

Round Table Final Report:
Submitted by Ryan Rice, Round Table Coordinator
On behalf of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective

DAY ONE (June 9, 2005)

Upon a rooftop patio overlooking Ottawa's cityscape and the Gatineau Hills, senior Anishinabe artist and pipe carrier Leo Yerxa spoke gentle and sound words to a circle of First Nations, Métis and Inuit curators, writers and artists who gathered in the nation's capitol for a round table on Aboriginal curatorial and critical practice. Leo's opening remarks set a particular temperament for the two-day meeting held on June 9 and 10, 2005, by acknowledging the continued efforts of the Aboriginal arts community's drive towards a greater recognition and rightful place within the discourse of art and history. His tone, interjected with humor as well as insight, reminded the participants that a curator, who holds a unique place within art's structure, should never mistaken their position with that of the Creator's. With such a wise outlook, the assembled guests proceeded to the round table with his words in mind.

Back on solid ground in the Winter Salon boardroom of the Albert at Bay Suites, 17 participants from across the country took their place at the table for a discussion based upon a proposal "A Framework for Action," submitted by a newly formed alliance - the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective. The ACC, formed after years of dialogue, discussion, informal conversations and email amongst peers, quickly came to fruition in April 2005 when Barry Ace and William Kingfisher met with Louise Profeit-Leblanc, Aboriginal Arts Coordinator Aboriginal Arts Secretariat and Jim Logan, Program Officer of the Canada Council for the Arts to discuss the possibility of developing and co-plementing a strategy for action to improve the existing and long-term opportunities for Aboriginal curators, critics, writers and curatorial residents within the arts community at large. Through the formation of the ACC, comprised of a working group that included Barry Ace, William Kingfisher and Ron Noganosh, as well as Steve Loft, Cathy Mattes, and Ryan Rice, the collective was invited to submit a proposal to the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat for consideration of funding a round table discussion for the purpose to identify the needs and discrepancies in Aboriginal curatorial practice. The proposal identified the ACC's motivation for its creation and need for a national round table to identify and discuss short-term and long-term issues, challenges and opportunities which could lead to the development of a long-term strategic plan to enhance and support a stronger Aboriginal presence with the arts. The accepted proposal identified a number of emerging, independent and resident curators, writers and the two Aboriginal artist-run-centers who were invited for consultation. Since many of the participants were working outside of established art institutions, each one brought a unique voice to the table by addressing their needs and desires for determining realistic goals to enhance a dynamic and attainable path for an Aboriginal curatorial practice to prosper.

The round table participants included Barry Ace, Frank Shebageget, Lori Blondeau, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Steve Loft, Daina Warren, Ryan Rice, William Kingfisher, Jeff Thomas, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Heather Igloliorte, Marcia Crosby, Leanne L'Hirondelle, July Papatsie and Ukjese Van Kampen. Two senior artists, Ron Noganosh and Edward Poitras were invited to give an artist perspective relevant to curatorial activities. Dana Claxton and Elwood Jimmy had to cancel at last minute due to family matters, while Cathy Mattes, Candice Hopkins, Pat Deadman, Guy Sioui Durand, Greg Hill and Robert Houle either had other obligations or did not respond. In an attempt to broaden the scope of the Aboriginal curatorial community, a number of curators and writers from south of the border were invited as guests if they could afford the personal expense to attend. Although none of the US invitees attended, several responded and acknowledged the importance for a gathering of this nature. Mr. Tom Hill, the first recognized Aboriginal curator in Canada, was also approached to act as an advisor/mentor, but his prior commitments placed him in Washington, D.C. on the dates of our round table. Mr. Hill was very supportive and excited about our initiative and the formation of a national curatorial collective. Other participants who were critical to disseminating information on programs and initiatives over the two-days included Canada Council for the Arts personnel, Ms. Louise Profeit-Leblanc, Aboriginal Arts Coordinator, Aboriginal Arts Secretariat, Mr. Paul Seeseequasis, Program Officer, Writing and Publishing, Mr. Claude Schryer, Off The Radar, Ms. Marianne "Mandy" Heggveit, Acting Head of Visual Arts, and Mr. Craig MacNaughton of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), an academic funding agency.

