Paris/Ojibwa by Robert Houle

This multimedia installation travels backward in time to the Paris of 1845. Two different cultures, urban and woodland, old and new worlds, come into contact. And through a metaphoric room, memory, objectification, decoration, construction and disappearance are revealed, a room defined by the sound of drums and chanting and a video projection animating the dancing Ojibwa.

The title alludes to contact between Parisians and a group of exotically garbed, indigenous people from Canada, elaborately head-dressed in plumes configured as never seen before. History is reclaimed through the aboriginal representation of an actual event based on a drawing and a travelogue.

The four elegiac paintings in the installation are a pictorial representation of abstracted shapes and forms that leave traces of time, of paint and colour. They interrogate space, and integrate a location where the Ojibwa will return symbolically one last time. The room, made of memories of a Delacroix drawing and Maungwudaus' pamphlet, includes a sound component that permeates throughout the host venue.


figure 1

The soft, rippling sound of water that slowly develops into drumming evokes a heartbeat. The viewer is at the intersection of indigenous spirituality and Judeo-Christian modernity. The ancestors and the manitous will hear the entry song. Looking at the installation orthographically from the pedestal, and diagonally across the floor, the two right-angled walls removed simulate two elevations, thus opening it up to the entire gallery space. The theatrical, trompe l'oeil, marble floor, never quarried, never danced upon, situates the viewer in front of a European interior, an alternate view. The dancers in the paintings move towards a prairie horizon, a familiar perspective as it comes from a photograph taken from the cemetery near the marsh grasses that my grandfather used to harvest for his cattle and horses next to Lake Manitoba (figure one).

figure 2

The epistemological wordplay, Paris/Ojibwa, derives from the need to find the right meaning of language, learned, translated and borrowed. Challenging the canon of the pedagogical variation of Euro-American superiority and reaching out for recognition exposes the complexity of knowledge with regard to its methods and validation when it is oppositional to your thought.

Discourse, with it strategies of deconstruction, politics of recognition and aesthetics of disappearance reframe a methodology that has excluded non-European thought. Imagine being born in a state but being outside of it by history and through conquest. The issue of recognition can be more clearly understood by these questions: Have you ever felt that the moment you speak, someone else has spoken for you? Or that when you hear others speaking, you are only going to be the object of their speech? Imagine living in a world of others, a world that exists for others, a world made real only because you have been spoken to. Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, writes:

"The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves."[1]

Ironically, as multicultural accommodation becomes a point of contention, a recent New York Times headline (January, 17, 2010) reads: "Populist Parties in Europe Mobilize Posters As Weapons in Their Culture Wars", using as an example, Italy's poster (figure two) showing a Native American in a war bonnet warning Europeans of being embattled into reservations. In the beginning of the 20th century, Parisians had seen les Parisien Apache, an underworld "tribe" on the streets of Montmartre, particularly Clichy. They were gangsters on the periphery of society mixing extreme dancing with pantomime, and savaging the emergent bourgeois middle class. The "Apache" gunmen of Paris and the Apache of Geronimo (c.1829-1909) create a complex identity maze, blurring distinction between the names, aboriginal and appropriated.

They also saw authentic Ojibwa on the streets as performers, tourists, and always as a curiosity from April to December of 1845. To many, they were sensational in their exoticism, these autochthon from America on the brink of extinction were in town and their ritual smoking of the calumet de la paix was all the rage, inspiring Baudelaire, in imitation of

Longfellow[2], to pen the following:

> Or Gitche Manito, le Maître de la Vie,
> Le Puissant, descendit dans la verte prairie,
> Dans l'immense prairie aux coteaux montueux;
> Et là, sur les rochers de la Rouge Carrière,
> Dominant tout l'espace et baigné de lumière,
> Il se tenait debout, vaste et majestueux.
>
> Alors il convoqua les peuples innombrables,
> Plus nombreux que ne sont les herbes et les sables.
> Avec sa main terrible il rompit un morceau
> Du rocher, dont il fit une pipe superbe,
> Puis, au bord du ruisseau, dans une énorme gerbe,
> Pour s'en faire un tuyau, choisit un long roseau.[3]

These Ojibwa who were also called Mississauga or Chippewa, came from what was then known as Canada West. Ignorance and prejudice were so widespread that pamphlets had to be handed out to advise people that one could not walk there, that the Rockies were not in India, and that the visiting performers had their own language, Ojibwa, Anishnabe (Anishnabewin).

