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OFF THE RADAR: INITIATIVES IN CRITICAL THINKING April 2004

Full Circle : First Nations Performance
Vancouver, BC

Public Forum Summary: Renewal and Transformation

March 6, 2004 Roundhouse Community Centre

Submitted by: Michelle La Flamme (April 2004)

This public forum addressed the use of Aboriginal traditions in contemporary performance. The panelists were Jeanette Armstrong and Maria Campbell with Margo Kane as the moderator. All of these women have worked in the arts and have been instrumental in community initiatives that encourage the growth and development of Aboriginal communities. These three women gathered in order to engage an arts community in a discussion they have been involved with for a number of years.

The purpose of this forum was to stimulate a public discussion and engage in critical thinking about contemporary Native art that incorporates traditional elements, interdisciplinarity, artists and community collaborations. The central thematic questions for the forum were:

1. What issues are relevant when indigenous people present work out of their original context: to other nations and to non-Native audiences who may have limited information as to the cultural context for the work they are witnessing?
2. What forms, protocols and paradigms are there for Aboriginal artists who work from and through their traditions?

Context

This discourse may be usefully placed within the current contemporary context whereby artists are seeking new answers and posing new questions to the larger field of representations, indigeneity and tradition within contemporary Native art. Margo Kane referred to a series of workshops that took place (1989-1990) called "Telling Our Own Stories" and the conversations

that were engaged in at that time as a precursor to this conversation. Her desire was to continue those conversations as more artists are presenting their work but the questions remain central to critical appraisals of how traditions are incorporated in contemporary Native art. One of the goals of these conversations is to break down the isolation that many Native artists experience and also to call upon traditional people who are mentors and elders to enter into this conversation and add their perspectives to this conversation.

Summary

Margo opened what she referred to as a “conversation” by outlining the goals of her company Full Circle:

1. To create opportunities for Aboriginal artists to tell their own stories in their own ways.
2. To develop the tools, skills and formats that are of their choosing.
3. To provide a space for artists to experiment with form that stem from Aboriginal performance culture.

Margo: Can you speak to the challenges faced by contemporary Native artists? Are those challenges different from those facing Native artists who were creating work in the seventies?

Maria spoke about the need for spaces for artist to do their work and also for administrative/managers/technicians to be trained to support the work that is being produced. In addition, Maria spoke of the need for Native performers/writers to understand the responsibility they have when working with traditional elements. She said she feared that elders might not be passing on the protocols to the youth of today. Maria also suggested that some sensitivity and protocols are needed even when Native performers from one nation play Native people from different nations.

Jeanette referred to the importance of Aboriginal publishing houses, the importance of writing within one’s original language and problems of translation and language retention facing many Native communities.

Margo spoke of the importance of art that breaks free from simply documenting Native reality. She spoke of the Native artists’ role as not solely that of a “mirror” but that the art should also say “what if.” She stated that the Native artist also has a responsibility to offer the possibility of a dream and that art should bring joy, inspiration and hope to communities that are struggling.

Multidisciplinarity or transdisciplinary?

Margo: Can we talk about the importance of having these kinds of conversations (such as the forum) across disciplinary boundaries?

Jeanette said it is difficult to say if she is a writer/visual artist or administrator. For her, the artist has to pay attention to the impulse to create and the right form/material/way to say something that wants to emerge and that the impulse to create may suggest that an artist work within a number of different forms. Her views of the creative impulse were heavily influenced by her

spiritual training and by Medicine people who taught her how to look at objects in a traditional way as part of creation with their own special energies.

Margo spoke of her training as an artist and the fact that she developed as an artist initially through “disciplines”. Margo asks herself “How do I express my Aboriginal self in my work?” She still questions what belong on stage and what does not. She came to realize that her training in dance, acting and her vocal training was in keeping with her understanding of the multiple aspects of the Medicine Wheel. The incorporation of different forms and disciplines in performance art seemed to parallel traditional spirituality which suggests that the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual should be in balance and engaged.

Maria spoke of the fact that elders have traditionally used a number of different art forms to express beauty from using silk thread, hooking rugs, scraping hides and that this itself was “multidisciplinary practice” but not labeled that way.

Respondents

Performer Skeena Reece spoke of her use of a traditional Tsimshian mask with the context of her recent performance at the Grunt Gallery in Vancouver. After seeing the reaction of the audience and hearing about some concerns expressed by audience members, she started to question what she had done and whether or not she had followed protocol in dealing with traditional elements in her performance art. Specifically she wondered about the appropriateness of smashing this traditional mask within the context of her performance and using a smudge before and after her performance.

Jeanette responding by referring to the protectiveness that has been developing in Native communities around art because of the history of colonization and the debasing of Native art. She suggested that this colonial history has lead to some Native people “freeze framing” traditional cultural notions for the purpose of a defensive protectionism. She suggests that Native artists consider what these ceremonies were traditionally. Because traditions and art were for the health of the people and yet, those conditions are different in the contemporary context, Jeanette concludes that contemporary Native artists have to ask a new set of question in order to move forward.

Maria suggested that Native artists consider what is the purpose in using traditional objects in performance art. She said Native artist need to ask how the grandmothers would feel about how those traditional elements are being used in order to decide if the use of traditional elements is appropriate.

Margo suggested that Native artists need to ask themselves what is it that they want to evoke for themselves and others when using traditional elements in performance art.

Another respondent, Lisa Ravensberger, suggested that the questions that were being asked at the forum should be shifted to accommodate the community of mixed race people within Aboriginal communities.

Kevin Loring the third respondent referred to contemporary Native art that is progressive.

The final respondent referred to Margo, Maria and Jeanette as “the backbone of our people in Canada”. She stated that she has been a product of the good work that these women have been doing.

My own critical analysis of the event.

After witnessing the conversations that took place at this forum I conclude that there was a consistent decentering of the “I” that is usually at the center of a Western artist perspective. All of these women referred to the creative process by way of community and tradition. They each framed their own artistic practices as part of a larger responsibility they feel toward community empowerment. All of the women spoke of the enormous responsibility Native people have to past traditions of expression, the elders and their teachings and the next generations. The forum demonstrated that the notion of the isolated/alienated tortured artist who does “art for arts sake” and disregards community is something foreign to many Native artists. This traditional holistic view of the world directly impacts notions of responsibility, forms of art, views of multidisciplinary artists, pedagogy and sensitivity to protocols around using traditional elements in performance. Because artistic work is often framed within this traditional awareness, Aboriginal artists often have a number of more penetrating questions because they are unable to see their work in a vacuum.

Ideas about disciplines were also framed differently by each of these artists/panelists. Maria, Margo and Jeanette said that they engaged in multidisciplinary art forms not to be “avant garde” per se, but rather because of Aboriginal notions of the traditional role of art and artists. Variety and diversity of artistic expressions on and off-reserve in Aboriginal communities was a theme echoed by all of the panelists. Each of the panelists had new paradigms to offer on the question of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary.

The fact that the forum brought together a range of ages and voices from within the Native arts community also suggests the importance of community. Perhaps the result of this forum is not about seeking answers to these questions but continuing to engage the arts community, different Native nations and generations into the discussion of some of the questions surrounding the use of traditional elements in the context of contemporary art.