The two-day sessions began as Barry Ace welcomed all participants to the Round Table on behalf of the ACC and introduced Ms. Louise Profeit-Leblanc, which was followed by a round of introductions by all of the participants. The magnitude of professionalism and expertise seated around the table provided an impressive indication of the diversity of our community across the nation. Everyone came to the table in the capacity of a curator but their competence didn't end there. Most of the participants also wear different hats in their "daily" occupations as art administrators, directors, cultural workers, artists, academics, civil servants, interpreters, and graduate students from reserves, urban and suburban centers. It became clear that the Aboriginal curatorial landscape is certainly not underrepresented in a qualified/professional sense, but rather, it became apparent that Aboriginal curators are very seriously underrepresented in the nation's arts institutions, galleries, museums and artist-run centres on the local, provincial, national and international stage. Professional development offered by the Canada Council for the Arts, Aboriginal Curatorial Residency Program has afforded many curators to work in their chosen field, but the hiring of an Aboriginal curator by a host institution has been a far cry from reality. After years of study and great effort by our pioneers such as Tom Hill, Rick Hill, Lee Ann Martin, Robert Houle, and Gerald McMaster among others, the power of

mainstream institutions and Western ideals still monopolize an art history (national and global) that continues to undervalue Aboriginal arts, past and present. It is in this spirit that the need for the round table discussion on developing future networking strategies are vital and imperative if an Aboriginal arts discourse is going to thrive and make known our important contributions.

Ms. Louise Profeit Leblanc expressed her gratitude for the ACC coming together and "taking up the reigns" to re-address the needs of the Aboriginal curatorial community, an issue first supported by the Canada Council in 1997. Eight years have transpired since the first historic meeting of First Nations, Inuit and Métis curators, yet the opportunities for Aboriginal curators still have numerous limitations and barriers. Ms. Profeit-Leblanc eagerly supported the development and initiatives of the ACC and its strategy for empowering a greater networking capacity that would evolve out of the round table discussions as informative and imperative for the positive development of the Aboriginal arts community. She insisted that the arts and academic community writ large needs to be better informed by Aboriginal voices offering accurate information about what is being exhibited and experienced. The exhibition "Dezhanejan" presented at the Canadian Embassy in conjunction with the Canada Council Art Bank opened at the inauguration of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. was put forth as one example where an Aboriginal curator or writer was overlooked from the curatorial end and critical process. Ms. Profeit-Leblanc recognizes the ACC as an important step towards "making right" in these recurring situations and poses the question, "How is the full truth being known here in Canada, about Aboriginal art? When half of it is being left out, on a continuous basis in these institutions that house our art, that invite Aboriginal artists to come into their space and perform their art, or to show their art in different mediums."

Barry Ace then presented the proposal for "A Framework of Action" (<http://aboriginalcuratorialcollective.org/PDF/framework.pdf>) that addresses such standing issues and challenges faced by Aboriginal curators, critics and writers in depth. He indicated how marginality is still very problematic and is a common experience for the Aboriginal arts community. The need for an organization with a national scope is a much-needed authority, something that has been lacking since the demise of the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA), to combat inequalities and missed opportunities. Ace says that, "Although we are out there, lots slip by us." But in order for the ACC to exist, it shouldn't be a volunteer organization, rather a structure with incorporation and full-time paid staff with access to on-going annual funding. The collective will only survive if it sustains itself and the Aboriginal curatorial community works together. Many ideas regarding the proposal were discussed including publishing opportunities as well as activities that would involve monitoring, assessing and consulting processes and measures to ensure government, museum and arts institutions are on track with presenting and supporting Aboriginal involvement and/or consultation with

their initiatives and programming. Ace also entertained the notion for future consideration in which the ACC can act as a Centre for Curatorial Excellence and work towards acquiring the National Indian Art Collection from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DIAND). He provided a brief history of both the Indian and Inuit art collections history, and how a transfer has been in discussion for many years.