At the behest of George Catlin, Maungwudaus (figure three) and his family and companions had left London to replace the Iowa in the tableaux vivants that complemented the display of his paintings and educational programme. A viral out break, smallpox had taken its toll on the Iowa and they were returning home. Catlin describes the arrival of the replacements in Paris:

"In the midst of my grief, with my little family around me, with my collection still open, and my lease for the Salle Valentino not yet expired, there suddenly arrived from London a party of eleven Ojibbeway Indians, from the region of Lake Huron, in Upper Canada, who had been brought to England by a Canadian, but had since been under the management of a young man from the city of London. They had heard of the great success of the Ioways in Paris, and also of their sudden departure, and were easily prevailed upon to make a visit there. On their arrival, I entered into the same arrangement with them that I had with the former parties, agreeing with the young man who had charge of them to receive them into my collection, sharing the expenses and receipts as I had done before; he being obliged to pay the Indians a certain sum per month, and bound to return to London, from whence they came, at his expense…. The following are the names of the party…

> Maun-gua-daus (a Great Hero) – Chief… Age 41
> Say-say-gon (the Hail Storm)… Age 31
> Ke-che-us-sin (the Strong Rock)…Age 27
> Mush-she-mong (the King of the Loons)…Age 25
> Au-nim-much-kwah-um (the Tempest Bird)…Age 20
> A-wun-ne-wa-be (the Bird of Thunder)…Age 19
> Wau-bud-dick (the Elk)…Age 18
> U-je-jock (the Pelican)…Age 10
> Noo-din-no-kay (the Furious Storm)…Age 4
> Min-nis-sin-noo (a Brave Warrior)…Age 3
> Uh-wus-sig-gee-zigh-gook-kway (Woman of the Upper World) – wife of Chief…Age 38

"The chief of the party, Maun-gua-daus, was a remarkably fine man, both in his personal appearance and intellectual faculties. He was a half-caste, and speaking the English language tolerably well, acted as chief and interpreter of the party."[4]

Maungwudaus, or George Henry as he was baptized and listed in the early nineteenth century records of the Methodist Episcopal Church, now the United Church of Canada, was the son of Mesquacosy and Tubinaniqua and half-brother of the well-known missionary, the Reverend Peter Jones. He helped write an Ojibwa hymnbook but left his church after a split between the followers of Reverend Jones, those who wanted to return to traditional ways and those who believed in Europeanization. Peter Jones thought that the European exhibitions of George Henry were harmful and stifling to the true character of their people. To Jones, amelioration meant living as Christians and integrating into the larger society, while Henry challenged the ideology behind that premise of becoming better by forfeiting everything handed down from the ancestors.


figure 3

Maungwudaus was well aware that they were seen as visiting "curiosities" as he writes in his self-published manuscript "An Account of the Chippewa Indians, Who Have Been Travelling Among the Whites in the United States, England, Ireland, Scotland. France and Belgium" (Boston, 1848). For example:

"We went to France; stayed five months in Paris with Catlin's Indian Curiosities. Shook hands with Louis Philippe and all his family in the Palace called St. Cloud; gave them little war dance, shooting with bows and arrows at a target, ball play; also rowed our birch bark canoe in the artificial lake, amongst

swans and geese. There were about four thousand French ladies and gentlemen with them. We dined with him in the afternoon in his Palace. He said many things concerning his having been in America when he was a young man. He gave us twelve gold and silver medals; he showed us all the rooms in his house."[5]

figure 4

They entertained Louis-Philippe and his queen, Amélie, as well as the king and queen of Belgium, at Saint Cloud. The French monarch had spent more than three years of his exile during the Napoleonic Wars in the new republic of the United States of America (1796-1800). He had traveled from Louisiana to Maine and had contact with the Anishnabe (Ojibwa) and the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) throughout the New England states and the Appalachians.

The Ojibwa numbers increased to a dozen after the birth of a child to Maungwudaus and Uh-wus-sig-gee-zigh-gook-kway, paradoxically born in the Salle Valentino on rue Saint Honoré in the same room where the wife of Chief White Cloud of the Iowa had died.

