

no more potlucks

# CREDITS

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# EDITORIAL

## 26: Haunted

Welcome to #26: this is the Haunted issue.

*Haunted as in:*

- *to inhabit, visit, or appear to in the form of a ghost or other supernatural being*
- *to obsess*
- *to be continually present in*
- *to pervade*
- *to be troubled, to be bothered.*

NMP regular **Andrea Zeffiro** speaks with *Red Works Studio's* **Nadya Kwandibens**, the cover photographer for this issue. Kwandibens' photography focuses on the decolonization of representation of Indigenous people.

**Sarah Mangle** is a writer, performer and educator currently living in Toronto, Ontario. Mangle describes her work as “an emotional political dream” and as “an attempt to understand an embodied grieving experience of the early AIDS crisis, without having been there.” Through *Deathlist* – performed as a 9 minute spoken piece that is read with a simple slide show backdrop – she attempts to understand intergenerational misunderstandings, differences and trauma.

**Nicole Robicheau** is a storyteller and media maker working and living in Montréal. Robicheau's *The Border Between Us* is an interactive documentary about two border towns and twelve people, set in Stanstead, Quebec and Derby Line, USA. It looks at life in the two communities post-9/11. We had the opportunity to interview her again, as part of an ongoing conversation, which began through the Korsakow blog last November.

**Jon Davies** is a curator and writer based in Toronto. Davies explores the relationship between avant-garde dancer/ choreographer Michael Clark and his glamorously queer London post-punk circle and how it inspired the author's own queer milieu in Toronto, centered around the drag party *Hotnuts*, almost twenty-five years later.

**Mitchell Akiyama** is a Toronto based composer, artist, and scholar. **Yan Wu** is a curator and writer who lives and works in Toronto. In conversation with Akiyama, Wu reflects on the project *Ur-sound*, or, the noise no writing can store, at the *Gendai Workstation* in 2012.

Our next theme is CRUSH, out May 1, 2013.

If you would like to pitch us an idea for a future submission, please consult our Guidelines and use the Submit form (or email us: info at nomorepotlucks dot org). NMP comes out every 2 months online, and bit later in print-on-demand. The ARCHIVE issue will be available in print shortly.

As always, huge thank you also to our copy editor, Tamara Shepherd, to all the NMP regulars, contributors past and future, and to readers and supporters of the project in so many ways.

Dear readers, we are still and always committed to bringing forward a haunting and captivating journal bimonthly.

*Mél Hogan & M-C MacPhee*



# Present and Absent: An Interview with Mitchell Akiyama

*Yan Wu*

I first met Mitchell few years ago at a homemaker get-together, an initiative by Gina Badger as a solution to fight against the solitary nature of our work days. Back then, Gendai, a non-profit art gallery I was running at the time, didn't have an office space and I had to work from home. That session was hosted at Mitchell's house. I was immediately fascinated by the number of DIY projects going on in that household and his collection of rare music instruments.

During the break, he told us about the project he was working on at New Adventure in Sound Art. Coincidentally, I was looking for an artist, preferably with some sort of Asian background (according to the mandate of the gallery), to lead a workshop for a group of students from Japanese language school, and Mitchell seemed perfect for it. Fortunately Mitchell agreed to the proposal. He performed John Cage's *4'33"* to the students, followed by a soundwalk of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre.

When the Gendai Workstation happened, knowing he would be interested, I invited Mitchell to collaborate with the architects-in-residence to create some site-specific instruments that could transform the space and introduce new possibilities to the neighbourhood.

In this interview, I asked Mitchell to reflect on the project from a different perspective, in response to the theme of this issue: Haunted.

**Yan Wu: Do you remember that project you did at New Adventure in Sound Art? That's how I was first connected to your work.**

Mitchell Akiyama: It was called *Thankfully, we now know all*. The piece involved getting multiple participants to simultaneously record environmental sound within earshot of each other. We then played back the recordings on a multichannel sound system and were able to hear the sounds, all recorded several metres apart, simultaneously. This allowed us to hear the particular area at a particular moment in time from a hugely expanded perspective. It was inspired by the Borges story "The Aleph," in which there is a point that exists through which the entire universe, past and present, can be experienced. It seemed to me that the current technological moment is making this idea less and less fantastical, that we can collapse distance and experience many points of view simultaneously.