The round table opened in a lively discussion on policy, and how ACC could be active in making changes at a government level in structures like Canada Council for the Arts, Canadian Heritage and DIAND and others as the needs arise. Barry Ace explained the differences between guidelines and policy, the latter being a legal matter, governed by Treasury Board that affects policy change. An immediate objective identified by the ACC recommended improvements to existing programs as well as the implementation of performance measurement mechanisms to aid in assessing "How effective are the existing programs in serving the community?" and if so, "how well and effective are they?" Future cooperative relationships between ACC and other governmental bodies would provide important assessment opportunities and enable the development of effective long-term planning and forecasting, funding requirements and assessments and integral support mechanisms that would encourage programs and organizations to self-assess on an on-going basis. Lori Blondeau, Director of Tribe, Inc. felt that smaller institutions needed to wake up as well and should invest more into their programming aside from doing the one "Indian" show a year, given the reality that the Aboriginal community is growing rapidly in many provinces. ACC would need to take a critical look at how our community (artists, curators, historians, writers etc.) is positioned in institutions, museums and artist-run centres to make sure they are not just filling a gap. Barry Ace cited one curatorial approach in our national art institutions is problematic because historical re-visioning attempts to integrate a pan-Aboriginal representation that never existed before into the framework of Canadian history. This is a growing concern for it is a non-Aboriginal approach that overwrites our distinct and diverse nations and makes assumptions of a desire to re/present Canadian art history as an ever-present inclusive history.

In order to ensure achievability of our goals, the ACC needs to exist as a National Service Organization, steered by a relevant vision. Steve Loft, Director of Urban Shaman, concurred and added that ACC "can generate policy that can be instituted" but cautioned us to be careful not to be redundant and overlap other organizational roles. Instead, Loft stated that we need "to be part of the larger cultural ecology," not just as advocates but also as generators of policy for efficient change. To accomplish such goals, ACC will review models that have and have not been successful in order not to "re-invent the wheel." Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew suggested we have to stimulate our peers and recommended one place to consider is the Canadian Museum Association and its membership. He also shared his experience of institutional racist attitudes from 1992, where certain officers

at the Canada Council felt that Aboriginal communities did not constitute a "critical audience" for advancement. Ms. Profeit-Leblanc assured the round table that these attitudes are no longer evident or relevant. One aspect she did find in her program was the lack of opportunities for "youth and elders." A consensus that emerged from the round table was in agreement that our approach to curatorial practice should be one to connect and recognize our own community as a focal point, whether be it young or old, from urban, reserve, or north or south populations.

The interchange among participants also discussed our "community" as a catalyst that can give power to our voice. As Aboriginal curators, and experts in the field, discussion continued to recognize the need to develop our own language and terminology (as July Papatsie put it "explaining it Aboriginally!"), as well as a framework for an Aboriginal art history outside of the dominant Western discourse. Daina Warren felt that it is crucial for the ACC to provide a forum to talk about art as well. Skawennati Tricia Fragnito agreed and said she wants to "be in an organization that talks about art...creating our language, and taking time to look at our own practices." Jeff Thomas raised the important point of the need to set standards by our own rule and by sharing our experiences and how they are achieved. Thomas believes the power to do so may be found in the establishment of the ACC. Marcia Crosby added that our community is complex and we shouldn't hesitate to write from that experience. She believes that it leads to respect, power and interest for our voices. She stated further that we should not worry about getting ghettoized; rather, we should worry about becoming prescriptive. Crosby feels that ACC will allow curators and writers to have a "bigger voice."

Lively discussions during the first day also included topics for further inquiry including intellectual property rights and the protection of traditional knowledge, promotion and exploitation in curatorial practice, naming and authority. July Papatsie gave examples faced by Inuit artists who continue to be exploited and their livelihood used by non-Inuit for profit and to acquire expertise. His role as curator in certain institutional circumstances and proficiency in Inuit traditional knowledge has been put to task through a hierarchal model of so-called collaborations. Others curators have shared their experiences of being exploited and consumed by institutions and non-Aboriginals who work in the field of arts to the point where they have felt that if they didn't get involved, it wouldn't get done. In one case, Steve Loft identified the issue of post-secondary arts curriculum disservices Aboriginal art history because it is always condensed into a 45-minute guest lecture by an "expert" instead of a semester long course. These types of strategies need to be critiqued, identified and challenged to ensure appropriate and accurate information is being respected at all levels of education.

