on board as many Aboriginal cultural centres, media and production facilities, and federal and provincial cultural officers as possible. The Banff Centre was an ideal partner in this respect, given its reputation as a respected research facility and cultural engine. This partnership with the Banff Centre would be significant given the central role played by the centre and Diamond in future projects such as *CyberPowWow*. Jurak also estimated that the cost of setting up and developing the network to meet the Alliance’s goal was \$250,000, and included marketing activities, product development, training, employment, programming and distribution. In terms of the audience that the network could target, the report considered Aboriginal students as primary potential users, followed by young professionals and media executives. In order to

<sup>13</sup> Jurak, “Native Net,” 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 9.

serve Native students, the Alliance decided to bring institutions on board that already had Internet connections; these included Native friendship centres, Native employment centres, the National Film Board, band offices, the Inuit Broadcast Corporation, the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) and artist-run centres. Some of these institutions had shown interest in participating in the *Native Net* and in training Aboriginal media producers in the use of BBS, and would send representatives to the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering.<sup>16</sup>

The connection between the community development model and the emergence of a network of cooperation among artists, institutions and technical advisors is not accidental. It demonstrates the interdependence of the *Native Net* as a lived form and the network of cooperation that slowly emerged around it and would become the basis of the future Aboriginal new media art world. By 1994, the Alliance already had a solid network of artists, curators and institutions ready to discuss the *Native Net*. In March of that same year, it hosted a three-day think-tank at the Banff Centre. The gathering, suggestively entitled “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes,” took place from March 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>, and brought together Aboriginal filmmakers, media producers, artists, academics and technical experts. Aboriginal performance and multimedia artist Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew, a central figure in the future Aboriginal new media art field, led the event. In typical Banff Centre fashion, the gathering combined presentations, brainstorming sessions and a performance/chat session with participants of the conference “Seduced and Abandoned: The Body in the Virtual World,” which was taking place at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, England. Besides the actual

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 18.

performance, which focused on the nature of virtuality and the Internet's potential to overcome material boundaries, the chat event permitted Aboriginal artists to explore the communication and artistic potential of online "live" telecommunication.

The *Native Net* proposed by the Alliance never fully materialized, at least not in the way it was planned and proposed in the early 1990s.<sup>17</sup> The Aboriginal media arts community's suspicion toward the Internet is only one of the reasons why the Alliance's plans were halted. Some members of the Aboriginal media arts community were also skeptical about the increasing commercialization of the Internet. By 1994, the convergence of grassroots networks and commercial online systems and the commercialization of applications such as BBS and email were *faits accomplis*. Despite the government's interest in connecting Aboriginal communities and the Alliance's goal of becoming the network provider, the commercial model of the Internet was at odds with a vision of the network as a community development tool. In fact, Aboriginal new media projects have always required funding incentives to succeed, given Aboriginal communities' lack of infrastructure and know-how, and service providers' reticence to invest in low profit areas.

However, as a lived form, the *Native Net* permitted the materialization of an emergent Aboriginal new media art world by providing artists with forms and strategies to use the Internet for communication and artistic purposes such as the BBS system, email and the notion of a multimedia digital database. Since 1990, some Native people in the U.S were already connected to a *NativeNet* and enjoyed the benefits of the BBS system. This Net

<sup>17</sup> Maskegon-Iskwew would set up and develop a drumbytes network almost ten years after the gathering with significant technological and conceptual modifications. The new network was called *Drumbytes.org*.

supported grassroots communication and was framed as a communication and information tool.<sup>18</sup> Other experiments in online networking in Canada were the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres' BBS, the Montreal-based BBS "The Igloo Station," and within the arts community, collaborative multimedia networks in Toronto (Matrix) and Vancouver (ANIMA).<sup>19</sup> While important models, these networks fulfilled only in part the Alliance's expectations. They were primarily local and text-based. However, the imagination of the *Native Net* was not a passive translation of well-known strategies. It was also a departure from these models. It was to be able to support multimedia content, as in the cases of Matrix and ANIMA, while still being committed to Aboriginal needs and worldviews. The translation of traditional knowledge and worldviews would become a central concern in future Aboriginal new media art projects.

