

Report and Points for Consideration

MAWESSINE

UNITED FOR AND THROUGH INDIGENOUS ART



May 1st and 2nd, 2021

Written by: Dave Jenniss



Ondinnok wanted to mark its 35th anniversary by inviting Indigenous artists to a springtime gathering—one worthy of those held by our ancestors. The event took place in Montreal on May 1st and 2nd, 2021, and included traditional opening and closing ceremonies led by Kevin Ka'nahsóhon Deer, Kanien'keha:ka Elder from Kahnawake. He welcomed participants with an opening prayer, teachings and a song. His water drum called to Iroquoian cultures and signaled our presence on the ancestral land of Tiohtia:ke. Michael Rice of Kanesatake joined the festivities with a song inspired by the legend of the Thunderbird.

The medicine wheel was placed in the middle of the discussion space for all to see. It had been the main element featured on the set of our company's very first production, *He Who Bears the Grief of the World*, in 1985. The healing circle served as an impactful representation of our symbolic contribution and common sense of belonging. Now, more than ever, we need to be in each other's presence to communicate and let our art nourish us. The Mawessine gathering bore witness to the strength and resilience shown by Indigenous artists over the last decades, while offering an opportunity to come together and look toward the future in these tumultuous times. A consultation was carried out with Indigenous artists prior to the event, providing an opportunity to reflect on the content of the Constellations while detailing each artist's contribution and establishing the event's reparative and spiritual elements. Our thoughts about the future, what it holds, our visions and our dreams were at the heart of our discussions.

The two-day gathering was guided by the spirit of ancient alliances and a desire for revival by bringing together the driving forces animating Indigenous performing arts in Québec, in keeping with the manifesto produced as part of the State of Affairs on Indigenous Arts in Québec, published in 2018. We believe in the importance of continuously building relationships between our nations. Artist collaborations, exchanges and residencies have allowed us to get closer and learn from one another while we enrich our work by sharing knowledge and skills. These meetings help us understand the realities of First Nations across the three Americas and around the world. The essence of our cultures is revealed and expressed through our art and all the symbolism it carries. We firmly believe in the expressive and representative power of our artistic practices. Art makes space for dialogue, brings people together, fosters healing, shares values and experiences, and presents different visions of the world.

Today, as an Indigenous person, you have been hurt—you are hurting—because of the residential school system, because of racism, because of cultural appropriation. You're in pain. Angry. Sad. But these feelings can be overcome by focusing on what is larger than us: nature,

language, land and art. They can help us find peace within ourselves, to be able to survive and enjoy this gift of life.

This report presents points for consideration from facilitators and the primary stars that made up the discussion constellations. They have been collected here by the event's curator and artistic director of Productions Ondinnok, Dave Jenniss.



Photo: Dave Jenniss and Normand Guilbeault. Photo credit: Myriam Baril-Tessier.

CONSTELLATION 1

Local and international artists from the theatre, dance, music, cinema and interdisciplinary performing arts sectors composed the first constellation, which was organized into two discussion circles. Its members shared generously of their thoughts, including a deep conversation on the evolving climate of the performing arts scene and the place of Indigenous artists within it.

How can we come together to honour these incredibly precious relationships for the Indigenous artistic community and the next generations of creators?

The first circle focused on ways in which our Indigenous community of artists, and future generations of creators, come together and honour our relationship with the cultural continuum: Indigenous languages, creative relations, transmission and knowledge transformation. Each participant shared their vision and creative approach as it related to the collective “we”. Discussion led to deep reflections on the ways our performing practices create space to talk about truth and our responsibility as Earth’s creative guardians to share the teachings of our community and culture.

“Dance is an art form that allows me to express myself with my body when words aren’t enough.” (Translated from the original French)

Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Wolastoqey Dancer

For many Northern (Inuit) and Indigenous artists in Quebec, theatre and playwriting are powerful tools to raise awareness about suicide and mental health issues. There are huge efforts made to promote art in many communities, despite a lack of resources. It’s important to not dismiss the healing potential of having a creative practice—we must engage with it so that it nourishes us throughout our lives. Building relationships between the North and the South is also significant, because artists in Latin America are facing the same issues as us: we are all working to reject colonial powers by speaking our languages and practicing our art, be it dance, theatre or any other art form. Let’s take the time to analyze the effects of deforestation and wars in order to understand how to maintain our ways of life and sustain our cultures. This is necessary to survive the changes imposed on us by colonialism. What if we returned to

pre-colonial ancestral practices? What if we evoked the medicine wheel? One thing is certain—we must engage with and speak about our art and cultures, even when the spaces in society that keep this culture together are sometimes dysfunctional.