**YW: Let's talk about the title of your show at the Gendai Workstation, "Ur-sound, or, the noise no writing can store." How did you come up with it? Maybe I am sensing a connection to some ghostly matter?**

MA: The title came from a book by the German media philosopher, Friedrich Kittler. It's from a section where Kittler discusses a text by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in which he imagines that running the needle of a phonograph over the coronal suture of a skull – which to him resembled the grooves of a phonograph record – would activate what he called the primal sound. According to Kittler, Rilke is imagining reading a writing, an inscription, that has no author – unless one's willing to credit God as the author. Before the phonograph all inscriptions were created by human hand, but mechanical reproduction made it possible to bypass the hand of the author. What I was gesturing at in this piece is that there is always a quantity or an element that is in excess of any medium's ability to capture or represent "reality." I would go as far as saying that there is a haunting in that moment of inscription, or that arises because of it, in that there is an apparent slippage between what was, what is, and what will be.

Any recording of voice represents a person as she was in a moment and can store it until, or even after, she is dead. The idea of recordings of dead people is pretty banal to us at this point. But it wasn't always. Sound recording has always been connected to ideas of death and of haunting. Initially, one of Edison's intended uses was for it to record the voices of "great men" for posterity. My PhD advisor, Jonathan Sterne, writes some really interesting stuff about the social world that anticipated recording. In the mid-eighteenth century people were obsessed with

storage. Two important things were invented during the Civil War: embalming the dead and preserving food through canning (which led to the term “canned music”). So in a way sound recording was just one more technological hedge against death and/or disappearance. And, at least at first, it also had the uncanny outcome of preserving the voice after the speaker had died. Again, I don’t know that most of us listen to a Robert Johnson recording and think, as a first thought: wow, he’s dead. But my sense is that haunting is never so direct. I like the sociologist Avery Gordon’s take on haunting, which she describes as a “seething presence” – it a thing, a person, an event, that is apparent, that influences us, even in its absence. She also writes that haunting leads to “transformative recognition” and not to any sort of rational understanding.



[Ur-sound, or, the noise no writing can store](#) from [Mitchell Akiyama](#) on [Vimeo](#).

**YW: You mentioned in your artist statement for the show that “Synaesthesia is the new norm.” How is it related to your work?**

MA: What I was getting at with that statement (which I admit is a little exaggerated) is that we’re living in a time in which so much of experience is rendered as data. Data isn’t implicitly visual or aural or tactile – it is just made to manifest in one sensory register. Any string of digital information can be turned into sound just as easily as it can be rendered as a visualization, which is something I examine in a lot of my work. For example, my piece “Seismology as Metaphor for Empathy” takes the seismic data of the 2011 earthquake in Japan and transcodes it into sound. Once rendered as data, the phenomenon of the ground moving could be translated in all kinds of ways – as colour spectra, as a bar graph, etc. And in “Ur-sound,” by actually dragging a phonograph needle through the suture of a skull, I was doing something along similar lines – translating marks in the world into sound.



[Seismology as Metaphor for Empathy](#) from [Mitchell Akiyama](#) on [Vimeo](#).

**YW: How and where did you come across the seismic data of the earthquake? Were you involved in the process of transcoding it into sound? What about the “sound of a skull”? Did you record that yourself?**

MA: I found the data online. It’s pretty incredible how much data is available. I don’t expect anyone but seismologists would generally look at it. I then used software developed by Patrick Feaster and the people involved with a project called First Sounds to “sonify” it. They’re doing really interesting work – it was First Sounds that managed to convert a “phonautogram,” this pre-Edison sound recording technology that was meant to turn sound into writing, not to play it back, back into sound. I also tried to use their process to convert an image of the skull into sound but it didn’t work as well. And, in the end, I decided that the only appropriate gesture was to do exactly as Rilke had imagined: drag a phonographic stylus through the suture.

**YW: It seems to me that direct references to historical events play an important role in your work, at least in this show.**

MA: Definitely. Pretty much all of my work comes very much out of historical narratives. But what I’m not trying to do is simply recreate archaic or obsolete technologies. For me it’s about finding the resonances between moments. So for example, my piece “The Third Ear,” in which one bites on a wooden dowel in order to conduct sound through the bones in the teeth and jaw, is based on a technique that Edison and Beethoven used to supplement their limited hearing. But the object is also built to recall Joseph Beuys’s “Silent Speaker,” which was basically a rectangular wedge of his signature grey felt. So, built into that piece were a few different thoughts on how the body receives or doesn’t receive sensation.



[The Third Ear](#) from [Mitchell Akiyama](#) on [Vimeo](#).

**YW: How apparent would you want to make these reference points to the spectators?**

MA: That's a tough question. Because, on the one hand, I hope that these pieces are all engaging as experiences of material and sensation, that they're beautiful and engaging objects. But I realize that it's really unlikely that most people will pick up on the references that are embedded in them. I always want these references to be available though, and I'm still trying to figure out how to best do that without interfering with the pre-narrative experience of the work. I was just at a sound art conference giving a presentation about a new project I'm working on and realized that, after having prepared a 30-minute presentation on the history of the idea of frozen sound (as a metaphor that predates the phonograph), I typically produce a pretty significant body of research for these projects.