The imagination of the *Native Net* proved to be crucial to the shaping of the future Aboriginal new media art world. It not only presented the Internet as a communication development tool, and provided Aboriginal artists with different strategies to create an Aboriginal space online, but also brought together a group of Aboriginal artists and curators, and connected them to funders and production facilities. This network of cooperation formed around

<sup>18</sup> Based on the Internet, *NativeNet* was first accessible to academics, students and university staff that enjoyed the benefits of an Internet connection. Lately, Gary Trujillo, founder and operator of the Net, and Peter d'Errico, professor at the Legal Studies Department, University of Massachusetts and involved in American Indian rights cases, began working on extending the Net to Native peoples and forming a community of Native peoples prepared to set up the system in remote communities. Trujillo, "From Drum Beats to Drum Bytes Conference."

<sup>19</sup> Accessible through a dial-up modem, the BBS system gained popularity between the 1980s and early 1990s as a software that permitted the sharing of messages or files on a network. With the advent of the Internet and the organization of content in webpages, the BBS lost popularity even when web-based versions were developed.

the *Native Net* would survive the Alliance's own partnership with the Banff Centre, dissolved six years later. The gathering also moved the Aboriginal arts community to consider the new medium as a tool and a space that Aboriginal people should not just use but also make their own.

### ***CyberPowWow: The Performance of Community Online***

In 1997, First Nations artists Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Ryan Rice and Eric Robertson launched *CyberPowWow*, an online gallery and chat room dedicated to the exhibition and discussion of Aboriginal contemporary art. Rice, Fragnito and Robertson had met in Montreal, while they were students of Fine Arts at Concordia University. The trio had formed the collective *Nation to Nation* only three years before the birth of *CyberPowWow*, with the specific goal of creating new exhibition venues for young Aboriginal artists, who were on the fringes of the artistic mainstream and of the established Aboriginal arts community. Fragnito, exposed to new media technology at Oboro, a new media centre in Montreal, introduced the idea of *CyberPowWow* to the group as a logical continuation of the community events that the group had been organizing since 1994.<sup>20</sup> The collective was committed to breaking away from the constraints of the gallery system, and at the time the Internet seemed a low cost medium through which to pursue that goal.

By 1997, the Internet had become a popular medium, a paradigm of the new global economy, and the rhetorical centrepiece of a digital utopianism that had quickly spread throughout the media. This technological utopian vision, fuelled by programmers, cultural gurus and lobbyists of Silicon Valley, presented the Internet as a technology that could fulfill the dreams of the old

<sup>20</sup> Some of these are *A Celebration of Art* (1994), *Art Bingo* (1994) and *Native Love* (1995).

new communalists as well as the needs of the economic technocracy which had emerged in the late 1980s. This vision, popularized in books such as *The Virtual Community: Homesteading at the Electronic Frontier*, and magazines such as *Wired* or *Mondo 2000*, saw the Internet as a space—a “cyberspace”—where a communion of minds could finally be realized.<sup>21</sup> In cyberspace, community would not be restricted by distance or differences in race and gender. Cyberspace had become an authentic *tabula rasa* where historical differences were systematically downplayed.

Though geographically and intellectually far from these digital utopias, the artists behind *CyberPowWow* were not indifferent to the popular imagery that surrounded the Internet. The image of the Internet as a social space, for example, proved to be particularly useful in the construction of an imagined locality. *Nation to Nation* did not have an institutional space where work could be permanently displayed or artists could gather and discuss the concerns of the community. Until 1997, the group had had a nomadic life, moving from event to event. The arrival of *CyberPowWow* would slowly change these dynamics.

The possibility of creating a gathering space online would gradually transform the relations of production and reproduction that were already in place since the imagination of the *Native Net* and that revolved around the

<sup>21</sup> What made the cyberlibertarian discourse influential at a time when the Internet was being widely adopted was the lack of a coherent counter discourse. According to David Silver, cyberculture studies only reached a certain maturity in the late 90s, once the Internet lost part of its novelty. Until then, the approach to cyberculture had been largely descriptive, simplistic and celebratory. Another factor that contributed to its influence was cyberlibertarians’ easy access to media and political and economic spheres. In fact, the movement counted amongst its allies the then American vice president Al Gore. See David Silver, “Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards,” in *Cybercultures: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies. Volume II: Thinking & Doing Cyberculture*, edited by David Bell (London and New York: Routledge), 61.

