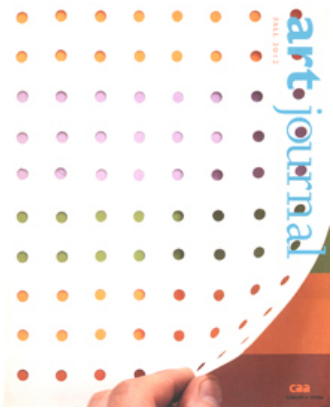

Art Journal
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://caa.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaj20

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Published online: 31 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: Bill Anthes (2012) Ethics in a World of Strange Strangers: Edgar Heap of Birds at Home and Abroad, Art Journal, 71:3, 58-77, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2012.10791103

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2012.10791103

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Ethics in a World of Strange Strangers: Edgar Heap of Birds at Home and Abroad

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Reclaim*, 1988, steel sign, 24 x 36 in. (61 x 91.4 cm), installation view, Purchase, New York, 1988 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

Coinciding with the emergence of a global contemporary art world, critical attention and not a little commercial energy have been expended on a cohort of contemporary artists who, as described by the editors of a roundtable published in *Art Journal* in 1998, "travel widely to create and exhibit their work, much of which derives from their experience of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile."[1] Artists of Native North American (or indigenous) background certainly fit this description, and they have, to an extent, engaged with the new institutions of the transnational art market, exhibiting in venues including the Venice Biennale and pursuing careers as what Miwon Kwon describes as "itinerant artists."[2] Since the late 1990s, new support structures and Native critical and curatorial efforts have been launched to advocate for Native artists on the global stage. Yet, with few exceptions, Native artists are absent from most accounts of global contemporary art.[3] In *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, Shari M. Huhndorf identifies a similar lack of attention to Native North American cultural studies in the larger project of "post-national" American studies. Huhndorf argues that this invisibility has the effect of "extending the colonial erasure of indigenous peoples" even as the historical experience of Native peoples of North America might otherwise be seen as a key example and implicit critique of imperialism.[4]

A possible explanation for this lack of visibility is the importance of a conception of sovereignty in the work of Native artists. While the work of many global contemporary artists engages issues of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile, the discourse of sovereignty as employed by Native North Americans is unique. Perhaps the most misunderstood notion in Native politics and culture generally, sovereignty in the context of Native people speaks to the claims to political autonomy of indigenous nations five centuries after the European conquest and colonization of the Americas. This abiding autonomy is grounded in a specific, bounded place in which a people reside (or once resided) and which is the basis of a shared cultural inheritance. Native sovereignty has often been cast as a relationship to a territory or homeland, usually arrived at in primordial or legendary times after a protracted period of migration. Homeland is important, even for those peoples whose historical experience has been one of involuntary displacement and relocation; many nations experience emplacement in new lands even as they maintain profound attachments to other, ancestral places. The Salish-Kootenai artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith writes, "Euro-Americans often wonder why the American Indian is so attached to the land. Even after Indians have lived in an urban environment for two generations, they still refer to tribal land as home. . . . Each tribe's total culture is immersed in its specific area. Traditional foods, ceremonies, and art come from the indigenous plants and animals as well as the land itself. The anthropomorphism of the land spawns the stories and myths. These things are the stuff of culture which keep identity intact."[5] Similarly, the Seneca-Tuscarora artist George Longfish has written of "landbase," which he defines as distinct from the European notion of landscape, which denotes "scenery," or sign of ownership and dominion. Longfish sees landbase as "the interwoven aspects of place, history, culture, physiology, a people and their sense of themselves and their spirituality and how the characteristics of the place are all part of the fabric. When rituals are integrated into the setting through the

The research and writing of this essay were supported by the Creative Capital–Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program and by Pitzer College. Ana Iwataki provided invaluable research assistance. I am thankful to Edgar and Shanna Ketchum–Heap of Birds and their family for their generosity and hospitality. Thanks also to Jack Rushing for his support of this project, and to Nancy Blomberg and Erik Berkemeyer at the Denver Art Museum, and John McKinn and Robert Warrior of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign American Indian Studies Program, for assistance with some images. An early version of this essay was presented to the Department of American Studies and the Native American Initiatives program at the University of Notre Dame in January 2011. Thanks especially to Laurie Arnold, Annie Coleman, Brian Collier, Erika Doss, and Sophie White for their engaged conversation. Kate Morris, Kelly Newfield, and an anonymous reviewer for *Art Journal* read the present essay carefully and offered useful criticisms.

1. Mónica Amor with Okwui Enwezor, Gao Minglu, Oscar Ho, Kobena Mercer, and Irit Rogoff, "Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 29.
2. Miwon Kwon, *Once Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 156–57.
3. See Bill Anthes, "Contemporary Native Artists and International Biennial Culture," *Visual Anthropology Review* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 109–27; and Judith Ostrowitz, *Interventions: Native American Art for Far-Flung Territories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009). The position and relative status of Native artists within the global contemporary art world have been the subject of some recent discussions, most notably at the symposium *Vision, Space, Desire: Global*

use of materials and specific places and religion includes the earth upon which one walks—that is landbase."[6]

The titles of just a few major exhibitions since the early 1990s give a sense of the importance of sovereignty and homeland in the political imaginary of contemporary Native people: *Our Land/Ourselves* (University Art Gallery, State University of New York, Albany, 1990); *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (Ottawa, 1992); *Green Acres: Neo-Colonialism in the United States* (Washington University Art Gallery, St. Louis, 1992), *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art* (Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec, 1998); and *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination* (George Gustav Heye Center, National Museum of the American Indian, New York, 2007). These exhibitions included artworks varied in media and approach, produced by artists of diverse tribal backgrounds. Such diversity and variety notwithstanding, the organizers of the exhibitions argued that Native people as a group shared a common political situation: they live in a neocolonial relationship to the settler nations of Canada and the United States.

Native conceptions of sovereignty are founded on an altogether different principle than obtains in the modern, European-derived sense of the nation-state. Native sovereignty and nationalist movements depend on an idea of a people or nationhood that is fundamentally spiritual, rather than legal and political. A founding figure in Native North American cultural studies, the Sioux theologian and legal scholar Vine Deloria Jr., writing with Clifford Lytle in their important 1984 book *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*, explained, "The idea of the people is primarily a religious conception, and with most Indian people it begins somewhere in the primordial mists."[7] Native conceptions of sovereignty, however, while distinct from the modern European political tradition, have in the course of dealings with the settler nations taken on many aspects of the dominant model. As Deloria and Lytle wrote, "The idea of peoplehood, of nationality, has gradually been transformed over the past two centuries into a new idea, one derived primarily from the European heritage."[8] Influenced by Deloria and Lytle, the Osage intellectual historian Robert Allen Warrior described sovereignty as "a term from European theological and political discourse that finally does little to describe the visions and goals of American Indian communities that seek to retain a discrete identity."[9] However, as Deloria and Lytle and Warrior demonstrate, the legal construct of sovereignty has been efficacious in contesting illegitimately imposed state authority over Native communities. Warrior concludes, "To simply abandon such terms, though, risks abandoning their abiding force and utility."[10]