**YW: It's interesting to see how different layers of reference points, that are each related to different senses, materialize into one piece of work. They are blended together, as a coherent experience. Do you consider this process of making as a means of translation?**

MA: Yes, very much so. Again, what I don't want to do is simply resurrect technologies that have fallen into obscurity. These projects are constellations of references that all revolve around similar concerns and then, as much as possible, are folded into an object. I don't know if I'd call them translations so much as articulations or assemblages – to use two terms that have other lives in media studies and philosophy, respectively.

**YW: How do you see your multidisciplinary background – as a musician, an artist, a scholar, and a father! – informing your practices?**

MA: I've been working on sound/music work, visual art, and have been reading and writing for years and always thought of these as separate practices. I've also been building things – renovating and repairing and things like that – for a while. But for some reason something changed relatively recently. I started making these works that drew from all of these backgrounds. It suddenly made sense to build objects that both produced or transformed sounds in ways other than simple speaker playback and that drew from my research on the history of acoustics.

**YW: Another example of “finding the resonances between moments”?**

MA: Sure, between moments and ideas and practices. Finding the right materials to tell a particular story, in addition to attending to their function. But also finding the intersections or resonances that exist between different events and texts and practices.

**YW: Last question: What is a ghost to you? How would you address yourself to the ghost?**

MA: I suppose a ghost is an entity or a thing or a phenomenon that was once with us that is vanished but recently returned. What is most uncanny and remarkable about a ghost is that it's simultaneously present and absent. At least this is Jacques Derrida's suggestion. If you're asking how I, personally, would address myself to a ghost, I'm not sure I have a good answer for you.

**Yan Wu** is a curator and writer who lives and works in Toronto. Her work focuses on inventing alternative strategies to facilitate cross-cultural exchange and developing a curatorial approach that relates material to structure, body to site, and utopia to sustainability in the intersection of art, architecture and urban design. In 2008, she co-founded Tanso, a non-profit organization facilitates and produces cultural exchange programs between China and Canada and subsequently produced new music events SOUNDEYE (2008) and SOUNDREACH (2009). Wu has worked as facilitator and translator with Art Metropole and Justina M. Barnicke Gallery on two collaborative projects between Chinese artists and Toronto local artists: BAGART (2009) and Keyword School in Toronto (2010). Her curatorial projects include Residency in RMB City (2010), Vectors: Connections and Interventions (2011-ongoing), Arbitrary Triangles: Three Passages through Shanghai (2011), and the Gendai Workstation (2011-2012), a one year long site-specific project whose discursive programming encompasses exhibitions, lectures, performances, screenings, discussions, workshops, dinners, and an experimental furniture design studio. Currently she works at Art Metropole and serves on the programming committee and board at the Gendai Gallery. As a writer, she contributes to Artforum.com.cn and other art and cultural publications in China and Canada.

**Mitchell Akiyama** is a Toronto based composer, artist, and scholar. He has released several records on labels such as Raster Noton (Germany), Sub Rosa (Belgium), and Alien8 (Canada), in addition to works on his own imprint, Intr.ersion Records. He has scored and contributed music to many films, including *El Huaso* by Carlo Proto, *Puffball* by Nicholas Roeg, and *The Corporation* by Mark Achbar, and has composed work for dance companies such as Victor Quijada's *Rubberbandance*, Örjan Andersson's *Andersson Dance*, and *Pigeons International*. Akiyama has received commissions from, among others, the Akousma Festival (in conjunction with the Canada Council for the Arts) and the *Nouvel Orchestre D'aujourd'hui*. He has performed across Europe, Japan, Australia, and North America in concert halls, clubs, art galleries, fallout bunkers, and festivals including *Sonar*, *Mutek*, and *Send + Receive*. Akiyama's artwork questions received knowledge about the senses and perception. Grounded in his research on technological mediation and storage, his installations and multimedia work investigate the relationship between historical narrative and sensory experience. His recent work was featured in the solo exhibition, *Ur-sound, or, the noise no writing can store*, at *Gendai Gallery* in Toronto. He has participated in group exhibitions and media arts festivals including the *Vienna Museum of Modern Art*, *Howard House Gallery* in Seattle, *Le Centre de Culture Val David*, and the *Signal and Noise* festival in Vancouver. Currently, Akiyama is pursuing a PhD at McGill University in Communications. His dissertation examines "field recording" across a variety of disciplines, from biology to folklore to sound art. He has published on a variety of subjects, from sound art to urban ecology in journals and magazines including, the *Canadian Journal of Communications*, *Canadian Art Review (RACAR)*, *Offscreen*, *Locus Suspectus*, and *Matrix*. A book chapter entitled "*The Recording that Never Wanted to be Heard' and Other Stories of Sonification*," co-written with Jonathan Sterne, was recently published in the *Oxford Handbook to Sound Studies*.