The phylogeny of the Iowa and the Ojibwa made them more susceptible to smallpox and their fear was based on the knowledge that many other aboriginal nations had completely disappeared. The distribution of infested blankets, the first germ warfare in North America is revealed in correspondence between Colonel Bouquet and Lord Jeffrey Amherst, the commanding general of the British forces during the final battles of the French/Indian wars (1757-1763). Chief Pontiac (1720-1769), a French ally, led a rebellion of eighteen indigenous nations in 1763 wherein the Seneca and the Frenchmen circulated wampum/war belts to try to halt the encroachment on territory yet to be settled by treaty. The Seneca, known as the keepers of the western door of the Iroquois territory suffered greatly. Several of their villages were decimated by the Amherst war strategy of giving a gift of a small metal box filled with infected pieces of flannel and then insisting that their emissaries "…do not open until you get home".[6]

Anxiety increased as Say-say-gon, Au-nim-much-kwah-um and Mush-she-mong took ill and died before returning to London to board the ship back to New York. Maungwudaus lost his wife and three children. This made me recall a diagnosis of painting by Kazimir Malevich's in his teaching diagrams in which he writes "For us painting has become a body in which are laid out for inspection the painter's motives and state." The image of the viral weapon (figure four) was a way to create resistance to infection by history and to celebrate autonomy by practices of impurity so eloquently elucidated by Mark A. Cheetham in "Abstract Art Against Autonomy".[7]

Divided by distance, the set was designed and built in Montreal at the Centaur Theatre's scenery shop while the paintings were being created in Toronto; I was obliged to conceptually transform my studio, a Victorian living room, into an art installation. It became a creative laboratory of memory, painting and set design became actual spatial and temporal manifestations of collaboration. Michael Eagan, an eminent set designer and friend with whom I once shared a studio came over and together we conceptually transformed my studio/living room into a salon of some descript. In this installation, his joy of architectural detail and theatrical lighting and my love of dreams as a validation came together in the floor. For both of us, it was a vision in which Maungwudaus and his performers would have used the stage's rhythmicity for choreographic intentions.

Creating a space where Maungwudaus and the dancers may have performed, and leaving it empty as if they had just left was crucial in connecting the touch of a cold marble and granite floor to a flashpoint of cultural clash and shock. Imagine dancing in moccasins to choreography created for the ground outside, the natural, the indigenous, the exotic, all confined and altered by "civilization". This re-imagining happened while in residency in

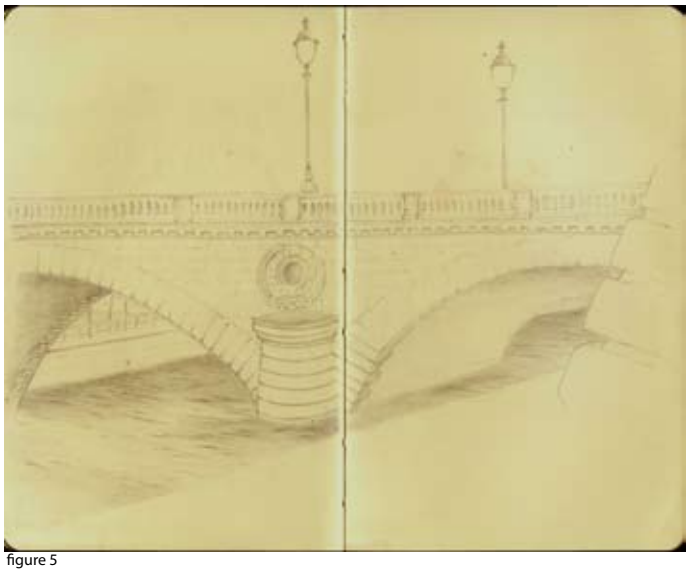
figure 5

Paris in 2006. I would walk, sketch and search throughout the city for any sign or inkling of what they may have felt (figure five). I recall drawing the Pont au Change early in the morning before the crowds had arrived and by the time I finished, American tourists were videotaping me and just being generally curious. What a funny feeling, to have the gaze on you so incessantly.

At every step during the creative process, I felt their presence,


figure 6

facing east located under the morning star, they dance away perhaps from the hard marble floors like those at the Salon de la Paix, Chateaux de Versailles (figure six). Their elaborate woodland regalia disappear giving way to impressions of time shaped by colour and line.

As someone who tends to use pure pigments to work with light and time, I had to work in both natural and artificial light. The sound of water and drums and the voices of women joining the men in an honour song activates the room into a juxtaposition of salon and powwow. The inclusion of the Kicking Women Singers in this installation is a cultural hybrid of theatricality and ethnicity,


figure 7

deliberately referencing the description of chants as passion and delirium by George Sand (1804-1876) who imagined herself watching one of the lurid scenes written by Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) in "The Last of the Mohicans".