More recently the Kahnawake Mohawk political theorist Taiaiake Alfred, in his widely read book *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (1999), has criticized the Native adoption of sovereignty as a political and legal construct. A veteran of the 1990 Mohawk uprising at Kanasetake (also known as Oka, Quebec, Canada), Alfred describes sovereignty as "an inappropriate concept," arguing provocatively that as an artifact of European jurisprudential tradition, sovereignty has no relevance to Native values and fails to fulfill Native spiritual needs. As little more than a zero-sum contest for power, the pursuit of sovereignty reduces Native politicians to mere opposite numbers to non-Native, neocolonial bureaucrats. Expedient yet deeply flawed as a model for Native community building, sovereignty is in Alfred's assessment ultimately self-defeating.[11] As the arguments

Perspectives and Cultural Identity, organized by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and held in Venice in December 2005, to coincide with *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon*, a conference mounted by Robert Storr, director of the 2007 Venice Biennale. See *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian, 2006). Notably, Terry Smith's otherwise expansive classroom textbook *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King Publishing; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011) fails to address a single Native North American artist.

4. Shari M. Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 3.

5. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, "Curator's Statement," *Our Land/Ourselves*, exh. cat. (Albany: University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany, 1990), v–vi.

6. George Longfish and Joan Randall, "Landscape, Landbase and Environment," unpub. typescript, 1984; quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 109.

7. Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 8.

8. Ibid., 12.

9. Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xxi.

10. Ibid.

11. Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 55, 58. The anthropologist Michael F. Brown has also made a provocative argument against unquestioned support among anthropologists for the notion of sovereignty in the movement for indigenous rights, informed in large part by Alfred's critique. See Brown, "Sovereignty's Betrayals," in *Indigenous Experience Today*, ed. Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007), 171–94.

of Deloria and Lytle, Warrior, and Alfred suggest, sovereignty is a contested key term. A better term, as Deloria and Lytle suggest, might be nationality or peoplehood, although the term sovereignty retains its currency in recent theorizations of Native art and culture.[12]

The Tuscarora artist and critic Jolene Rickard was perhaps the earliest to employ the rhetoric of sovereignty in relation to contemporary art.[13] Rickard has been clear, following the earlier work of Deloria and Lytle, Warrior, and Alfred, in arguing that the use of the discourse of sovereignty by Native people has been simultaneously an appropriation and a contestation of the European tradition of the term—an instrument wielded by Native communities in pursuit of "self-defined renewal and resistance."[14] As she writes, "The appropriation of a European notion of sovereignty was a strategy to resist the further dispossession of our land and resources. The idea that Indigenous communities would assert a call for nationhood in our own terms, not as domestic dependents as defined by the U.S. government, is at the center of the sovereignty debate."[15] Significantly for the present study of contemporary art, Rickard tracks the shift away from territorial conceptions of sovereignty to an expanded understanding of the concept as a project of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual autonomy. Sovereignty as it appears in recent writings by Native artists and critics lies beyond the limited scope of the European-derived jurisprudential framework that gave the term its original meaning. In part, this shift away from territorial notions of sovereignty may reflect a sense that commitment to specific, bounded places is at odds with the contemporary realities of globalization, in which what Hannah Arendt termed the "national trinity" of "people-territory-state" has been in large part eroded by the tendency of late capitalism to dissolve nations as concrete entities.[16] However, Rickard cites Warrior's concept of "intellectual sovereignty" (itself informed by Deloria) and the same term as employed by the Lenape Native studies scholar Joanne Barker, along with similar projects, as attempts to create "decolonized" methodologies—efforts to wrest disciplinary authority over Native histories, cultures, and identities away from colonial institutions and intellectual traditions.[17] Other recent uses of sovereignty in this expanded sense cited by Rickard include "artistic sovereignty" (Quick-to-See Smith); "cultural sovereignty" (the Tewa-Diné filmmaker Beverly Singer); and "visual sovereignty" (the Seminole-Muscogee-Diné photographer Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie).[18] Following the arguments of Deloria and Lytle, Warrior, and Alfred, these expanded critical projects for Native sovereignty resonate deeply with Native conceptions of nationality and peoplehood that look back to a time and place before the imposition of the European legal and political tradition. They comprise a "shared ancient imaginary."[19]

Moreover, Rickard argues that sovereignty—in an expanded, aesthetic sense —is obligatory for interpreting the work of contemporary Native artists: "Sovereignty could serve as an overarching concept for interpreting the interconnected space of the colonial gaze, deconstruction of the colonizing image or text, and Indigeneity."[20] Attention to this "emergent space," she writes, is a critical and theoretical imperative. Indeed, a more complete understanding of indigenous conceptions of sovereignty would help clarify the status of Native artists in the contemporary art world, which has been inattentive in large part to the perspectives on the experience of contemporaneity that indigenous artists—with their

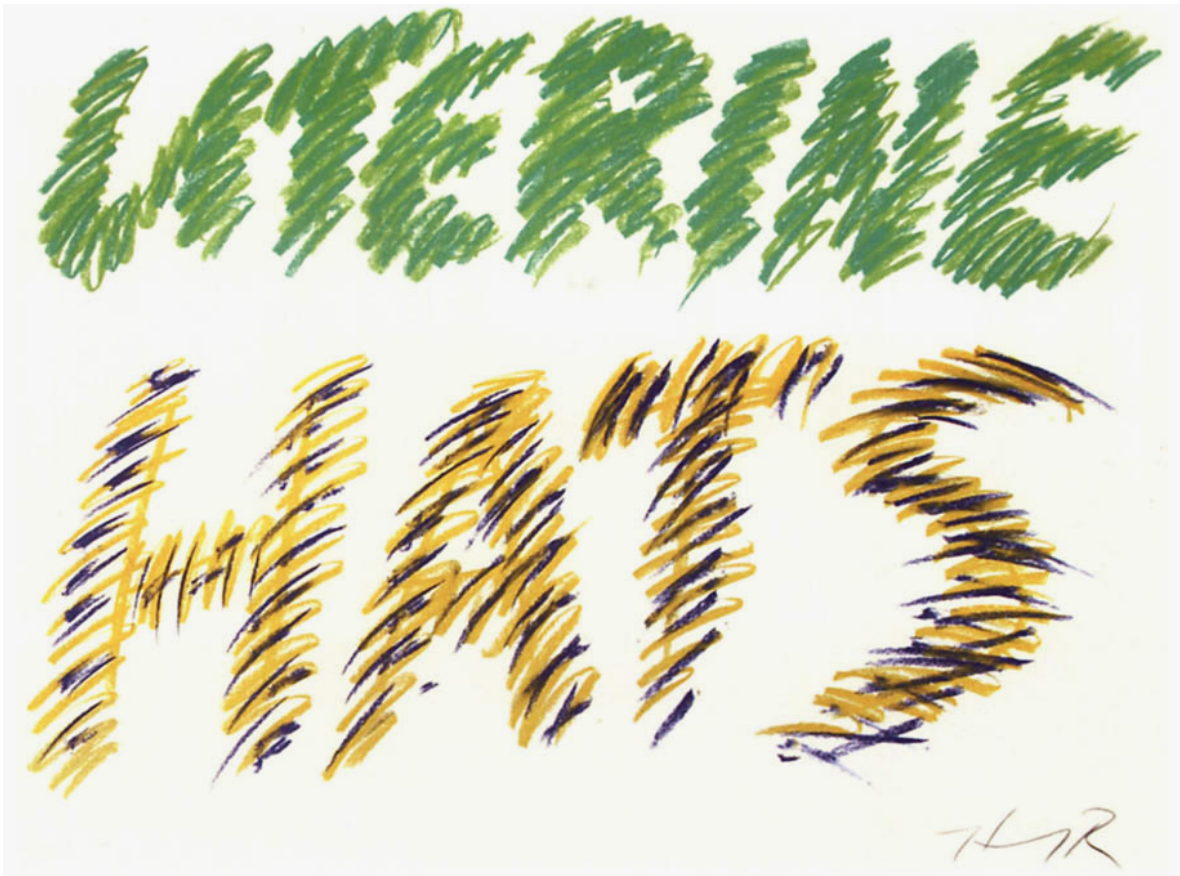
12. Self-governance, which Deloria and Lytle criticize as implying a subordinate relation to a dominant political power, is also clearly inappropriate as a concept. Deloria and Lytle, 13.
13. Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," *Aperture* 139, "Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices," ed. Peggy Roalf (1995): 51–59.
14. Jolene Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2, "Sovereignty, Indigeneity, and the Law," ed. Eric Cheyfitz, N. Bruce Duthu, and Shari M. Huhndorf (Spring 2011): 467.
15. Ibid., 468.
16. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1973), 232. See also Jolene Rickard, "The Local and the Global," in *Vision, Space, Desire*, 59–67.
17. An important critical touchstone for many of these writers, including Rickard, is the Māori theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).
18. Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty," 471.
19. Ibid., 472.
20. Ibid., 471.