# Process and Production: An Interview with Nicole Robicheau

*Mél Hogan*

What follows is an interview I conducted with Nicole Robicheau over the course of the last six months. In November 2012, we published a first iteration of our conversation on the Korsakow blog, which we expand upon here. This interview focuses on Robicheau's research process and project production, a topic we will continue to explore this month at the Brakhage Center for the Media Arts.

## **Mél Hogan: What brought you to this border town, Stanstead and Derby Line?**

Nicole Robicheau: I wanted to do a project about borders. I've long been interested in how such an arbitrary demarcation can affect the lives of people who happen to find themselves on either side of it. Doing research on the Canada-U.S. border was a tangible way to examine a border that's near me, and one that is going through drastic changes. I came across Derby Line and Stanstead in my research, and the unique character of the two towns, and I was immediately drawn in.

## **MH: Tell me more about this idea of the border as an arbitrary demarcation...**

NR: I've crossed quite a few borders overland and I'm always struck by how these lines that delineate nation-states seem to be carved up without any regard for the life that surrounds them. And certainly many borders of current countries, if not all, were decided by people in places far removed from the actual line, just by

looking at maps. It's impossible to see lived experience by looking at maps. Not to mention the fact that usually people who decided these boundaries didn't even have the right to do so in the first place. Yet very few of these lines are now being challenged.

**MH: You have a background in journalism. How has that influenced the way you've approached your topic?**

NR: I think in the beginning, I approached the story very much like a journalist would. In fact, I was working as a radio reporter for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) at the time, and I began by looking into its archives for contacts of people who had been interviewed and were somehow invested in all the changes that were happening along the border. What was different for me with this project though was that I was really interested in capturing the stories of everyday people living along that line. I was tired of having to interview experts, which I always had to do in my work as a journalist. With this project, I was actively militating against my journalism training, which usually had me interviewing people in positions of authority.

**MH: What was your research question going in?**

NR: I had a few. How do surveillance and heightened security measures change life in border-towns? How does putting up walls affect the daily lives of the people living on both sides? How have people's relationships with their neighbours changed? How does living so close to another nation affect one's identity and sense of self? I was looking to explore the borderland as a collection of stories rather than as data to examine.

**MH: Tell me about the people you talked with: who are the twelve people in your film? How did you meet them? What was the interview process like (how did you set it up)? How did you take/select the images to represent them? How did you decide which segments to feature/edit out?**

NR: Well first off, eleven were people from the two towns, and the twelfth person is me. It was important for me to put myself in the film a bit, to show that I was there, and that what I had created was my particular perspective on what I had experienced. Some of the people I found by looking through the CBC archives, and by reading articles about the two towns. Other people I found randomly while I was there. Yet others were recommended to me by some of the people I had already interviewed. Some of the characters I did pre-interviews with over the phone, and set up in-person interviews in advance, and others I just met and interviewed on the spot while in the towns, like the people in Steve's pizzeria.

It's hard to explain, and maybe this comes from my journalism training, but while I'm interviewing someone, when they say something really telling, or interesting, or

powerful, I immediately know that this is what I'm looking for. I often will just keep asking questions until I get it: that small tidbit or story that just grabs me. I never really know what that's going to be until I hear it. Those are usually the pieces that made it into the final documentary, although I did edit the audio quite a bit, and I moved pieces around for clarity.

**MH: What were your main concerns in creating these portraits? How important is the concept of 'voice' in your film (your voice and theirs)?**

NR: What I wanted to do differently in *The Border Between Us* than what I did in my radio work as a journalist was to actually use my voice, and not just my vocal chords. I talked on the radio and told stories for the CBC, but I never felt like I was using my authentic voice. What I was doing was presenting ostensibly balanced stories, often by interviewing experts. I wasn't actually using my voice.

I engaged in quite a bit of self-reflexivity throughout my process. I worried a lot about what I was doing to my characters' voices during my editing process. I edited what they told me, chopping things up, moving them around and taking out pauses and umms. I chose photographs to go with their words. They had no say in choosing the photographs, nor did they ask for me to take out their umms. I worried that the way I presented the words they told me wasn't how they meant them to be presented.

**MH: How did you reconcile this worry?**

NR: I don't know that I did reconcile it. I think that making a documentary, just like writing a piece of non-fiction, always involves a certain amount of interpretation on the maker's part. I wanted to acknowledge this. I certainly could have involved the people who I interviewed in the process of the editing of *The Border Between Us*, but that would have been a very different type of project altogether. For me, it was important to be hyper-aware of the manipulative aspects of media, and to try to manipulate only for clarity, and not to alter what I thought were the ideas they were putting forward.