What is the importance of dreams, technology, and time?

The second circle focused on the creation of a sustained relationship with “technologies”. As mentioned above, our traditional practices were ancestral, guided by dreams and rooted in the land. Technology made it possible to stay connected during the pandemic, but this form of technology will never replace our performing arts and the importance of dreams. That said, we cannot ignore the usefulness of technology. For example, when holding an event during COVID, we were able to use digital technology to see, hear and join artists remotely. Technology is everywhere and it’s here to stay.

Let’s make one thing clear—we may be able to film a dance or a play, but cameras can’t translate what is felt during these performances. Lenses can’t capture what is invisible, the vibrational energy that exists between every person present at an event. That’s why it’s important to always question technology. We mustn’t create only for and through digital technology, but it can be one part of a larger piece, or a tool that helps with the artistic process.

Our dreams are the basis of our existence and help determine how we travel to meet each other. Nature and silence are essential to our creative process. During the discussion, suggestions were made on how to think about our relationship to dreams, and how to dream better. Technology can help us connect, but only if we are conscious—while dreams can bring us further than we ever thought possible, to see things that we never could have otherwise imagined. Our creativity creates a living web of relationships that encompass invisible realms that exist beyond us in time and space. Technology will never be able to translate these relations and cultural practices the ways that our bodies and ancestral memories can.

“In some Blackfoot communities, dreams reproduce collective acts of theatre creation.”

Margo Kane, Artistic Director of Talking Stick Festival

After talking about time and the practice of art, we came to the unanimous conclusion that time is precious and operates differently for us as First Peoples. Our way of seeing time has been destroyed by colonization. Institutions have started understanding that pushing us to perform and producing “fast art” does nothing to help our practice. Instead of creating to respond to distribution pressures, we need to take time to deepen our artistic approach and let it guide our art.

How do we join forces in a climate of career pressure and production deadlines that is imposed on us? How do we recognize, maintain and redefine the “we” that connects our artistic community?

We believe that, beyond our sense of belonging to a Nation, we are connected by the knowledge that was transmitted to us, that we learned and that we have a responsibility to share. It's important for us to insist that there are no borders between Indigenous peoples across the three Americas. We must resist building borders, and not let dominant society erect them between us. We must remain vigilant. Consensus is only possible in a society guided by a strong sense of togetherness. We are part of an artistic community and we must emphasize the values of mutual aid, cooperation, collaboration and discussion.

“I am of the South and of the North,” she said. “I participate in two worlds; I am two worlds. But I belong to the territory of the North, the land of the Inuit.” (Translated from the original French)

Sylvia Cloutier, Inuit Artist

We learn from one another through transmission. Pressures to compete, be productive and be recognized in a world that isn't ours should not divide us nor distract us from *our* values and goals. These are major challenges.

Recommendations

- ★ Create a list of Indigenous artists and their respective disciplines and update it twice per year.
- ★ Create an Indigenous arts centre where artists can showcase their work.
- ★ Create opportunities for artists to meet and discuss with Elders.
- ★ Call on institutions to accept that time operates differently in our culture.
- ★ Remember that, even though technology can be useful in some sectors of the arts, it's not always a useful tool to advance as an Indigenous artist.
- ★ Continue to build bridges with Indigeneity here and elsewhere.



Photo: Véronique Hébert, Yves Sioui Durand and Carlos Rivera. Photo credit: Anaïs Gachet.

CONSTELLATION 2

Appropriation, self-identification and the recognition of Indigenous identity in the arts.

Appropriation has made headlines in recent years and has become a newsworthy topic in the arts sector now more than ever. From the Kanata play to director Michelle Latimer or more recent cases in Quebec, as reported by the show Enquête, the anger and hate generated by these social media call-outs have given way to significant reflection. Some people see these public call-outs as beneficial. The individuals claiming false identities were already known among different groups that had been decrying their actions for some time. It's good that these people have been unmasked. We've been quiet far too long on the matter of appropriation.