Experiences of naming who we are was also discussed, a situation in which Marcia Crosby identified as being repetitive and on going since the 70s. What terminology do we use to identify ourselves? Is our art Indian Art?

Are we being ghettoized? are some of the recurring questions that continue to pervade us and these questions have not changed, been answered or cleared from our conscience. Several people responded to the issue and it was felt that certain forms of labeling and self-identification can result in homogenizing and relegate the diversity of nations into a convenient form of "Other." Institutions, who continue to support colonialist attitudes, have created a serious quandary by trying to fit us in. In order for our Aboriginal arts community to confront these issues head on, we need to identify ourselves rather than allow the institutions do it for us. Barry Ace reminded us that history has made many of our people to be ashamed of whom they are. By reclaiming our identities, we invest in our uniqueness in both personal and professional matters that are always in constant flux. In the end, each of us must approach these issues from different perspectives until an individual comfort level has been obtained and proper terminology identifies us as distinct Nations in Canada.

DAY TWO (June 10, 2005)

The morning session addressed regional issues that were presented by several of the participants. Ukjese Van Kampen insightfully presented on the Yukon arts scene. The Aboriginal people of the Yukon, who make up 25% of the population, are underrepresented and / or misrepresented in exhibition and museum displays. The Athabaskan people, who make up the majority of the Aboriginal population, are dominated by neighboring Tlingit aesthetics due to its marketability and acknowledgement by government personnel as "representative" of the region. He says the Athabaskan people feel forgotten and left out. The Society of Yukon Artists of Native Ancestry (SYANA) are still active, but often find themselves placed in compromising situations to fill in gaps in public programming, often perceived as tokenism. Van Kampen also discussed an upcoming exhibition in which the Alaska Highway is examined. Unfortunately the non-Aboriginal curator has not included a First Nations perspective on the history and development of the highway, which in turn has had an enormous impact on the traditional lands and life ways of the Athabaskan peoples. In response to this oversight, many suggestions were made to counteract the omission that keeps colonial history dominant. By initiating dialogue with the curator may be part of the solution, but also a critique of the exhibition through a critical perspective would provide an insight into what is omitted, censored or disregarded. Van Kampen said that a national body such as the ACC could provide support by calling to task certain situations that require resolution. By creating awareness and sharing regional information of "happenings" at all levels (local, national and international), the ACC will effectively privilege our curatorial practice. The need for a national network is a necessity that will allow for a support system to exist and grow. (*Ukjese Van Kampen recently brought us up to date via email on July 7, 2005 to tell us that an Aboriginal artist is included in the Alaskan Highway themed exhibition.*)

To further an impact to our practice, an Aboriginally written discourse needs to be made accessible. In order to make this a reality, William Kingfisher stated that the criticality of publishing our experiences could exist through exploring and taking advantage of publishing opportunities for periodical and comprehensive texts (in reference to Paul Seesequasis and Craig MacNaughton's presentations). He explains that we need to create our own space, outside of the gallery, where we can speak to ourselves through the pages of a journal. Kingfisher identified a copy of Olive Dickason's "Indian Art in Canada," published in 1972, as an example of the "most up-to-date" survey of Aboriginal art history by an Aboriginal person. A proposed comprehensive art text could compile 40 plus years of writings on issues revolving around contemporary art practice from a variety of perspectives by Aboriginal curators, art historians, anthropologists, artists and cultural workers. Inclusion of academic and non-academic analysis would stimulate all levels of pedagogy and interest. Ryan Rice compiled bibliographies from each of the participants to assess collectively the publishing experience as well as to sample the extent of written work produced. He agrees with Kingfisher regarding the need to access this body of work for advancing and enhancing our research processes either in "support of" or "challenges to" our ideas. The availability of such resources is beyond reach because many articles, essays and catalogues are self-produced, in-house publications or limited in print runs. The national art documentation centre, ARTEXTE (Montreal), only lists 35 documents related to Aboriginal art, with more than half authored by non-natives. Rice suggests that it is vital for an Aboriginal bibliography be produced as well as accessible via a documentation centre or online database.