Internet as a “focal thing.” According to Albert Borgmann, focal things are meant to produce practices that instill a sense of community.<sup>22</sup> The possibility of collaborating online would weaken, with time, the influence of production centres such as the Banff Centre or Oboro, while facilitating artistic exchanges with artists in the U.S. and Australia. In terms of cultural reproduction, the creation of online galleries would also permit the distribution of online works outside the circuit of mainstream museums and galleries. These changes in relations of production and reproduction should be understood as affecting and responding to changes in Aboriginal new media art practices and lived forms.

The first version of *CyberPowWow*, presented in two chat events at Oboro and Circle Vision Arts Corporation, depended on the free chat application called *The Palace*. A second version, *CyberPowWow 2*, sought further independence by developing its own version of the application. Eight Aboriginal artists were invited to design avatars and customize the chat space: Lori Blondeau, Sheryl Kootenyahoo, Bradlee LaRocque, Maskegon-Iskwew, Archer Pechawis, Melanie Printup Hope, Edward Poitras and Rice. A third development of the project, *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow*, centered on issues of Aboriginal digital aesthetics and encouraged the participation of Aboriginal artists from Australia and the U.S., as well as non-Native artists, in the design of avatars and web-based works. A final version issued in 2004, *CPW04 Unnatural Resources*, discussed the meaning and feasibility of an Aboriginal territory online.

*CyberPowWow* was a project with many interactive layers. The first layer, the website, followed the conventions of a traditional art gallery: a white

<sup>22</sup> Darin Barney, “The Vanishing Table,” in *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*, edited by Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 43.

background and a series of icons representing works and texts, carefully lined up. This careful arrangement was organized as a hypertext: each icon led the viewer to either a work or a curatorial text. The logo of the project, three teepees connected with a wire on top of the earth and the legend “An Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace,” was always visible, at the top of the page. Within the complex architecture of the project, this first layer was just the point of entry. In fact, it was only after downloading *The Palace* that the viewer could visit the actual online gallery. *CyberPowWow*’s gallery also followed the spatial conventions of traditional galleries. It had an entry hall, where visitors took up an avatar, followed by a series of rooms where web-based work was showcased. Typically, Aboriginal artists were invited to design avatars and environments that could be experienced by viewers that joined the chat. The artists invited did not always work with the Internet, though with time, many of the participants of *CyberPowWow* (i.e. Fragnito, Ryan Johnston, Jason Lewis, Pechawis and Buffy Saint-Marie) became associated with the Aboriginal new media art world. During the chat events these guest artists guided viewers through the shows, and it was not uncommon to take in discussions about Aboriginal art and contemporary art in general. The rest of the time, the gallery was open to visitors who, after having downloaded the application, could browse the works and interact with other occasional visitors.

Fragnito discovered *The Palace* at a *Studio XX Wired Women/ Femmes* evening in 1996. The software could be downloaded for free, and permitted the creation of a private chat environment with relative ease. The use of the software was a far cry from the rather rudimentary knowledge that most participants had. Indeed, while Fragnito envisioned the chat as an opportunity to discuss art, most participants regarded the chat event as a



chance to explore an unknown medium and to talk to friends. In 1998, however, *The Palace* was no longer supported and Fragnito had to look for ways of resuscitating a version of *The Palace* that did not depend on the main provider. After many attempts to recreate *The Palace* by using different software, Fragnito contacted one of *The Palace's* creators, who provided her with enough tools and information to keep the software running.