Being Indigenous isn't something that can be claimed halfway. One either is or isn't Indigenous. And this identity doesn't solely depend on blood; or at least it shouldn't be the only criteria. After centuries of colonization, we need to rewrite serious and fair protocols. We need each community to create an oath of allegiance that community members can respect and that is inspired by their values, language, philosophy, behaviour and relationship with nature. Membership should be based on respecting this oath. This is the direction we should take. For years now, people have profited off the flaws that have started appearing as we've progressively abandoned our systems.

Many artists have spoken about their mixed ancestry and identified their non-Indigenous genealogy. We also honour this background. We do not recognize each other on the basis of "purity", blood quotas or "racial" definitions. Indigenous identity is also in the stories, familial relationships and connections to community life inherited from our ancestors. Identity is forever shifting, nourished by the efforts and actions taken by artists to connect with and maintain their identity while giving it space to manifest in their work. They've often expressed the desire to find and hold onto the foundations of their identity, language or customs, and return to the land. Our cultures and languages may be varied, but the effort and commitment are the same. It is crucial and necessary to transmit knowledge about identity in a truthful and transparent manner. Recognition from peers, from family and from community is essential for an Indigenous person in this day and age, regardless of whether or not they're an artist.

Recommendations

- ★ Create a protocol to validate Indigenous identity.
- ★ Call out all appropriation, without resorting to verbal abuse or violence, through social media.
- ★ Ask for recognition from peers.
- ★ Have every company and organization create a code of ethics.
- ★ Demand that institutions, arts councils and other organizations validate the identity of jury members who are artists.



Photo: Kevin Ka'nahsohon Deer. Photo credit: Anaïs Gachet.

CONSTELLATION 3

This is the last constellation. Themes of transmission, heritage, childhood and the promotion of art were brought into the sharing circle and discussed. Artists who had worked with youth brought up the following questions: How can we connect young children from Indigenous communities with art from a young age? Is it up to school boards, school administrations, or even teachers' own initiatives to implement programs dedicated to the survival of stories from the past?

A variety of people from different backgrounds in education, teachers and former school principals participated in the discussion.

What role does education have in transmitting art to the youth in our communities?

We know that it's important to share our cultural heritage with future generations. Art is essential for a people's survival. Art makes it possible to release our deepest feelings. It helps create a sense of pride and develops children's self-esteem, merely by practicing art in the classroom. Art helps develop a critical mind and contributes to making humans better. Our art awakens, activates and revitalizes the mind and spirit. All children should dream and have the opportunity to become a conduit for culture transmission among their own nations.

We must know where we are from to know where we're going. It is crucial that Indigenous youth have a desire to learn more about their nations' ancestral art. This thirst for knowledge must in part be quenched by educational networks, because transmission has unfortunately been broken in some communities. How do we awaken the desire to share these teachings? One proposed strategy that stood out suggested that every community create a cultural plan to be strictly followed by school boards. During the constellation, contributors shared the significant administrative burdens that often slow down the implementation of revitalization programs.

As artists, how can we grow to fulfill the role that is rightfully ours, as conduits of imagination? Shouldn't we work together with schools and teaching staff? As this constellation's contributors pointed out, we certainly think so.

It was repeated time and again that culture is the very foundation of a nation, and that it interacts with the world through language. While it's important to define art and culture, artistic practices can't be separated from culture for First Nations. Art is tied to the imagination and offers a space to create, heal and build relations with the spirit world. Indigenous peoples' creativity has made it possible to adapt to the land. Singing and gathering symbolic objects gives strength. Being in relation with one another is of great value—it's important to take the time to learn by being together. The difference between artistic practices and culture is relevant when sharing our art among networks for distribution—this difference is not inherent to our values.

Recommendations

- ★ Create opportunities to network and share knowledge and experiences among communities that have created protocols for cultural and historical transmission.
- ★ Create a network to broadcast and promote Indigenous art.
- ★ Create an Indigenous council for the arts that regulates art, training and school programs.
- ★ Ask the Assembly of First Nations to apply political pressure in order to provide support to artistic and cultural projects in every community.
- ★ Promote art by inviting professional artists to speak about their experiences in their own communities.
- ★ Get involved in the creation of an art and transmission curriculum for schools, by artists, and in partnership with the First Nations Education Council (FNEC).



Photo: Catherine Boivin, Catherine Joncas and Barbara Diabo. Photo credit: Anaïs Gachet.

PERFORMING ARTISTS

We wanted to give artists the stage during the event. We had the opportunity to experience three performances, each one entirely different from the next.