Artists Ron Noganosh and Edward Poitras offered their advice on issues related to curatorial duties. Noganosh circulated a document that included his concerns on artist fees, exhibition fees, copyright and artist/curator relations for the round table members to take notice and discuss. Poitras informed the round table on the issue of moral rights being a priority in the relationship between artist and curator. By observing these rights, the artist will be rightfully identified as the creator of his/her work, who will also ensure its integrity. Curators ought to bear in mind that Aboriginal artworks from institutional collections need to be re-assessed properly as works that embrace a history. A curator should seek an artist's permission to include their work in an exhibition and initiate dialogue as a common practice. Poitras stressed the fact that curators should consciously position works within a proper context. Discussion also focused on the role of curators and their need to understand the content of contracts and how it can affect the artist and their work. In larger institutions, the curator becomes a liaison between the artist and the internal bureaucracy of the organization. In this position, the curator should be supportive and dedicated to their artists.

The afternoon session shifted to welcome a discussion with Ms. Marrienne Hettveig, acting Head of Visual Arts, Canada Council for the Arts, pertaining to the Aboriginal Curator In Residence program. She inquired

about the round tables opinion of the program and said that feedback would be most valuable to the program officers. Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, one of the first recipients of the grant, said she had a wonderful experience at the Walter Philips Gallery because she had the opportunity to focus strictly on her duties as curator. Smaller institutions and some artist-run centres do not always have the luxury of providing an ideal situation to support a residency. One issue of concern addressed accountability and suggested an assessment of the host institutions commitment and investment. Otherwise, the curator in residence only fills a temporary void for arts organizations to address marginality, community and equal opportunity. It was discussed that a two-year residency is essential, and should be granted automatically to successful applicants. An international program / exchange is also desired by curators.

The balance of the afternoon was reserved for the round table participants to come to a decision as to whether or not the ACC is valid. Barry Ace led the discussion and posed the question "Should the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective exist?" All participants were in agreement and also supported the prospect of the ACC becoming a national service organization. Ace brought forth recommendations in need of endorsement by the participants (now members). The objectives, culled from the round table discussions and the ACC's proposal for "A Framework for Action," were identified as immediate, short-term and long term. They include:

IMMEDIATE

- The Aboriginal Curatorial Collective is endorsed as a national and representational organization.
- The name, Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC), will be the working title for the organization until another name is favored.
- The participants of the round table are invited to become members of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective.
- The members of ACC will continue to support and work together to fully develop the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective's mandate, scope, structure, strategic policy direction and membership criteria.

SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

- The ACC needs to define the parameters in which it is willing to take on.
- Support the Canada Council for the Art Curator in Residence program in an advisory capacity, as well as other relevant programs deemed appropriate. This may include strategic policy direction, performance and evaluation processes.
- To develop, maintain and monitor national statistical data pertaining to the curatorial community and relevant art institutions and organizations in Canada.
- To examine, develop and adopt the most appropriate organizational

- model and practices for the objectives of the ACC.
- To examine the impact and scope of national and international work by the United Nations on the protection of traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights, and how they may pertain to Aboriginal cultural based arts and the Aboriginal curatorial practice and writings.
 - To recognize and support collaborative initiatives and establish working relationships with organizations such as Nation To Nation, Tribe, Inc., and Urban Shaman.
 - To incorporate the ACC as a national non-profit organization.
 - To access information related to existing policy development, related legislation and directives supporting the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat and other Aboriginal programming at the Canada Council for the Arts, in order for the ACC to identify and influence effective policy change.
 - A TikiWiki was developed in order to provide a forum for immediate national communication, dialogue and consensus building.
 - A final report to be submitted by Round Table coordinator by July 15, 2005
 - Urban Shaman in Winnipeg will host a 2nd round table for the fall of 2005. Funding needs to be secured.
 - Grant application for Writing and Publishing was submitted on June 25, 2005.

LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES

- To develop the ACC as a self-sustaining entity.
- To explore self-sustaining options, such as developing the ACC as a national centre for excellence in curatorial practice, research and curatorial development.
- To develop professional standards for the ACC's membership that can be used as a model for curatorial fees, collaborative and research protocols and access to information.
- To develop a communication strategy for engaging and stimulating horizontal organizations such as the CMA, CARFAC, and provincial/national arts institutions and organizations.
- To develop a journal publication that will consolidate and commission curatorial and critical writing on Aboriginal art, that will be relevant in its contribution to an Aboriginal arts discourse.
- To publish a comprehensive text on the history of Indian art in Canada, documenting the contributions of the aboriginal arts community.
- To develop a resource/documentation centre for use and access by the ACC and Aboriginal community. A physical space can house documentation as a front end and an online resource can provide information on accessing materials. The web site will also contain pertinent information for curators, researchers and those interested in the arts, and will include job posting, exhibition announcements, articles, book reviews and online exhibitions.
- To reassess the viability of the ACC after a term of 5 years as an on-going process of internal performance measurement.

The objectives, sanctioned by the 17 members seated at the round table, will act as the framework of action for the ACC to pursue. Barry Ace thanked everyone for participating in the two-day gathering and invited Leo Yerxa to formally close the round table. The conviction and goals of the ACC was created by a community, in order for Aboriginal arts and curatorial practice to be acknowledged and shared in many communities. "We need to tell our own story," as Jeff Thomas reminded us, because it speaks of our unique experiences and histories.

IMMEDIATE ACHEIVEMENTS

The effort to build the ACC began immediately following the round table.

- Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew set up a WIKI on ACC's own URL - www.aboriginalcuratorialcollective.org.
- A working committee was formed to put together a grant application for Writing and Publishing. (Marcia Crosby, Lori Blondeau, Daina Warren, Ryan Rice)
- A working committee was formed to conceive the structure of the ACC. (Barry Ace, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Jeff Thomas, Steve Loft and Ukjese Van Kampen)
- A working committee to seek funding for the next ACC round table was formed. (Barry Ace, Steve Loft/Urban Shaman)
- A working committee was put together to research and craft an application for a SSHRC grant. (William Kingfisher, Leanne L'Hirondelle, Marcia Crosby, Lori Blondeau and Ukjese Van Kampen)
- A "blurb" summarizing the meeting was submitted by Ryan Rice, and is posted on the Canada Council for the Arts website. It reads...

"Members of the Aboriginal Curatorial community (independent, emerging, artist-run, and in-residence) convened for a round table discussion that was held in Ottawa on June 9 and 10, 2005. Hosted by the newly formed Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, curators and critics discussed issues related to curatorial practice, publishing and the national Aboriginal art diaspora.

The ACC's proposal "A Framework for Action" identified and led the discussion towards short-term and long-term goals, challenges and opportunities to enhance and support an Aboriginal presence within the arts. The two day gathering, supported by the Aboriginal Secretariat of the Canada Council for the Arts, recognized the need for on-going support for Aboriginal critics and curators in writing, research and publishing in order to contribute an Aboriginal voice to the discourse of art history writ large."

- Documentation of roundtable being transferred to DVD.

TO DO and CONSIDER LIST (from issues brought up during the round table)

Membership – Once structure is in place, membership will be open up to Aboriginal curators, writers, artists, art historians and others who work within the arts and cultural milieu.

Regional Representation – It was discussed that it is important to have representation across the board, but we do have to realize that if there is no one in any specific territory, we do not have to create a “curator” out of necessity.

Bibliography – The ACC needs to research and compile a comprehensive list of work written by Aboriginal curators, critics etc. It was also discussed that a bibliography of non-native essays, catalogues and text be compiled as well as a list of academia, who work in the field of Aboriginal art and history.

Pedagogy – Packages of writings could be collected and circulated as a resource we can all submit to and use.

Presence – It is important to get Aboriginal voices into the public. Several conferences such as NAASA, CAA, and CMA among others are forums to present our work.

Art – We need to include a forum for sharing our practice and discussing artwork. The next round table needs to include this in the agenda.