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Death from the Top*, 1983, hand-painted, die-cut mat board letters on wall, 8 x 20 ft. (2.4 x 6 m), installation view, *Preparing for War* exhibition, Brooklyn Army Terminal, 1983 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

unique historical experience of homeland, displacement, migration, exile, and the experience of daily life under a neocolonial settler regime—might offer.

However, sovereignty as an abiding claim to autonomy—territorial, political, or aesthetic—remains mostly misunderstood by critics and audiences from outside a narrow circle of those initiated into, committed to, or otherwise interested in Native North American cultural studies and contemporary art. While various recent critical projects have foregrounded sovereignty—and while Native critics have argued for the importance of decolonizing methodologies, grounded in local knowledge and Native epistemologies—as a critical, explanatory frame, sovereignty lacks currency in the contemporary art world. A Native understanding of sovereignty in the expanded field advocated by Rickard, I argue, is embodied in the work of Hock-E-Aye-Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (born 1954). For over three decades, this artist has produced artworks in a variety of mediums—a body of work that not only comprises a trenchant and thoroughgoing critique of the loss of land and autonomy endured by Native North Americans under the heel of settler colonial expansionism, including his own Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation as well as other Native peoples, but also embodies a distinctly Native epistemology.[21] This essay highlights three of Heap of Birds's major bodies of work: the *Neuf* series, an ongoing series of abstract paintings drawn from the experience of his reservation homeland in Oklahoma; *Native Hosts*, a likewise ongoing series of public artworks that engage local Native histories in varied locations; and *Please the Waters*, a 2009 public artwork in New York that narrates a human and environ-

21. Two key sources that read Heap of Birds in this regard are W. Jackson Rushing III, "Street Chiefs and Native Hosts: Richard Ray (Whitman) and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds Defend the Homeland," in *Green Acres: Neo-Colonialism in the U.S.*, ed. Christopher Scoates, exh. cat. (St. Louis: Washington University Gallery of Art, 1992), 23–36; and Kate Morris, "Picturing Sovereignty: Landscape in Native American Art," in *Painters, Patrons, and Identity: Essays in Native American Art to Honor J. J. Brody*, ed. Joyce M. Szabo (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 187–209. Other sources on Heap of Birds's art include Papo Colo, Jean Fisher, and Lowery Stokes Sims, *Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds: Claim Your Color*, exh. cat. (New York: Exit Art, 1989); W. Jackson Rushing III, "'In Our Language': The Art of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds," *Third Text* 19, no. 4 (July 2005): 365–84; Edgar Heap



Edgar Heap of Birds, *American Policy* (detail) 1986, pastel on paper, 22 x 30 in. (55.9 x 76.2 cm) (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

mental history of the Hudson River watershed. These three bodies of work will be interpreted in light of the role of land and environment in Heap of Birds's artistic practice, suggesting an understanding of sovereignty that can be illuminated by a reading of actor-network theory as it resonates with Native conceptions of place, culture, and identity.

Actor-network theory posits a field of human and nonhuman interaction, in which agency is generally but evenly distributed, and in which human actors are entangled in collectives that include the nonhuman. As Bruno Latour writes, "Humans, for millions of years, have extended their social relations to other actants with which, with whom, they have swapped many properties, and with which, with whom, they form collectives."[22] Actor-network theory, this essay will suggest, provides a framework for understanding Native conceptions of sovereignty, not in the narrowly legalistic framework inherited from the European political tradition by way of the conquest and colonization of the Americas, but in keeping with Native epistemologies. Moreover, illuminated by actor-network theory, Heap of Birds's multifaceted work suggests an ethics, grounded in Native conceptions of sovereignty, yet fully appropriate to a globalized society.

Many of Heap of Birds's works develop from his extensive historical research and recount in frank terms specific atrocities. Beginning with early works such as *Death from the Top*, a text-based installation from 1983, Heap of Birds's practice has embodied what Hal Foster terms the "archival impulse," through which "artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present . . .

of Birds, "Life as Art: Creating through Acts of Personal and Cultural Renewal," in *[Re]inventing the Wheel: Advancing the Dialogue on Contemporary American Indian Art*, ed. Nancy J. Blomberg, exh. cat. (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2008), 26–37; W. Jackson Rushing III, "The Prehistory of *Wheel*: Symbolic Inversions and Traumatic Memory in the Art of Edgar Heap of Birds," in *[Re]inventing the Wheel*, 69–77; and Kathleen Ash-Milby and Truman T. Lowe, eds., *Edgar Heap of Birds: Most Serene Republics* (Washington and New York: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2009).

22. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1999), 198; quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 103, n116.

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Wheel*, 2005, porcelain on steel, diam. 48 ft. (14.6 m), ea. element ht. 12 ft. (3.7 m). Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado, 2005 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds).

The artist poses with his work.

in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory."[23] The text for *Death from the Top* highlights an exemplary countermemory of the Native experience of American Manifest Destiny, drawing from the recollections of a survivor of the 1868 Washita Massacre, a formative event for the Southern Cheyenne, in which tribal leader Black Kettle and his wife, along with over one hundred warriors and an unknown number of women and children, were killed by United States troops. Other works level a more generalized critique of the costs of expansionist military and economic agendas in a more personal, stream-of-consciousness, diaristic language and visual style—an analogue of the artist's own embodied alternative knowledge: *American Policy*, a series of text drawings begun in 1986, compares the global reach of the US military to a history of domestic repression and violence against Native peoples.