While the online gallery remained open throughout the year, most interaction occurred during *CyberPowWow's* biennial chat events. These events, or powwows, were celebrated in artist-run centres and galleries, where participants were invited to view new digital work showcased on the website and to chat with other Native artists and audiences. Once in the gallery, more savvy participants taught other visitors how to browse the Internet and join the chat. This on-site collaboration was one of *CyberPowWow's* many strategies to instill a sense of community among participants. The idea of calling these events 'powwows', instead of just 'openings', shows the project's debt to pan-Indian imaginations of tradition and its orientation towards community building.<sup>23</sup> The last of these powwows took place in May of 2004, and shortly after that *CyberPowWow* ceased to exist, remaining only as a database of Aboriginal new media art. Technical difficulties, lack of funding and the enormous time and effort that the project required from its main operator, Fragnito, are all factors that ultimately brought it to an end.

The story of *CyberPowWow* illustrates the difficulties faced by any emerging art world. For Becker, the success of an art world depends on the

<sup>23</sup> Pan-Indianism proposes constructed Aboriginal culture beyond national and tribal differences.

mobilization of people and resources.<sup>24</sup> *CyberPowWow* faced know-how and funding restrictions that are not unusual in other Aboriginal new media art projects. The Internet had barely reached remote Aboriginal communities at the time, and the majority of Aboriginal peoples in urban areas only had online access at public terminals. Added to this restriction is the fact that *CyberPowWow's* artistic nature might have contributed to alienate those outside the urban arts community. Despite the use of new media, its audience did not vary much from the one that followed *Nation to Nation's* previous events. Most online interaction took place in the context of *CyberPowWow's* openings. These two-day events, hosted in art galleries, drew an urban audience interested in contemporary Aboriginal art and a few outsiders curious about the technology.<sup>25</sup> While the network of participants that joined *CyberPowWow* extended from Charlottetown to Montreal, the spread of the network was less connected to the use of new media than to the support the project received from the artist-run centre scene.<sup>26</sup> In effect, apart from the early collaboration with Circle Vision and Oboro, *CyberPowWow* would receive support from institutions such as the Banff Centre and Tribe Inc., in Saskatoon.

The project was nevertheless successful at instilling a sense of togetherness online, even if it never evolved into a permanent space, an

<sup>24</sup> "To understand the birth of new art worlds, then, we need to understand, not the genesis of innovations, but rather the process of mobilizing people to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis." Becker, *Art Worlds*, 310-311.

<sup>25</sup> The difficulty in attracting Aboriginal audiences is a problem of many contemporary Aboriginal artists and curators. The lack of proper measuring techniques also makes difficult the assessment of Aboriginal new media audiences.

<sup>26</sup> In *CPWO4: Unnatural Resources* the network of gathering sites included The Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre, EMedia Gallery in Calgary, Tribe in Saskatoon, Urban Shaman in Winnipeg, InterAccess electronic media arts centre in Toronto, Artengine in Ottawa, Oboro in Montreal, Eyelevel Gallery in Halifax and Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown.

artist-run centre that the community could fully appropriate. As in the “real” powwow, participation was sporadic, often restricted to the actual offline event, when the community had access to computers and was guided in the use of *The Palace* application. Funding restrictions also limited the scope of the project, forcing *CyberPowWow* to return to a Native-only environment in its final version.

“I had been thinking a lot at that time about Native artists and communities and how Native artists were sort of really flung across,” Fragnito recalled at a CRUMB Seminar in 2001.<sup>27</sup> The idea of building up an Aboriginal space online where artists could meet and show their work was a new take on an issue that had motivated the imagination of the *Native Net*: the lack of Aboriginal arts venues. However, what distinguished *CyberPowWow* from previous projects such as the *Native Net* was its understanding of the Internet as a territory that could be claimed and appropriated by the community, as the project’s identification as an “Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace” suggests. The imagination of cyberspace as a social space, and the community as online performance model that evolved from it, would have a lasting influence on the Aboriginal new media art world and future Aboriginal new media art projects.