Delacroix (1798-1863) compared his Greco-Roman heritage to that of the noble antiquity he saw in the Ojibwa, *chevaliers de la forêt*. His drawing, "Cinq études d'Indiens" (figure seven), in the museum had to be studied directly. Arlette Sérullaz, director of the musée Delacroix since 1984, writes in a musée de Louvre publication on the drawings:

"En 1845, à l'occasion de l'exposition organisée, salle Valentino, par le peintre américain Georges Catlin (1794-1872) des peintres de sa *Galerie indienne*, un groupe d'Indiens Iowas donna un spectacle de danses rituelle, pour le plus grand plaisir du public. En septembre de la même année, un second groupe d'Indiens, de la tribu des Ojibwas, se produisit à Paris. Intrigué par leurs costumes et leurs danses… Delacroix les dessina à plusieurs reprises: en dehors de la feuille du Louvre…."[8]

Seeing the sketch at the Louvre's Pavillon de Flore, le département des arts graphique was like traveling back in time to when he first drew it, looking fresh, every line an immediacy of romantic passion. Foreign and coming from a former colony, I sat at a large table in a salon with a gilded ornate ceiling, putti holding garlands at the cornices, and drew directly from the study. The moment was intimidating and inspirational, surrounded by empire and glory, art as a frontier without cultural borders.

Delacroix had already painted with sympathetic emotion "les Natchez" (1835), ten years before seeing and drawing the Ojibwa. His inspiration was Chateaubriand's novel Atala, a story of the last Natchez couple resting on the banks of the Mississippi as their baby is dying from the mother's tainted milk. The subject of this painting is personal and political, the idea of annihilation, a period in America and Europe that endured until the mid twentieth century.


figure 8

The psychological aspect of the lower panels of the paintings with their singular image of a micro-organism taken from a buffalo hide robe was deliberate. Hides were often decorated in a mnemonic style of painting and were used as objects of exchange between nations and changed hands often. I saw this particular robe at le musée du quai Branly (figure eight). Its detail visually refers to an earlier work of mine, "Postscript", which dealt with the previously mentioned correspondence between Amherst and Bouquet and their usage of the word "vermine". Its French-influenced motif likely has a provenance east of the Great Lakes. The combination of a traditional style with popular tulips mingling with parrots perhaps places it at the Convent of the

Ursulines in Quebec founded by Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672) where the first students were Algonkian girls. I wanted to demystify the smallpox, the Ojibwa in my paintings had to be standing as in having survived. The image became medicine by acknowledging how it had been used so that a new history can be told. To this end, Hervé Dagois, an artist and animator was commissioned to create a video that would celebrate a contemporary healing dance known as the jingle dress dance.

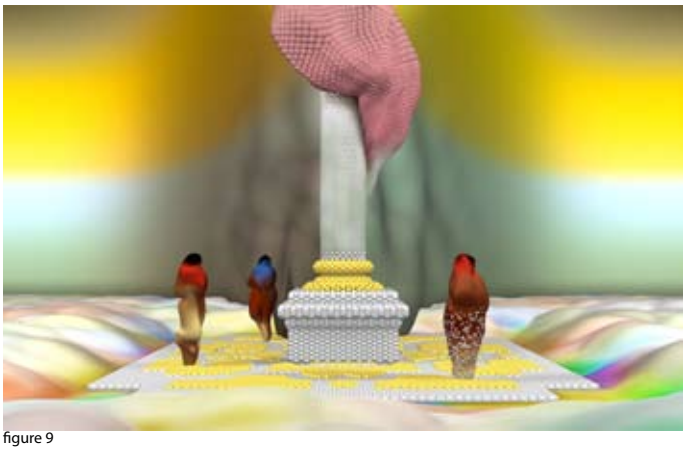
figure 9

The poetry Dagois lavishes on the healing dance is so optimistic and reassuring (figure nine).