Heap of Birds also asserted Native alternative knowledge and countermemory with *Wheel*, a permanent outdoor sculpture installed at the Denver Art Museum in 2005. An arrangement of ten vertical forms in red porcelain enamel over steel frames—each twelve feet tall and notched at the top in a Y-form, resembling a forked tree trunk—marks the contour of a circle forty-eight feet in diameter. The shape of the sculpture recalls a traditional Plains Earth Renewal (or Sun Dance) lodge—resonating with Heap of Birds's long-term participation in

23. Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 4.

this important ceremony. The vertical elements, however, also read in a more abstract register. Towering high above a viewer's head, they are powerful visual metaphors for the resourcefulness and tenacity—what the Ojibwe writer and critic Gerald Vizenor terms "survivance"—of indigenous cultures.[24] In designing *Wheel*, Heap of Birds drew inspiration from the forked branches he saw used in simple shelters and as makeshift supports for cooking pots. They suggest improvised yet sturdy structures in the landscape—they might carry the weight of a horizontal roof beam. Heap of Birds described the form as "symbolic of our inherent strength."[25] In handwritten texts and symbols transferred to the surface of the ten lodge-post forms, Heap of Birds recounts a history of US-Indian policy and memorializes the 1864 massacre by a territorial militia under the command of US Army Colonel John Chivington of four hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho people encamped under a US flag at Sand Creek, Colorado. Heap of Birds's artworks have become iconic examples of a critical contemporary Native art. With their mixture of economy and pathos, such works offer an indictment of the legacies of conquest and an affirmation of the ongoing Native struggle for sovereignty.

A recent temporary public artwork by Heap of Birds, *Please the Waters*, installed from August 1 to November 29, 2009, at Wave Hill, in the Bronx, New York, complicates a reading of the artist's work solely as a countermemory of conquest. Wave Hill is a contemporary-art center and public garden on twenty-eight acres overlooking the Hudson River and the cliffs of the Palisades. In *Please the Waters*, Heap of Birds narrates a history of the Hudson River Valley in the four hundred years since Henry Hudson, in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, navigated the waterway in search of the fabled Northwest Passage to the Far East.[26] As Foster notes of the archival impulse, "Artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects . . . that might offer points of departure again."[27] *Please the Waters* presents just such a return to an unfulfilled beginning with relevance for a renewed future, and provides a basis for revisiting some earlier, serial works from Heap of Birds's career—the abstract *Neuf* paintings and *Native Hosts* public interventions. In these works, land (as nation or home place) emerges as a key term in the artist's ongoing practice.

As Heap of Birds noted in a 2004 interview with the critical legal geographer Nick Blomley,

> The land is the beginning and the end. It is to humble yourself and know that the land and earth comes first before the people: somewhat like caring for the children first because they are precious, although we are not parents of the land. . . . [A]s someone grows to know certain sites on this earth then it can cradle you, reaffirm you, and offer you a relationship. Also the earth remains after you are gone and was here before one's distant relatives. The earth also is an instrument giving the necessary tools and plants in order to create ceremony.[28]

Here, Heap of Birds explains that land makes possible ceremony—the foundation of identity. But Heap of Birds also emphasizes that land "comes first before the people," and "remains after you are gone." Land, in this formulation, exceeds human history.

Please the Waters, comprising a group of eight twenty-four-by-thirty-six-inch commercially printed steel signs, along with a suite of preparatory text-drawings,

24. See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
25. *Wheel, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, 2005*, exh. broch. (Denver Art Museum, 2005).
26. As the artist Matthew Buckingham writes, "Far from being the first, Hudson was one of the last Europeans to arrive before European colonization. Indeed, there seems to have been little surprise when one of the first Indigenous people he met on his voyage spoke to him in French." Buckingham, "Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name," *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 173. Buckingham's essay is the text of the voice-over from his artwork of the same name, a 38-minute, 16mm color film projection with sound. It was first shown in 2004, in *Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project*, Beacon, New York, curated by Diane Shamash for Minetta Brook.
27. Foster, 5.
28. Heap of Birds quoted in Nick Blomley, "Artistic Displacements: An Interview with Edgar Heap of Birds," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22 (2004): 799.

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Please the Waters* (detail), 2009, 8 steel signs, ea. 24 x 36 in. (61 x 91.4 cm), installation view, *The Muhheakantuck in Focus*, Wave Hill, Bronx, New York, 2009 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

was presented at Wave Hill in the exhibition *The Muhheakantuck in Focus*. The principal theme of the exhibition was the significance of the river for Native peoples. In using a Native word for the river in the title and including Native artists among the thirteen featured artists from Mexico, the United States, and Canada, the exhibition was notable in foregrounding Native issues.[29] The waterway was used by the Lenape (or Delaware Indians), who traditionally occupied lands between the Delaware River and the Lower Hudson River—encompassing present-day New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, northern Delaware, and southeastern New York State—before their displacement by Iroquoian rivals and encroaching white settlers in the nineteenth century. In Lenape, the Muhheakantuck is the "river that flows two ways," as the Hudson is in fact a salty, tidal estuary, in which currents move north as far as the city of Troy, New York, and south toward New York Bay and the open waters of the Atlantic. Each sign, in shades of blue, and bordered by a pattern of animal, chemical, technological, or financial symbols, begins with the phrase "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS," followed by a terse, three-line phrase relating a human and natural history of the Lower Hudson.[30] A sign reading "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / SALT TIDES / WINDS / SEA" is dated "CIRCA 4000 BC," suggesting a primeval blank slate when the region and the waterway were formed by the watershed and the moon's gravitational influence on the waters of the Atlantic.

Heap of Birds explained that the watershed has also been home to a changing and often conflictual community of human and nonhuman denizens. Following chronologically, viewers read that "CIRCA 800," the Lower Hudson hosts a dense population of fauna: "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / BEAR HAWK HERON / BEAVER EEL DEER / TURTLE SNIPE WOLF." By "CIRCA 2005," the region's population of animal inhabitants includes "HUDSON SHAD OSPREY / STRIPED BASS / BALD EAGLE / ATLANTIC STURGEON." Humans and cultural conflict mark the region by "CIRCA 1609," the year of Hudson's first voyage. Representing this juncture, Heap of Birds created two signs: "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / DUTCH / EAST INDIA / COMPANY" and "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / ENGLISHMAN / JOHN COLEMAN / ARROW IN THROAT," narrating the killing of a Hudson's Bay Company captain. Human habitation has debased the watershed by "CIRCA 1960," as toxic chemical compounds released into the ecosystem by industry turned the region into a federal Superfund site: "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / DIOXIN / POLYCHLORINATED / BIPHENYL"; "MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / FURANS / POLYCYLIC AROMATIC / HYDROCARBONS."