**MH: How do you situate yourself in your work?**

NR: I wanted to be present in my work, but not as an omnipresent narrator, as I had been in my work as a journalist. Korsakow allowed me to do that. I was able to appear as just one of the other characters, without having to fill in the gaps between the clips of various people with a narrative throughline. This is, for me, the power of Korsakow.

**MH: What has your experience been working with Korsakow? Why did you choose Korsakow to present your work?**

NR: I wanted to mesh artistic practice with journalism, and I wanted to experiment with an architecture that doesn't prioritize one story over another, or have a need for a narrative throughline, and Korsakow allowed me to do that. I had wanted to experiment with non-linear web-based storytelling, and Korsakow was a great way for me, someone who has no HTML background at all, to be able to create something web-based. The program is relatively easy to use, although I did spend a lot of time working through glitches, which I think is inevitable with any web-based work.

**MH: Did using Korsakow make you understand or organize your research process differently? How do iterations inform your work process and what you produce?**

NR: I don't think I realized how much work was involved in how I chose to use Korsakow before setting out. First off, I was collecting both audio and still photos, which I couldn't gather at exactly the same time. Then I had to edit the audio and still photos separately using two different programs. I then had to put the two together using Final Cut, and finally import the movie files into Korsakow to create the final film. Plus I wouldn't say I'm very good with technology! I learned a lot by doing it this way. But it was certainly a very long process from the beginning until the end.

**MH: Talk to me about your formal choices: why make a film using audio and images (and not moving images)?**

NR: I have to say it wasn't a very well-thought-out decision. Because of my background in radio, I had wanted to use audio, but I didn't want to just use that. I had flirted with the idea of using video but I think still photos and audio work really well together on the Internet. Still photos also just have this power to draw you into stories in a way that moving images just don't. They let you linger, and somehow create your own vision of what you're seeing.

**MH: What is afforded by the 'interactive documentary'? What do the film's potential interactions do for you as a storyteller?**

NR: I think some would say that interactivity takes the control away from you as a storyteller because you're letting someone else click a button and decide what they want to watch next. But I would argue that that's not really the case, and especially not with Korsakow because it allows the storyteller to make very precise decisions on how interactive the film is. I tried to create my smallest narrative units (SNUs), the building blocks of the Korsakow film, as stand-alone stories as much as possible, so that the order they're watched in didn't really matter. One

thing I worried about though, that I wouldn't necessarily worry about with a linear documentary, was whether there was some piece of what I thought was important information that could potentially not be seen by a viewer. So I did engage in a repetition of ideas more than I would have in linear work.

**MH: Can you expand on the creative process? What does creating a Korsakow film entail, from mapping out your clips to embedding it in your site? What other tools and technologies are required other than the software?**

NR: I guess what I worried about the most with Korsakow was whether or not the way the clips came together made sense. How the program works is that you keyword the clips you input into Korsakow, and then you can link them to each other using the various keywords. So you can control how people move through the film a lot, or very little, depending on how you chose to keyword. I did mine pretty randomly, where most things are linked to each other, but I wasn't sure that made sense. I remember sitting on my floor with bits of paper on which I had written the names of each SNU. I moved them around in various combinations to see if the story made sense, and to determine what would be the best way to have them all link together. So a paper and a pen were two very important technologies for me!

**MH: What did you discover through the process: driving to the border town, conducting the interviews, creating with Korsakow, and publishing the film online?**

NR: What was a big challenge for me that I hadn't realized was how difficult it would be to try to gather still photos and audio at the same time. I wanted the material I gathered to complement each other, but I couldn't gather both at the same time. So I often felt that my head was sort of split in two, thinking both visually and about what people were telling me. I also didn't realize how much anxiety I would feel myself walking along the border. The border really is invisible, and jagged, and if you're not from there, or haven't spent a lot of time there, it's hard to know where you can walk, and where you're crossing into another country illegally.

**MH: Tell me more about this experience, and how it changed your notion of the border.**

NR: One of the things that really struck me was the first time I saw one of the gates that have been put up on two side streets that are shared by both countries. For years the streets were open, but this was one of the new security measures implemented after 9/11. Before going to the towns, I had always imagined and assumed that these gates were being put up to physically keep people out. But standing in front of one of the gates, I realised that it wasn't very high, a few metres maybe, and only as wide as the small side street is. So I could have just walked

around it, and crossed into another country. Peter Andreas writes about new border securitization initiatives along the Mexico-U.S. border and claims they're more symbolic than actually deterrent. This seems to me like the same case with the northern border. These gates are more about the image crafting of border policing, which includes building walls, rather than stopping people physically from crossing.