Williams observes that lived forms materialize the practical consciousness of a period and those engaged in the making of the work of art. *CyberPowWow*’s “Aboriginally determined territory” appropriated the digital utopian representation of the Internet as a “frontier” and as a “knowledge space” that were widely available in the mid-1990s. In fact, *Nation to Nation* proposed to conquer and settle in cyberspace in line with the most radical

<sup>27</sup> Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, “Distribution,” (Ottawa: Art Gallery of Ottawa, 2001).

cyberlibertarian rhetoric. The engagement with the discourses surrounding the Internet became more pronounced in *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow* and *CPW04 Unnatural Resources*. By this time, Fragnito was the project's sole operator and producer. The curator's interest in technology, the incorporation of Aboriginal artists such as Pechawis, Lewis, Maskegon-Iskwew and Johnston, who were already working with new media, and the support of Diamond and the Banff Centre, were all factors that facilitated the project's engagement with cyberculture.<sup>28</sup>

In the first *CyberPowWow*, references to the "conquest" of cyberspace and the frontier experience are subtle. The most evident allusion, apart from the website's logo, is the title of Rice's work, "We come in peace." The general mood is exploratory, even cautious, as in Audra Simpson's "Lola BigBear, Love and the Net," a piece about the risks—and potential—of online anonymity.<sup>29</sup> Despite this timid approach, the overall image of the Internet is positive. The Internet is regarded as "the latest story-telling medium,"<sup>30</sup> a powerful cultural repository and the home of a new pan-Indian community:

Even though we know that First Nations always had contact with one another, our communities until recently, were isolated by a certain regionalism, one that was perceived as much as it was physical, because, I think, in our collective mind we felt restricted by the reservation system. The events of 1990 (widely known as the Mohawk Crisis) helped to change that [...]. Since then, a new community has

<sup>28</sup> Ryan Johnston is a Banff-based designer who collaborated with Fragnito and L'Hirondelle. Archer Pechawis is a curator, performance and new media artist. Jason Lewis is a digital artist and assistant professor in the department of Digital Image/Sound and the Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal.

<sup>29</sup> Audra Simpson is a Mohawk anthropologist. See Audra Simpson, "Lola BigBear, Love and the Net," *CyberPowWow* (March 1997), <http://cyberpowwow.net/audrawork.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "CPW: FAQ," *CyberPowWow*, <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/triciawork1.html>.

been forming, one whose membership criteria is self-determined, not imposed by colonialist guidelines. This community doesn't have a territory, because it doesn't need one: it has the infinite expanses of cyberspace.<sup>31</sup>

References to the "frontier" became more obvious in the last two *CyberPowWow*s. In *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow* for instance, the goal was to explore "the space where Native meets non-Native."<sup>32</sup> Historically, this border zone was the frontier, the "site of epic conflict and covert desire," as Pechawis elliptically describes it. In an attempt to subvert the historical implications of the frontier metaphor, Pechawis and Fragnito, CPW 2K's curators, invited Native and non-Native artists to collaborate in the design of the "Aboriginally determined territory." However, despite the celebratory tone of the curatorial essays, this "branching out" was a polemic move on Fragnito's part. At the time, the dialogue between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal art worlds was not usual and seemed to contradict the identity politics of much of the Aboriginal contemporary art scene. Even for Fragnito, "branching out" did not mean the dissolution of the project's Aboriginality. On the contrary, the curator's idea, expressed sometime later in "Five Suggestions for Better Living," was to create opportunities for a more inclusive Aboriginal arts community: "There is strength in numbers. I propose that if you are an Indian and an artist, you are automatically an Indian artist."<sup>33</sup> Fragnito would further explore the idea of extending the

<sup>31</sup> Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "Moccasin Telegraph," *CyberPowWow*. <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/triciawork3.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Archer Pechawis, "Not So Much a Land Claim," *CyberPowWow*. <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/archerweb/index.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Fragnito, "Five Suggestions for Better Living," in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, edited by Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagge (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2002), 232.

definition of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal identity in general in later online projects such as *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century*.