However, by "CIRCA 2009," as the exhibition opened in the quadricentennial year of Hudson's first voyage, the river is witnessing the beginnings of an ongoing restoration, as well as an event that Heap of Birds interprets as the natural world asserting its power over human technology—"MUHHEAKANTUCK KNOWS / LGA AIRBUS A-320 / US AIR / 1549." This refers to the well-known story of a passenger jetliner en route from New York's La Guardia Airport to Charlotte that was struck by a flock of Canada geese minutes after takeoff and that ditched in the river near midtown Manhattan on January 15, 2009. Heap of Birds has described the incident as "the birds asking the plane to land," which, due to calm waters, was brought down without human injuries.[31]

A favorable notice in the *New York Times* praised Heap of Birds's signs, which, the reviewer wrote, "remind us of a vanished indigenous past, but also that the

29. The drawings were installed in the Glyndor Gallery at Wave Hill. Collectively, as the curator Jennifer McGregor wrote, the artworks in the exhibition explored "the significance of the waterway to Indigenous peoples before and after Hudson's arrival." The river "provided both a connective route for the Indigenous people and a conduit for launching European trade and expansion beyond the region, ultimately impacting the entire continent." McGregor, *The Muhheakantuck in Focus*, exh. broch. (Bronx: Wave Hill Glyndor Gallery, 2009). An interesting comparison is the 2004 exhibition *Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project*, mounted by Minetta Brook, a New York arts organization, which did not include indigenous artists, although many of the featured artworks did address issues of local indigenous peoples, cultures, and histories.

30. The borders included images of biological mutation, currency symbols ($, *f*) eagle and fish forms, abstract images of waves, bear claws, gas mask-respirators, arrowheads, birds, and airplanes. Heap of Birds explains that the choice of the color blue (his customary color for public signage has been red) was a tribute to his youngest son, Wougim—whose Cheyenne name translates as "Blue Sky Man."

31. Edgar Heap of Birds, lecture, University of San Francisco, May 5, 2010.

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Neuf* Series #1, 1981, acrylic on canvas board, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm) and ***Neuf* painting, 2008,** acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76.2 cm) (artworks © Edgar Heap of Birds)

Hudson River is an ecosystem that required constant stewardship and care."[32] But such characterizations largely miss the point of *Please the Waters*. First, rather than focusing on a vanished past, Heap of Birds's signs, like all of the artist's text-based work, make use exclusively of the present tense. Moreover, only one of eight panels makes explicit reference to the Native human inhabitants of the region—the Lenape—who might be credited with shooting an arrow into the throat of an English interloper in 1609. Second, the notion of the Lower Hudson as an "ecosystem that required constant stewardship and care," in addition to recycling stereotypes of Native peoples as natural environmentalists—"stewards"—fails to recognize what Muhheakantuck knows—that the region is a vital network of human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic actors, any of which may at one moment be ascendant, but none of which can claim dominion. The river knows that an ecosytem is not static. The river knows that the Lenape and their Dutch partners depleted the region's population of beaver and other fur-bearing mammals by the middle of the seventeenth century. The river knows the destruction wrought by manufacturing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If Heap of Birds took Wave Hill's brief—that his artwork place "in focus" the significance of the river for its Native human neighbors across four turbulent centuries—he also expanded that brief to describe a landscape dense with human and nonhuman

32. Benjamin Genocchio. "The River's Meaning to Indians, Before and After Hudson," *New York Times*, September 6, 2009, WE10.

histories. *Please the Waters* is concerned not only with the region's native peoples, but also with the landscape itself, before and after the catastrophe of discovery and colonization.

The river also knows that birds can bring down planes. The technical term for the incident that befell US Air flight 1549 is a "bird strike"—a phrase that would seem to assign agency to the birds rather than the more powerful and deadly aircraft with which they have become mixed up, but which nevertheless they have brought down in a postmodern media event. Indeed, the animals (and chemical compounds) listed on Heap of Birds's signs are forces with agency in their own right. The bear, hawk, heron, beaver, eel, deer, turtle, snipe, wolf, Hudson shad, osprey, striped bass, bald eagle, Atlantic sturgeon, and sundry industrial byproducts have shaped the region as much as the human actors and corporate protagonists that figure on just two panels. Heap of Birds refers to his animal actors as "clan mothers," citing a powerful linkage to human identities as well. The signs document the intertwined histories of the human and non-human—and organic and inorganic—forces of agency in the landscape. But Muhheakantuck itself "knows." The river, in Heap of Birds's telegraphic narrative, is possessed of awareness—attention and intention—a mind.

Since the early 1980s, Heap of Birds has produced abstract paintings, and

I would like to shift focus to those paintings. To this ongoing and open-ended series he has given the name *Neuf*—the Cheyenne word for the number four. *Neuf* is a key concept in Cheyenne culture relating to the four sacred colors, or the four directions, and to the process in which a ritual is performed four times—as in the commitment made to undertake the Earth Renewal ceremony for a cycle lasting four years. Heap of Birds has been an Earth Renewal participant since returning to Cheyenne-Arapaho territory in the early 1980s. In the summer of 2010 he completed his fourth cycle of four years, earning his fourth "paint," a sequence of body adornment in which the dancer embodies an animal spirit or totem over the course of the ceremony. Heap of Birds made the first *Neuf* painting around the time that he became an Earth Renewal participant, as he moved to the reservation to live in his grandmother's cabin on the family property near Geary, in western Oklahoma, which he has called "the old home-place."[33]

The first *Neuf* painting was small and completed out of doors—quickly and spontaneously—in acrylic paints on canvas board. Interlocking impasto forms in white, black, and gray play against shapes in shades of green, salmon, and earth tones—a field of related but discrete bodies in which no individual predominates, and which suggests extension beyond the edge of the canvas. While it is, to be sure, an abstract painting, Heap of Birds has described it as his response to the rugged canyon that he was coming to know as he lived on the land, taking daily hikes and hunting with his dogs to make a living and find his way as an artist.

For Heap of Birds, the series had a beginning that was insistently local. "I was out in the canyon where my grandmother had built a house," he explains, "about 500 acres of land, and I went hiking and walking a lot. . . . There was one lone cedar that came up out of an outcropping of rocks where you'd think nothing could survive. I went back out there and took a small 5-by-8-inch canvas and went down into the canyon and made the first Neuf painting. . . . It took me six years to realize I was painting this tree."[34] The recurring shapes draw from the landscape, but also Heap of Birds's sense of its vital energy: "Events such as water rushing after a storm, cutting the red rock, giving new form to the red earth [which] add a natural energy to my painting, while connecting my work with a visible reality."[35] While the first painting was made of soft, cloud-like shapes, in later paintings the forms take on jagged edges, similar to the scrub pines that grow on the land, a comparison that Heap Birds emphasizes in lectures, when he shows a slide of such a tree—a juniper—turned on its side, its serrated outline looking very much like the forms in the paintings. Indeed, for anyone who has experienced firsthand the formidable landscape of the reservation, the *Neuf* paintings will recall the rugged beauty of that landscape.