The concept of *une esthétique de la disparition*, first came to my attention from French postmodern philosophical ruptures from Sartre and Camus to Baudrillard and Virlio. Virilio's metaphors of the postmodern body as a war machine, and the irradiation of the mediascape by a "logistics of perception" is discussed at length in "The Possessed Individual: Technology and the French Postmodern", by Arthur Kroker, where he writes about Virilio's discourse on the political history of the late twentieth century, the fateful fin de millennium.[9]

Paul Virilio argues for taking account of interruptions in the rhythm of human consciousness and morphological irruptions in the physical dimension. The engaging dialogue about First Nations and their voice in the West had first come into focus for me while writing "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones" for the exhibition, "Land Spirit Power" at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992. I was also encouraged by a commissioned translation


figure 10

by Shena Wilson of Nelcya Delanoë's essay, "Dernière rencontre, ou comment Baudelaire, George Sand et Delacroix s'éprirent des Indiens du peintre Catlin" in which Delanoë questions whether the phylogenic evidence functioned in a closed circuit. Were North American Indians created with a false authenticity by using "en vrais trompe l'oeil"? The knowledge about us, even today is minimal and fictional; often we are two-dimensional living in an imagination created by the dream machines in Hollywood.[10]

Paris/Ojibwa is an empty room made from deconstruction, not constrained by apocalyptic tones, a language of manifesto that still respects classical forms or at least attempts to respect them. When it comes to looking at and "reading" the installation, it is Anishnabe history, which speaks of healing from the ravenous gaze of pending disappearance. It is a voice of endurance claiming the sacred heritage of a sweat lodge representing the universe and connecting the participants to the past, the earth and the spiritual world. The photograph (figure ten) of a frame of a peyote sweat lodge by Edward Curtis (1868-1952) represents a place for the spirit and body to heal. This haunting image of a sacred structure looks sanitized by its lack of any human activity, where is the covering? However, coming from the prairies of southern Manitoba, this image of "Medicine Lodges" (figure eleven) is more significant. Working on Paris/Ojibwa and dealing with medicine and healing, I needed something authentic from my life, a personal and cultural connection, such as my memory of going to sun dances in my early teens. I recall those teepees with no entrances, their mystery intensified when you realize that the doors were painted. They were abstract. And as if by magic,


figure 11

someone would move the bundles affixed to a tripod outside of them during the day as if following the sun.

The painted figures, a shaman, a warrior, a dancer and a healer become abstract monochromatic icons whose indigenous roots connect to the landscape in each painting. Together they are a poetic, symbolic, transatlantic return home through the magic of art, the spiritual aspect of memory (figure twelve).

Robert Houle, Toronto, March 2010

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figure 12

Michael Eagan is a theatre designer whose work has been seen in major Canadian theatres for more than three decades. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of New Brunswick and subsequently graduated in design from the National Theatre School of Canada. His first designs were for Centaur Theatre, the Saidye Bronfman Centre and Compagnie Jean Duceppe. He went on to work extensively in Toronto at Tarragon Theatre, Toronto Workshop Productions, The Canadian Stage Company, Theatre Plus, Théâtre français de Toronto among many others. Across Canada he has designed for theatres, virtually from coast to coast, with numerous design credits for Neptune Theatre (Halifax), The Atlantic Theatre Festival (Wolfville), Théàtre de l'Escaouette (Moncton), Theatre New Brunswick (Fredericton), National Arts Centre (Ottawa), The Grand Theatre (London, ON), Manitoba Theatre Centre (Manitoba), Rainbow Stage (Manitoba), Prairie Theatre Exchange (Winnipeg), Theatre Calgary (Calgary), Alberta Theatre Projects (Calgary), The Citadel Theatre (Edmonton), Bastion Theatre (Victoria), as well as the Shaw and Stratford Festivals.

Eagan's work has also included projects for the lyric stage, ballet, musical theatre, circus and cabaret. He designed *Les Contes d'Hoffman* for Opéra de Montréal, *Happy New Year* on Broadway in New York, *The Rake's Progress* at the Banff Festival of the Arts, *The Sleeping Beauty* for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, *Canadian Fantasy Circus* (Kobe, Japan), *Le Diner Farfelu* for le Casino de Montreal and *Les Portes tournantes* and *Amadeus* for the Atlantic Ballet Theatre.

He has had a parallel career in education and has taught at the University of Toronto and continues to teach at the National Theatre School, where he was director of the scenography section from 1987 to 1998. Michael is originally from New Brunswick, but has lived in Montreal for many years and is currently working on his book, "The Eye of the Prince: A Selected History of Scenographic Perspective."

Hervé Dagois received his post graduate diploma in information technology from the University of Paris VI (Pierre et Marie Curie) but has also painted for many years. He first began to paint in Paris but moved to Toronto for four years in the 1990's where he developed and exhibited his work. Hervé currently lives and works in Paris where he researches and creates cutting edge 3D animations and videos and runs his own web design company.

Rich Dawson is head of carpentry for Centaur Theatre Company in Montreal, Quebec.