It is only in *CPW04: Unnatural Resources* that the electronic frontier is directly referred to by co-curator Jason Lewis: “If we consider cyberspace to be another frontier undergoing colonization, and if we’re concerned with how that colonization plays out, might we not do well to reflect on the historical course of colonization in this continent?”<sup>34</sup> Lewis’ reference connects the frontier metaphor to the history of colonization in North America. The tone of Lewis’ essay exudes skepticism and an awareness of the politics associated with the image: “By reflecting in the past and seeking to understand how that history shares similar dynamics with the new New World, the exhibition helps ensure that there are no reservations in cyberspace.”<sup>35</sup>

What Lewis adopts from the frontier metaphor, though, is the idea that cyberspace is a *terra nullius*: “Cyberspace has no native population that might contest the notion that it is *terra nullius* and thus subject to control by the first immigrants who might claim it.”<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of *terra nullius* or “empty land” permitted the colonization of the American West by ignoring Aboriginal peoples’ rights to the land under colonization. As such, the doctrine is inseparable from the frontier experience; it is the legal artifice that justified the colonization of Aboriginal land.

Lewis’ ambivalent adoption of the frontier metaphor reveals a critical engagement with digital utopianism. On the one hand, the metaphor permits *CyberPowWow*’s participants to imagine the Internet as a territory that can be “colonized” and profited from by a largely deterritorialized Aboriginal arts community. On the other hand, to avoid falling into the colonial undertone of

<sup>34</sup> Jason Lewis, “Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito,” *CyberPowWow*. [http://www.cyberpowwow.net/cpw04\\_text.html](http://www.cyberpowwow.net/cpw04_text.html).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

the metaphor, *CyberPowWow*'s team imagines cyberspace as *terra nullius* and introduces the project as an Aboriginal solution to the excesses of both pioneers and "rapacious capitalist(s)."<sup>36</sup>

*CyberPowWow*'s critical engagement with digital utopianism also affected how the project imagined community. In "First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed," one of the texts that accompany the *CyberPowWow 2* exhibition, Aboriginal art historian Jolene Rickard regards *CyberPowWow* as a new pan-Aboriginal strategy to move beyond the restrictions of the reserve system: "*CyberPowWow 2* is an odd talisman but nevertheless an indication of how Native people are struggling to subvert the colonial borders of the reservation."<sup>37</sup> For Rickard, the space provided by *CyberPowWow* is home to an increasingly deterritorialized community. However, previous Aboriginal new media art projects such as Maskegon-Iskwew's *Speaking the Language of Spiders* or Cheryl L'Hirondelle's *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* and even the Alliance's *Native Net*, this community does not precede the project; it is the output: "*CyberPowWow 2* is a site set up to create

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

This imagination of cyberspace as *terra nullius* would be later questioned by Fragnito and Lewis in an article published in 2005, a year after the termination of *CyberPowWow*. In this essay, the authors recognized the possibility of a built-in online politics:

Since its beginnings, cyberspace has been imagined as a free and open space, much like the New World has been imagined by the Europeans (...) But if Aboriginal peoples learned one thing from contact, it is the danger of seeing any place as *terra nullius*, even cyberspace. Its foundations were designed with a specific logic, built on a specific form of technology, and first used for specific purposes.

See Jason Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Summer 2005), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Jolene Rickard, "First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared," *Cyber PowWow*. <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/jolenework.html>.

a Native cyber community. We are all part of it.”<sup>38</sup> This “cyber community” presents many of the characteristics identified in popular imaginations of virtual communality. It is a community of interest, constituted primarily by contemporary Aboriginal artists interested in new media. It is also a community of equals, where free expression is nurtured. Finally, it is a community where individuals choose to remain anonymous behind their avatars.

*CyberPowWow's* imagined communality also challenges the virtual community metaphor by proposing offline interaction as necessary to the community's growth and development. In fact, *CyberPowWow* never fully developed as “just” a chat room or online gallery, but depended on the offline openings and gatherings to maintain the online community alive. As Fragnito explains:

The idea that only being on the Internet wasn't good enough. When I first started it I knew that not everybody would know how to use *The Palace* and not everybody would know how to use the World Wide Web or browser. So what I wanted to do is to make sure that people did come together in groups, at real places which have since come to be called “gathering sites,” where they could help each other access the internet; help each other to learn how to use *The Palace*, talk to one another and of course eat food.<sup>39</sup>

In his discussion of art worlds and innovation Becker notes that the fate of innovations depend on technological know-how and access, and on distributors' and audiences' receptivity. *CyberPowWow* is a perfect illustration of these dynamics. It lasted while its main contributors maintained the relations of production and reproduction necessary for its survival. However, *CyberPowWow's* main obstacle throughout its life was the Aboriginal arts