The *Neuf* paintings, however, are unconventional landscapes. Their bold abstraction aside, what distinguishes them from the European tradition of the landscape as it has evolved since the seventeenth century is the absence of a horizon. The horizon line, which figures so prominently in landscape paintings, might as well stand in here for rationalized system of perspectival rendering that creates the illusion of a view into deep space. The horizon—the point where land meets sky—is the limit of our vision in a landscape painting. It corresponds to the eye-level view of the perceiving subject—the viewer of the painting, who occupies, at least in theory, the same vantage point as the painter, or the imagined individual whose gaze we momentarily inhabit when we look on the painting.

33. Heap of Birds quoted in Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, exh. cat. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 149.
34. Heap of Birds quoted in Dorothy Shinn, "Taking Aim at Chief Wahoo: American Indian's Billboard Labeling Tribe Mascot Racist Doesn't Fly," *Akron Beacon Journal*, December 22, 1996, E5.
35. Edgar Heap of Birds, *Sharp Rocks*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, NY: CEPA, 1986), n.p.

Juniper Tree, Cheyenne-Arapaho Nation (photograph © Edgar Heap of Birds)

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Neuf* paintings, 1998, installation view, Acadia Studio, Bar Harbor, Maine, 1998 (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds; photograph by the artist)

From the first *Neuf* painting, made on site in the canyon, Heap of Birds has pushed the horizon line out of the frame, so that the effect is of being plunged into the canyon—engulfed in an environment—rather than viewing it from a commanding distance.

Scholars in recent years have argued that the techniques of perspective encode an ideology of dominion over the landscape and those that inhabit it. The limit of our vision corresponds to the limit of our domain. Perspective, it is argued, creates a distinction between surveyor and surveyed—between subject and object—a "gaze" that distances and objectifies, enabling policies of colonial expropriation, territorial expansionism, and wanton environmental devastation. It would take much more space to flesh out this argument, but suffice to say, the modern, Euro-American acquisitive individual, the argument goes, is constructed by this panoramic view, a Foucauldian "eye of power" that visualizes a fantasy of mastery. Malcolm Andrews, in his history of landscape in Western art, writes that such paintings offered a unique combination of "information and invitation."[36] Indeed, art historians have argued for the close connection between the development of landscape as a genre in early modern Europe and the project of colonialism.[37] The geographer Jay Appleton has sought to naturalize such a notion with his "habitat theory," which argues that the aesthetic pleasure we take in a landscape painting derives from "atavistic modes of valuing territorial advantage that were almost instinctive to hunter-gatherer societies. The strategic importance of seeing the hunter's prey or hostile forces without being seen oneself translates naturally into a sense of greater security. Land forms that offer images of prospect and refuge, therefore, satisfy ancient survival needs that are buried deep in the human psyche. An appealing landscape is a single view of aptly disposed prospect-refuge opportunities."[38]

It is significant to note, as Heap of Birds mentioned in a 1992 interview, that his grandmother's cabin does indeed enjoy such a commanding view. "As you saw from the top of our place here," Heap of Birds recounted to Larry Abbott, "you

36. Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 77.
37. See, for example, W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
38. Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London: John Wiley, 1975), quoted in Andrews, 18. Appleton links these features to the "visual field of violence . . . hunting, war, surveillance." To be clear, Appleton's theory needs to be unpacked and historicized. Mitchell notes that there exist other, nonmasculine, nonviolent, positions: "woman, gatherer, scientist, poet, interpreter, or tourist." See Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, 16.

can see twenty or thirty miles in every direction."[39] Yet, for the *Neuf* paintings, the view that Heap of Birds has sought is from down in the canyon, with the horizon pushed out of frame—not a "sovereign gaze" that surveys the landscape like a predator, but the view of an inhabitant of that landscape. In a sense, as the horizon line disappears, so does the perceiving subject. Not separate from the landscape, the subject is part of a larger collective of human and nonhuman actors.

This observation corresponds with recent writings in the "posthumanities" in which the human subject is decentered from its customary position of privilege vis-à-vis the natural, the animal, and the nonhuman. In particular, *Please the Waters* and the *Neuf* series resonate with actor-network theory, originally developed by Michel Callon and Latour in their studies of the role of interdependent structures, or material-semiotic networks—technical and intellectual—in which scientific achievement and innovation occur. As developed by Callon and Latour, actor-network theory considers aspects of background, such as technologies, systems of rules, social systems, and so forth, as objects of analysis in their own right, assigning agency to the nonhuman entities in the network. Actor-network theory has been borrowed and developed by other fields, including history, feminist theory, and ecocriticism, which is particularly relevant to the present discussion. Ecocritical readings of actor-network theory, such as the "political ecology" of Jane Bennett, posit a vital field, wherein agency—what Bennett describes as the power to move other affective bodies—is distributed unevenly among human and nonhuman elements.[40]

Following actor-network theory in reading the landscape as a vital collective, in turn, is helpful in understanding sovereignty from a Native, rather than Eurocentric, perspective. In a recent essay describing practices of visual sovereignty, the Seneca scholar of Native literature and film Michelle Raheja writes, "Native nations prior to European contact theorized about the concept of sovereignty in order to discursively distinguish themselves from the other human, spirit, animal, and inanimate communities surrounding them through performance, songs, stories, dreams, and visual texts such as wampum, pictographs, and tipi drawings."[41] Here, Raheja invokes a tradition of imagining the indigenous nation that predates the imposition of the European jurisprudence. For Raheja, sovereignty (following Deloria and Lytle, a better word to capture this sense might be "peoplehood") is asserted by a human population across and against a field or network of human and nonhuman relationships—from which a nation and an identity are forged. This reading resonates with the idea that most Native people's names for themselves translate as "the people," or "the real people." As Deloria and Lytle write, "Tribal names generally reflect the basic idea that these particular people have been chosen from among the various peoples of the universe—including mammals, birds, and reptiles, as well as other humans—to hold a special relationship with the higher powers."[42] We may see this sense of the interrelation between human and nonhuman as embodied in the permeability between human and nonhuman realms that is an important part of many Native worldviews —for example, the nonhuman or "shape-shifting" supernatural personages that figure in many Native spiritual practices and stories of origin. Further, we might see resonances with Bennett, when she writes that while "environmentalists are selves who live on earth, vital materialists are selves who live as earth," or with Latour, who imagined a possible politics as a "parliament of

39. Heap of Birds quoted in Larry Abbot, "A Conversation with Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds," in *Will/Power: New Works by Papo Colo, Jimmie Durham, David Hammons, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Adrian Piper, Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson*, ed. Sarah J. Rogers, exh. cat. (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1992), 49–50.

40. Bennett defines as "actants" a range of matter and collectives of matter including litter, power grids, stem cells, and fatty foods in her discussion of what she terms a "vital materialism."

41. Michelle Raheja, "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 2007): 1164.

42. Deloria and Lytle, 8.

things."[43] The *Neuf* series pictures such a view of the self and the human community of which it is part as also embedded in a broader network. The landscape is not a thing out there, but a continuous field alive with energy of which the artist is part. There are no edges, no sure footing, no borders. Nevertheless, we will see that Heap of Birds's vision is very much committed to the idea of a bounded, specific space of the family allotment, the reservation, or the tribal nation, which coheres and abides despite the exigencies of history—human and nonhuman—even though it has been uprooted and displaced.