**MH: The theme of this issue of NMP is “Haunted.” Is there a way in which the border’s presence itself haunts the people? Or is the border mostly forgotten by the people of Stanstead and Derby Line ?**

NR: There’s actually a scene in the documentary where I’m being given a tour of the Haskell Library and Opera House. The building is split between both countries, and was built as a gift to the two communities. Lynn Leimer, the opera house theatre manager, at one point begins to talk to me about ghost hunters who have come to the building because apparently it’s haunted. She tells me stories about things happening to various performers when they come to play, like the stage lights not working. She tells me there are two ghosts who live in the building. It’s not until I listen to my recording of the interview later that I realize that there are most likely two because one is a Canadian, and the other an American. And come to think of it, there were some strange noises in my recording also... but yeah, apart from these ghosts who potentially haunt the border, I wouldn’t say the border’s presence itself necessarily haunts people. Many people talked to me about the border as an imaginary line that with all the changes is becoming more and more concrete. So perhaps it was forgotten for a time but now it’s constantly being remembered.

**MH: Your project has been out for a few months now. What kind of feedback have you been receiving?**

NR: I’ve been getting some really great feedback. I’ve been invited to a few universities to present the documentary and I also hope to present it in the Haskell Opera House next season. It’s really great to see that people from various parts of the world have watched it, enjoyed it, and taken the time to write to me and tell me.

**MH: What was it like to show your work within an academic setting (defending your Masters)? Is your project a research-creation MA, and if so, can you explain how and if that shaped your project?**

NR: Yes, it was a research-creation MA. It was a really valuable experience to defend it, and I got some great feedback from my committee. I think the feedback I received in my defence was somewhat different from what I’ve received since. The documentary part exists only online, and not all the rationale behind it, such as my methodology and theory. I think creating the project in an academic setting also allowed me to be much more self-reflexive in my work, and think about the

form that I was using in a way that I had never done before. It felt like I really got to go much deeper into what I was doing than I had before. I'm not sure that shines through the final project, but I certainly felt it while I was making it.

**MH: What's next for you and for this film?**

NR: I'm currently working with an American journalist to expand the project along the entire Canada-U.S. border. We're in the early stages, figuring out other Stansteads and Derby Lines across the country to visit and trying to secure funding. I always saw this project as a stepping-stone to a bigger project encompassing the entire border.

**MH: Have you visited any other borders since? What kinds of stories are you working on today?**

NR: Sadly, no, I haven't visited any borders since. I'm looking forward to getting started on the expanded border project. I'm also currently working on a non-fiction book that has me revisiting people from my past and a children's book about a cat.

*Nicole Robicheau is a storyteller and media maker who primarily works and lives in Montreal. She has previously worked as a radio journalist for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). She also does aid work with the Canadian Red Cross and has also worked with various organizations in Africa and in Europe on media development.*





# Deathlist

*Sarah Mangle*

Thousands and Thousands Dead.

Thousands and thousands after the glory of glorious sex, dead.

After the glory of glorious drugs and sex, dead.

Sex in the face of all that bullshit, dead.

Risk-takers, dead.

People with years and years of hardened glamour. Practiced and calculating. Fighting fucking hard. Working hard. Looking defiantly right at the camera.

She hit the drums really hard. Her mouth opened up like a huge cave. She screamed into the crowd: DO YOU WANNA LOVE? DO YOU WANNA LOVE? DO YOU WANNA LOVE?

The interviewer behind the camera asked the plaid bearded man on his couch, Do you think it's healthy that you sleep with so many men - that you don't have just have one boyfriend?

The man said, Who says I should have just one boyfriend? Fuck you.

Who are you fucking up? Are you fucking kidding me?

They were fucking to really feel each other. They were fucking to feel alive.

They were fucking to come, to help their lovers come.

Peter says, I try to come out as HIV positive to at least one person a day. You hear my status and you picture my death. It's such a recent history, but do you really know it? Do you really feel it?

We had a die-in. We carried big black fake coffins on our shoulders into the downtown. I didn't read the literature, so I didn't really understand what I was doing there, but they needed someone to help paint the cardboard black and fold the cardboard into the shapes of coffins so I did that.

Let's make a house for all the cold bodies and a house for all the lukewarm bodies and a house for all the warm bodies.

Make sure you have the right number of everyone. Count everybody. Everyone is lining up. There are no numbers on the doors and we sit on the floor.

We went swimming. We dunked our heads in. We went all the way down in the water – we could swim that far. But it started a panic. People felt uncomfortable and people didn't know what to do. We were losing the game, and I would've told the others the rules, if I'd been allowed to, but back behind me came this thick feeling: if you tell them the rules you lose everything.