Powhini

A Performance by ★ Charles Koroneho

It began with a recorded video performance—given the great distances that sometimes separate us—whose formal treatment was very similar to what we see in visual art installations. Accompanied by a highly aesthetic language, a bright geometric shape displayed a shadowy area in its centre. We can't tell what it is at first, until it reveals itself to be a significant mythical object in Maori—a fighting stick. The image then splits to show us how it might be used—we see a man tie a string of organic fibre around a sculpted stick. Traditional chants follow his movements. A second dimension appears. We see a night sky simulated on a digital screen. The performer uses software to display South Pacific star constellations.

The mix of tools used in this performance show that it is possible to combine digital technology and traditional knowledge. The performance offers a conceptual proposal, rather than a physical performance where presence is at the heart of the event. The intention of Charles Koroneho is shared in his words describing darkness, obscurity, night and/or the deep unknown spaces in our souls. The performance reminds us of what connects us—sometimes the search for depth requires that we revisit our fears and our mistakes. Ancestors visit us as we seek out knowledge. The manifestation of spirituality is a crosscutting theme for many Indigenous artists.

La femme caribou

A Performance by ★ Marjolaine McKenzie, Innu

Theatre artist Marjolaine McKenzie read us the premise of her first theatre piece. Since 2004, she has worked with children in Matimekush, her community that borders the tundra. Through her reading, we can feel the deep love that she has for her land and its healing potential. The history of Innus is printed on the earth, in the wildlife they hunt and in the ceremonies they hold.

A Performance by ★ Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Wolastoqey

Ivanie Aubin-Malo offered her thoughts on movement, the movement of water guided by the heart; an interior movement that informs her dancing, a practice she engages in her journey to find her truth. She also spoke to us about her mission at Tangente, where she works with 15 dancers through movement workshops.

She told us a story about her time in Tobique, a Wolastoqey community of New-Brunswick. Here she witnessed the corporeal inertia of people when they were in the presence of singing and drums. No one dared dance even though the music was calling—she didn't get up to dance, either. In this moment she discovered the toll that losing freedom takes on bodies.

A LIVELY GALA

Curated by Dave Jenniss, the Mawessine gathering was brought to a close by thanking the many important people who've left their mark on our two previous artistic directors, Yves Sioui Durand and Catherine Joncas, in the company's thirty-six years of existence. During the gala, we had the pleasure of honouring Lucienne Losier, Guy Simard, Christian Gagnon, Julie-Christina Picher, Sylvain Malo and Lucie Mineau, who each received a beautiful brooch designed by Wendat artist Michel Savard.

We wish to acknowledge the event's musical curation by Normand Guilbeault and Annie Poulain, and the animation by Charles Bender and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine. Throughout the evening, interdisciplinary Indigenous artists happily surprised us with their readings of some of the company's most notable pieces. We had the opportunity to hear Véronique Hébert, Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui, Carlos Rivera, Kathia Rock and Marie-Andrée Gill.



Photo: Catherine Joncas and Yves Sioui Durand. Photo credit: Myriam Baril-Tessier.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Artists and Performers: Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Charles Bender, Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, Normand Guilbeault, Annie Poulain, Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui, Carlos Rivera, Kathia Rock, Marie-Andrée Gill, Véronique Hébert, Jasmyne Hébert, Sonia Robertson, Sylvia Cloutier, Moe Clark, Catherine Boivin, Quentin Condo, Barbara Diabo, Kevin Ka'nahtsón Deer, Margo Kane, Charles Koroneho, Soleil Launière, Caroline Lemire, Michael Rice, Andrée Lévesque-Sioui, Marjolaine McKenzie, Amélie Miljours, Marc Vallée, Amiel Cayo and Roger Wylde.

Technical Team: Daniel Brière, Sarah Merrette-Fournier, Luc Vincent-Savard, Samuel Savard, Philippe Alessandro Saucier, Diego Alexander Riveros Perez, Sophie Robert, Roxanne Doyon and Maude Fournier.

Ondinnok Team: Amélie Girard, Mélodie Martin Couture, Carole Bérubé-Therrien, Anaïs Gachet, Kijâtai-Alexandra Veillette-Cheezo, Nathalie Delorme, Yves Sioui Durand and Catherine Joncas.



Photo: Sylvia Cloutier, Charles Bender, Véronique Hébert, Yves Sioui Durand, Carlos Rivera, Dave Jenniss, Ivanie Aubin-Malo and Moe Clark. Photo credit: Anaïs Gachet.