Indeed, for an artist so well known for his neoconceptual, text-based, and often critical political artworks, it is striking that Heap of Birds has so regularly pursued abstract painting drawn from the experience of landscape. Perhaps because of this fact, some critics have interpreted the *Neuf* series as embodying the artist's commitment to a concept of place that is at odds with the contemporary experience of globalization. They see the *Neuf* paintings as central to understanding the artist's commitment to tradition and emplacement—to being rooted in a specific, bounded homeland. The art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault, for example, argues that there is "a certain logic to the repetition of the *Neuf* sequence. There are fixed places, there *are* great certainties, everything is *not* relative."[44] Moreover, this sense of being grounded in a fixed place is seen as central to a project that critics have termed "defending the homeland" and "picturing sovereignty," which they argue characterizes Heap of Birds's artistic practice more generally.[45]

However, such readings elide (or perhaps merely fail to recognize) the degree to which the *Neuf* series has developed into a much more flexible artistic syntax that enables Heap of Birds's increasingly global practice. The artist has continued to make *Neuf* paintings for over three decades. The paintings have become larger—and perhaps more schematic—as Heap of Birds transforms his initial response to the "old home place" into a repeatable pattern that can be picked up again and again, as an autonomous studio practice, regardless of the artist's location. He has produced *Neuf* paintings "for Arizona" and "for Maine," as well as "for Oklahoma," and in such far-flung sites as Australia. Far from grounding the artist, the *Neuf* series has become a language of shapes that suggest the interchangeability of places and attachments as much as their distinctiveness—a sign of the artist's itinerancy as much as his rootedness. Heap of Birds explains that the *Neuf* paintings can be made anywhere. Only the first was painted *en plein air*—on site. The rest have been painted from memory in the studio, drawn from the first. In a sense, we might see them as portable homelands, a sign for the artist's embodied perception wherever he might be.

Interestingly, Heap of Birds is willing to have the forms read differently for varying audiences—as trees, leaves, clouds, or other forms. After a 1994 residency project in Australia, during which time he snorkeled on the Great Barrier Reef, Heap of Birds began comparing the forms to the bodies of brightly colored tropical fish. The forms are mobile and adaptable. They have also appeared, translated and reimagined, on new surfaces and objects. In 1992 with the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, Heap of Birds produced a suite of printed silk scarves featuring the *Neuf* shapes. For a 2007 glass project in Murano, coordinated with his appearance at the Venice Biennale, Heap of Birds reinterpreted the *Neuf* shape as a human figure—the bodies of Native performers who died while traveling in Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. These translations are also significant

43. Bennett, 111; Latour quoted in Bennett, 104.
44. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Hot Dogs, A Ball Gown, Adode, and Words," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 125 (emphases in original).
45. See for example Rushing, "Street Chiefs and Native Hosts"; and Morris.

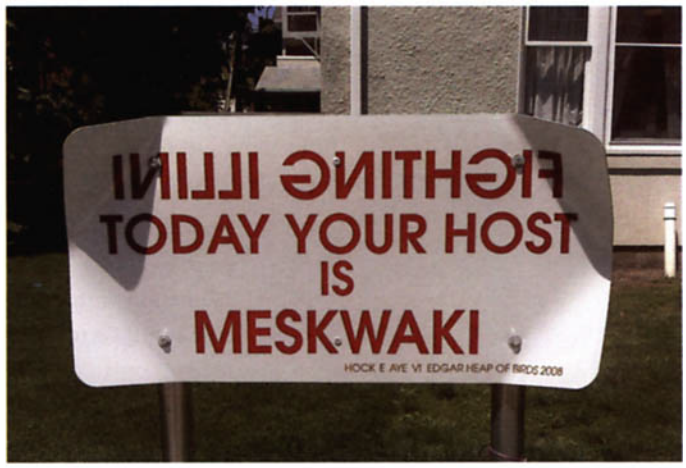
Edgar Heap of Birds, *Neuf* Series scarf, 1992, acid dyes on silk jacquard, 40 x 40 in. (101.6 x 101.6 cm) (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

Edgar Heap of Birds, Untitled Murano glass vessel, 2007, glass, metal, and organic material, ht. approx. 31 in. (78.7 cm) (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

in that they transform the *Neuf* shapes into tactile experiences—scarves that can be worn, vases than can be handled. A visual experience becomes physical. Heap of Birds's own embodied perception of the landscape can, in some fashion, become entangled with our own. Notably, Heap of Birds considers the shape to be an optimistic and life-affirming symbol. As he explained, "These . . . painted works seek to project the understanding that the world, as witnessed from the sage, cedar, and red canyon, is a lively and replenishing place."[46] Thus, if the *Neuf* landscapes are an expression of being in, with, and of nature, it makes sense that the shapes can also become tropical fish, among which one swims, and with whom one shares an ocean and an environment. They are optimistic and life affirming, even as they become human bodies in the Venice glassworks, fallen, returning to the earth. They are figures for an idea that self, other, and nature might be mutable, interchangeable, and relational, or even share an identity at some deep level.

The perspective offered by *Please the Waters* and the *Neuf* series enables a reconsideration of what is arguably Heap of Birds's best-known work—the ongoing series of temporary public signage known as *Native Hosts*. In 1988, commissioned by the Public Art Fund, Heap of Birds created the first works in the series *Native Hosts*, a suite of six signs for City Hall Park in lower Manhattan (each commercially printed on aluminum in a standard size, as in numerous later works, including *Please the Waters*). Droll yet pointed interventions in the public park, the signs greeted passersby with the phrase "NEW YORK [in reversed text]/ TODAY YOUR HOST IS SENECA," or one of five other tribes with traditional ties to the land that is now the greater New York area: Shinnecock, Cayuga, Montauk, Mohawk, and Oneida.[47] Since 1988, versions of the work tailored to the local history have been installed in Vancouver (1991 and 2007), Buffalo (1996–98), Norman, Oklahoma (2000), Portland, Oregon (2002), Champaign-Urbana, Illinois (under the title *Beyond the Chief*, in reference to a recent decision by the

46. Heap of Birds quoted in *Land Spirit Power*, 149.
47. Heap of Birds's initial proposal had included twelve signs, but the installation was limited to six by the mayor's office. Lucy Lippard, "Signs of Unrest: Activist Art by Edgar Heap of Birds," in *Edgar Heap of Birds: Most Serene Republics*, 20.



upper right:
Edgar Heap of Birds, *Beyond the Chief*, 2008, steel sign (with damage from vandalism), 24 x 36 in. (61 x 91.4 cm), Champaign-Urbana, Illinois (artwork © Edgar Heap of Birds)

above and right:
Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Hosts*, 2000 and 2011, steel signs from ongoing series, ea. 24 x 36 in. (61 x 91.4 cm), Norman, Oklahoma, and St. Croix, US Virgin Islands (with Patricia Swan, faculty member of the Good Hope School) (artworks © Edgar Heap of Birds)