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Fragnito, “Distribution.”



community's ambivalence towards the Internet, already made manifest during the planning stages of the *Native Net*. This ambivalence was a reaction against the increasing commercialization of the medium. Nevertheless, *CyberPowWow* was a crucial step in the consolidation of the Aboriginal new media art world. By embracing the position of the Aboriginal new media artist, artists such as Pechawis, Maskegon-Iskwew, Lewis and Fragnito, already known in the Aboriginal contemporary art world, helped legitimize the emerging scene.

The adoption of the "virtual community" as a strategy for the consolidation and expansion of the Aboriginal arts community contrasts with the community development model prevalent within the emergent Aboriginal new media art world since the imagination of the *Native Net*. *CyberPowWow* imagined community as a product as much as a producer of Aboriginal new media art. This community was constituted not just by Aboriginal artists, but also by non-Native artists and cultural producers who sympathized with Aboriginal artists. While the inclusion of these non-Aboriginal members proved to be controversial, the project revealed the increasing questioning of the identity politics pursued by Aboriginal artists since the 1970s. Similarly, the search of an online territory for a deterritorialized community demonstrates, firstly, the persistent role of land in the imagination of both Aboriginality and Aboriginal community and, secondly, the influence of digital utopianism on the artists and curators involved in *CyberPowWow*. The artists behind the project regarded the "colonization" of the online territory as a necessary step towards the constitution of a virtual community. The imagination of this new "land" was deterritorialized in the sense that it refuted any association with specific reserves. The deterritorialization of land, typical of pan-Indianism, could be easily translated online thanks to the

popularization of the cyberspace metaphor. If the Internet was a territory, it was possible to imagine an “Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace.” Finally, the construction of an online art gallery is consistent with Native artists’ plight for mainstream recognition.

The practice and imagination of community as online performance was an important step in extending the reach of Aboriginal new media art beyond the network of cooperation which emerged during the implementation of the *Native Net*. On the one hand, the celebration of chat events at artist-run centres extended Aboriginal new media art’s exposure beyond the Internet and the Banff Centre to encompass non-Native arts institutions and audiences. On the other hand, the imagination of an online territory provided the emergent Aboriginal new media art scene with a strategy to bypass mainstream art galleries and institutions. It is in this sense that *CyberPowWow* is a lived form that not only mediated already existing needs and discourses, but also facilitated a new imagination of community. The community as online performance model put forward and enacted by *CyberPowWow* continues to affect future practices of production and reproduction in the Aboriginal new media art world.

## Conclusions

The imagination of the *Native Net* and the development of *CyberPowWow* reveal the interdependence of lived forms and the networks of cooperation formed around them. The focus on collaboration, typical of the community development and community as online performance models, produced informal network of artists, curators, organizations and audiences engaged in

the making and reception of Aboriginal new media art. This collaboration took on a variety of forms depending on how Aboriginal practitioners conceptualized and used the Internet. At first, as in the case of the *Native Net*, artists gathered around the Internet to imagine forms of developing this new communal tool. As Becker observes, during this stage in the life of an emerging art world “the circle of cooperation does not go beyond the face-to-face interaction of a local community.”<sup>40</sup> Later, with the popularization of the Internet and digital utopias evident in the development of *CyberPowWow*, Native artists began collaborating online. This shift coincided, and facilitated, a move from a community development model to a community as online performance model.

Virtual communities contributed to bridge the geographical distance that separated artists in the Aboriginal contemporary arts community. In turn, the community as online performance model influenced the creation of online venues such as *CyberPowWow*, where artists and audiences could gather. Online collaboration and virtual territories dedicated to the discussion and exhibition of new media art contributed to, first, the artists’ *esprit de corps*, a sense of shared interests and common goals that would help delineate the boundaries of the Aboriginal new media art world, and, second, the recognition of the projects as art. The rise of the Web 2.0 and its emphasis on social networking would invigorate the community as online performance model, even after the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the decay of digital utopianism.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 314.

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