They were underwater. They looked like they were underwater. I couldn't really hear them. They looked like they were very far away. And I was tired. I felt tired of this.

Draw a box, and then draw some of the things in it. You don't know enough, you don't think enough, I don't think enough. I don't know. I'd like to feel like we're either all entitled to it, or we all suffer together. I'd like it to feel like that, but it doesn't.

There are a lot of empty rooms. There are a lot of forms to fill out. There is a lot of space and there's no room to die. There are not enough beds to die in. The

cemetery's full. But is anyone is really dying anymore? How did we get here? We're not all in this together but we didn't get here on our own.

Klaus Nomi is at Fashion Week. He hasn't designed anything but everyone's trying to capture his style. No one can sing like Klaus Nomi because no one practices quite as hard. No one has that style. No one has style like Klaus.

I took my friend Peter to the party I always went to on Monday nights but he didn't feel excited like I always felt. It reminded him of Ottawa. It reminded him of growing up. Peter was drinking and drinking. He was shouting too loud at the wrong times and remembering. I wanted him to shut up but I knew there was a problem with that, with my wanting to manage him, and I wondered why I liked fitting in at that party. He couldn't and he didn't want to.

Time moves on its own. Grief is an inexplicable, foggy feeling in the body.

When I heard that Neil died I stood in Emma's kitchen next to the stools, next to the fridge. She was cooking. She did not notice my strange pause but I could observe myself. It was the rubber body feeling. I could see myself doing something different.

It's a Deathlist in here, and it's a Deathlist out there. It is very warm. We could make breakfast in the gutters. The gutters are like hot plates.

We watch people walk by. I lean against the brick and pull myself up onto the ledge like Peter's already doing. Later we can go to the two-dollar Peanut Butter Noodle place.

Peter says, as soon as I was diagnosed with HIV they filled me up with pills. I couldn't tell how I felt. I had no idea. All the support groups were about taking the meds.

Everything smells.

The line in the street is a painted line, a river. The line in the street is a filthy strip of grass. The line in the street is winding its way all the way down the block.

My friend Peter says, I went to theatre school. When I told the school I was HIV positive, the theatre school people grabbed each other's shoulders and cried. They felt bad about me "having AIDS". They wanted to grieve together. They wanted to

“

I read the posters. All the posters on the walls say Get Tested. I felt like the posters were meant for me. I went to the clinic to get tested and the nurse told me I'm in no risk at all, but still I feel those pamphlets follow me to bed.

What is on your Deathlist?  
A comfortable pillow.

fall in love and love each other. Blindfold each other and run into walls. They put on a production of Angels in America (but for who?).

I walked down the stairs. My girlfriend walked down afterwards. The street was soaking wet.

When I'm dead, please help my soul to stay by your side. Not like in a creepy way, but I just worry about being lonely.

Klaus Nomi's friends wouldn't come to his bedside because no one knew what it was at that time and everyone was scared and no one wanted to catch it.

I read the posters. All the posters on the walls say Get Tested. I felt like the posters were meant for me. I went to the clinic to get tested and the nurse told me I'm in no risk at all, but still I feel those pamphlets follow me to bed. What is on your Deathlist? A comfortable pillow.

So I go to the clinic. I'm given a fake name that I don't need, but I like the protocol. We all check each other out in that room. Oh honey, the doctor says, you have nothing to worry about. The nurse asks me what I do to help my menstrual cramps. Do you have a Deathwish? Do you ever hope for death?

Eileen Myles, Eileen Myles, what do you see? Eileen Myles, who died that you knew? Did it feel like too much?

Yvette says we walked over to help them die, knowing they wouldn't have done the same for us. If it was breast cancer, they wouldn't have helped us. Sarah Schulman said, everyone – all the gays – they're all in family units now, it would be much more difficult to organize. But condos have such thin walls. Wouldn't you be able to hear the cries? Wouldn't you notice the sadness?

I thought maybe my lover's hands that had eczema could give me HIV but I didn't ask the nurse.

What's on your Deathlist? A scene from an overpass. The panoramic movie view over the tops of trees.

The extended pause. The rubber body. The laying down. I am just laying down. I am just laying down here in your office.

I put myself on your Deathlist. Let's make patches and stickers about it. Later, someone will pin them to a white wall and type up a note.

I want to give my weight to you. My body will do it, or not do it, on its own. In my old house, on my old couch, I am crying. I am crying and crying.

Arthur Russell's boyfriend just had so much love, in *Wild Combination*, he said, I don't know. I guess we weren't monogamous. You have to do what you do. We were supposed to be monogamous, but, well, you know, shit happens. You have to do your best. The trick is to find the patience to do the things you want to do so bad. You have to do what you do.