University of Illinois to retire the controversial mascot "Chief Illiniwek," 2008), Lansing, Michigan (2009), and St. Croix, US Virgin Islands (2011).[48]

Interpretations of the *Native Hosts* series have focused primarily on Heap of Birds's use of language. As the critic Jean Fisher writes, the series "lays bare the problem of language: the vehicle through which the history and culture of his people were disavowed and redefined. . . . If the law dispossessed the people of their homelands, language continues to disinherit the Native American from the right to speak in her or his own name. Language most clearly demonstrates the unbridgeable distance that exists between Anglo and Indian perceptions of the world."[49] But as Fisher notes, the signs bring together in one space dominant and Native languages. This tactic forces "a confrontation between what are essentially mutually unintelligible words."[50] Also significant, the colonial names of familiar places are reversed. In doing so, Heap-of-Birds's public installations defamiliarize the local setting and inform viewers of the nations that once held aboriginal sovereignty over these lands. As the critic Robert L. Pincus writes, text reversal is "a tidy visual metaphor for the great divide between American Indian history and general American history. Hold the sign up to a mirror and New York would read correctly and everything else would be backward. It's as if Heap of Birds is using

48. To date, the only permanent installation is in Vancouver, on the campus of the University of British Columbia in 2007.
49. Jean Fisher, "New York, Today Your Host Is Shinnecock," in *Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds: Claim Your Color*, 18.
50. Ibid.

English while reminding us it never fully defines his world."[51] Thus, the reversal of place names signals a historical perspective—a looking back—as well as a metaphor for embodied knowledges at mutually incomprehensible cross-purposes. Native names are never reversed and always appear in an insistent, declarative, present-tense sentence: "Today your host is . . ."

The series also engages with specific places and histories and in this regard might be seen as further evidence of Heap of Birds's affinity with the archival impulse. Moreover, locations and the names of tribal "hosts" are chosen in collaboration with local stakeholders (Native communities, and in the case of *Beyond the Chief* in Champaign-Urbana, the various ethnic-studies programs and minority student organizations that cosponsored the project), as are the names used to address non-Native viewers ("New York" in City Hall Park; "Fighting Illini" at the University of Illinois). The basis of each installation design—Heap of Birds's research into local history and work with local collaborators—locates the series in a history of site-specific artworks, as well as with a drive to foreground alternative knowledge and countermemory. In the terms of Miwon Kwon's genealogy of site-specificity, *Native Hosts* is "site-oriented" in that it engages issues outside art's conventional institutional spaces; the content of the work merges with the physical site itself and its diverse histories, revealing histories that have been obscured by official public narratives.[52] In New York, *Native Hosts* was placed near and in dialogue with a monument to Horace Greeley, the founder of the *New York Tribune* and author of the famous slogan of US territorial expansionism and Manifest Destiny: "Go West." This deliberate placement encouraged viewers to think about the complex history of a shared space; in this way, *Native Hosts* is also exemplary of what the artist Suzanne Lacy has termed "new genre public art," a movement that might best be described as a social interventionist practice, in which artists use varied forms to engage diverse audiences about the meaning and function of shared spaces, and the often-turbulent histories of those spaces, as well as the notion of the public itself.[53]

To be sure, *Native Hosts* operates by revealing hidden histories of displacement—of ongoing claims to territory, of sovereignty lost, stolen, reclaimed, and regained, and of the traumatic relationship of Native peoples to land in North America.[54] What has remained unremarked, however, is that these works have also modeled a protocol, a form of diplomacy, and an appropriate way of being a visitor in a foreign territory. They represent a Native perspective, which sees relations between peoples as relations between sovereign equals—whether as allies or enemies—by acknowledging those with a claim to a particular place in their language, and in the name they give themselves. In these works, then, Heap of Birds is modeling a kind of ethics, such as that invoked by the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's recent attempt to revitalize a notion of cosmopolitanism, which he defines as an "ethics in a world of strangers."[55] Appiah avers that this notion demands that we recognize "obligations to others [that] stretch beyond those to whom we are related by ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship."[56] But, as we might ask with Heap of Birds in light of *Please the Waters* and the *Neuf* series, what if our notion of a global ethics was extended to the nonhuman, to what the ecological writer Timothy Morton, in a posthumanist mode, refers to as "strange strangers"?[57]

In the works highlighted above, Heap of Birds suggests a way of thinking

51. Robert L. Pincus, "Heap of Birds Weaves Spell that Sustains Show," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sunday, March 12, 1995, E-1
52. See Miwon Kwon, "Genealogy of Site Specificity," chapter 1 in Kwon, esp. 24–32
53. See Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).
54. The English word "host" in the work's title has two Latin roots. It can denote one receiving or entertaining guests, in which case it derives from *hospes*, a word that refers both to one who receives strangers and one who is a stranger seeking recognition, and that evokes the many complexities of reciprocal obligations. The English word "hospitality" comes from this root. It can also refer to a large group or a multitude, as in a group of soldiers or angels, a meaning derived from *hostis*, meaning enemy. The English word "hostile" derives from this root. Thanks to Stephen Glass for unpacking this etymology.
55. Cosmopolitanism has recently been highlighted as a characteristic of a multicentered history of modern and contemporary art. See for example Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), part of the series organized by the Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA), Annotating Art's Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts.
56. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), xv.
57. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

about sovereignty that is not limited by the Eurocentric legal and political tradition, but instead looks back to a shared ancient imaginary. Significantly, Heap of Birds has produced versions of *Native Hosts* in numerous locations. If in his *Neuf* paintings he is grounded in the home he has made, with *Native Hosts* Heap of Birds is a visitor, paying proper respects in a foreign territory, attentive to the proper protocols involved in being a guest on another's territory. These works are made from the perspective of an alien, an outsider, and a visitor, who nevertheless models appropriate discourse, behavior, and respect for the "hosts." In *Please the Waters*, humans share a vital network with other actors. Indeed, the names that Heap of Birds features in *Native Hosts* are the names that Deloria and Lytle translate as "the people." They are the names of human communities that find their place and their home within a field of human and nonhuman interaction—the names that Native communities traditionally used to define themselves within and against a vital environment, and which gave form to their relationship with the natural and supernatural worlds.

Heap of Birds's work addresses this point. "I have always remarked that we should not always focus only upon the more trivial relationship of Indians against some figure like president Bush or Custer," he writes. "While this violence has been deadly, the dominant culture actually wishes it that way, keeping them in the picture, making the argument about them, from their power position. To open the discussion up to include the Milky Way Galaxy is much more real to our Native understanding."[58] Heap of Birds's disciplined and insightful body of artwork—drawings and abstract paintings, as well as text-based public art—teaches us to think about sovereignty, nation, and human identity against a field of human-nonhuman, organic-inorganic networks and collectives. This idea is perhaps more in keeping with Native epistemologies of place and power than a notion of sovereignty in a purely jurisprudential sense. A Native theory of land and peoplehood is a way of thinking about nation and identity beyond the zero-sum game of politics in the settler nation.

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58. E-mail to the author, January 20, 2011.