Daniel Barkley graduated with both a BFA and MFA from Concordia University, Barkley originally focused his studies in film production aspiring to make his own films. After working in the film industry for seven years Barkley decided to go back to painting. In addition to his studio practice Barkley teaches set painting at the National Theatre School of Canada and is head scenic artist at Centaur Theatre Company. Daniel exhibits throughout Canada, the United States and internationally. His most recent show was at the O'Connor Gallery in Toronto in November of 2009.

Notes

[1] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Boston, Princeton University Press: 1992), p. 25.

[2] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*, originally published in 1855.

[3] Charles Baudelaire, "Le Calumet de Paix," *Les Fleurs de Mal*, originally published in 1868.

[4] George Catlin, *Catlin's Notes of Eight Years' Travels and Residence in Europe, with his North American Indian Collection*, originally published in 1848.

[5] Maungwudaus (George Henry), *An Account of the Chippewa Indians Who Have Been Travelling Among the Whites in the United States, England, Ireland, Scotland, France and Belgium*, originally published in 1848. This travelogue was first brought to my attention in 2007 by Barry Ace.

[6] Michael Bell, *Robert Houle's Palisade* (Ottawa, Carlton University Art Gallery: 2001). This exhibition catalogue provides a wealth of endnotes and original sources about smallpox and General Amherst.

[7] Mark A. Cheetham, *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance and Cure Since the 60's* (Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press: 2006). This influential book gives a revisionary account of abstract art and the narratives of purity and autonomy.

[8] Arlette Sérullaz, *Delacroix* (Paris, Musée du Louvre: 2004), p. 87.

[9] Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada: 1992) p.p. 44-73.

[10] Nelcya Delanoë, "Dernière rencontre, ou comment Baudelaire, George Sand et Delacroix s'éprirent des Indiens du peintre Catlin," *Destins Croisés: Cinq siècles de rencontres avec les Amériidiens* (Paris, Albin Michel/UNESCO: 1992). English translation commissioned by the artist from Shena Wilson, 2006. I am indebted to Nelcya for her insightful observations on *une esthétique de la disparition* which started me on this journey in 2006.

Figures

Figure 1 – Photo of Lake Manitoba. This photograph of Lake Manitoba was taken from the cemetery on the Sandy Bay First Nation Reserve. Photo credit: Robert Houle.

Figure 2 – Italian anti-immigration poster, "The sort of propaganda that one can now find in Europe manages, if often just barely, to skirt racism laws. In Italy, the Lega Nord, part of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's ruling coalition, has circulated various anti-immigrant posters." (New York Times, "When Fear Turns Graphic", January 14, 2010).

Figure 3 – Maungwudaus' troupe. An 1851 daguerreotype of six of the Chippewa (Ojibwa) that visited Europe in 1845. Photo credit: Chicago Historical Society.

Figure 4 – "Postscript" is part of the installation, Palisade, (Robert Houle, 1999) that investigates the "history" of the interactions of the First Nations and the colonizers, military and settlers. The work references an actual postscript in a letter from Colonel Henry Bouquet to General Amherst, dated 13 July 1763 in which Bouquet suggests that the distribution of smallpox infested blankets would "…I think effectively extirpate or remove that Vermine".

Figure 5 – Sketch of Pont du Change, Paris, (Robert Houle, 2006).

Figure 6 – "Louis-Philippe assistant dans un salon des Tuileries a la danse d'Indiens hovas. 21 avril 1845", 1846, (Karl Girardet, 1813-1871), collection of Musée national du Château de Versailles. Photo credit: Agence photographique de la Réunion des musées nationaux.

Figure 7 – "Cinq études d'Indiens", (Eugene Delacroix, 1845), plume encre brune, sur papier velin, collection of the Louvre. Delacroix drew these Ojibwa during a performance at the Salle Valentino.

Figure 8 – Louis XIV – style motif buffalo hide, undated, collection of the musée du quai Branly.

Figure 9 – Preliminary image from video/animation "uhnemekéka" for "Paris/Ojibwa" (Hervé Dagois, 2010).

Figure 10 – "Frame of Peyote Sweat-Lodge" (Edward S. Curtis. 1927).

Figure 11 – Medicine Lodges. This is one of a series of images taken from a set of postcards by A. Young & Co., August 30, 1907 of a gathering in Fort Macleod, Alberta.

Figure 12 – Houle Studio. Robert Houle in his studio with the "Paris/Ojibwa", January 2010. Photo credit: Michael Cullen.