What's the name of the guy who wrote *Before Night Falls*? There's that death scene at the end of the movie. His boyfriend lovingly smothered him so he could die after he took a lot of drugs and laid on the couch. He used a plastic bag. Love me enough to kill me. Love me enough to help me die.

I'm on your Deathlist absolutely.

Everyone around us tried to ignore it but it was very hard to ignore.

We didn't belong and that was the point.

We were all packed together in a room. And the room smelled bad, some people kept talking on and on and on. Trauma follows a person around.

You have your hand up inside me, and it's like you're in my insides.

What's on your Deathwish Deathlist? What's in your house?

Over and over, we talk a kind of history. We say we're all in this together. Who are you? The river. The ocean. Unstoppable bodies of water.

Deathlist is quiet. Deathlist hasn't left my bed. Deathlist never leaves the party. Deathlist never leaves the street.

I'm not sure how to understand it.

**Sarah Mangle** is a writer, performer and educator currently living in Toronto Ontario. Sarah sits on the editorial committee for FUSE Magazine and is the advice columnist for Shameless magazine. Sarah is currently working on a multi- year documentary project about her relationship with her lesbian homesteading aunts and hosts bi-monthly performance nights of experimental, new and in progress work and music at The Holy Oak Café in Toronto to fundraise for the video and support the making of critical brave new weird work.

<http://lonelydogpublishing.blogspot.ca>  
<http://homesteadfilmproject.blogspot.ca>



# Hail!

*Jon Davies*

On April 9th, 2008, the Images Festival in Toronto screened acclaimed American dance-video artist Charles Atlas's feature-length masterwork *Hail the New Puritan* (1985–6), in an evening curated by Ben Portis and Kathleen Smith for a small but engaged audience at the Workman Theatre. *Hail the New Puritan* is a highly stylized, faux-verité “docufantasy” about British dance sensation Michael Clark, contextualizing his “ballet-based but punk-fuelled choreographies” in his glamorously and decadently queer, post-punk milieu in mid-1980s East London. I watched *Hail the New Puritan* unfold with a number of friends responsible for the monthly drag party Hotnuts, which then took place at The Beaver on Queen St. West, about four blocks from the theatre.

*Image Left: Charles Atlas. “Hail the New Puritan,” 1985–86. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York [www.eai.org](http://www.eai.org)*

Begun in 2006, Hotnuts is the brainchild of two avant-garde drag monsters, Frankfurt nightlife transplant producentin and Newfoundland-born fashion designer and second-generation showgirl Mary Messhausen. Visual artist and filmmaker Oliver Husain typically paints the event's posters and handsome El Bear Ho capably mans the door. The themes embrace the extremes of absurdity: Hotnuts at The Lobster Beach Resort, Mannequin Bingo Troll Hotnuts, The Social Nutwork, Hotnuts Teargas & Tassles, Hotnuts Dipping Sauce, and Hotnuts of an



All Hotnuts photos  
from: [www.flickr.com/  
photos/produzentin/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/produzentin/)

Imperfect Angel are just some of the most memorable. With Mary hosting, the night features the latest house music by produzentin and a friend (such as DJ das hussy), a live performance – which has ranged from a beer- and Cheetos-slathered Britney Spears impersonator to a baroque Popeye and Olive Oyl number – and the night is free to those attending in drag. The themes loosely dictate the fashions for the evening – some, like Adult-BabyNuts or Siegfried & RoyNuts are easier to interpret sartorially than others – and for those who dress up, the challenge is to ride the fine line between high-fashion and dumpster-clown, with surrealism, creativity and outrageousness as the undisputed goals – never beauty, realness or attractiveness. Drawing from a promiscuous colour palette and eclectic textiles and props, the drag is invariably post-gender, post-taste and post-assimilation, typically extreme in its juxtapositions, and almost always homemade in look or in fact. Looking “good” means appearing as terrifying or as heretofore-unimagined as possible, and the core group has developed a familial intimacy through trying to out-trash/class one another and engaging with the shared vices of Comme des Garçons, Mariah Carey and Jägermeister.

A fictive diary (of sorts) pastiching narrative and performance to invoke and hyperbolize Michael Clark, his circle and their subculture, *Hail the New Puritan* was utterly captivating on that spring evening in 2008. However, what still haunts me nearly five years later is how my spectatorial experience that night vividly and profoundly embodied the kind of intergenerational exchange that I see as the *élan vital* of queer cultural world-making, an exchange that takes place as much through cultural objects like this video artwork as through living, breathing people (even though Atlas was there that night to present and discuss his work). Despite being a devout atheist, I wouldn't hesitate to call it a spiritual experience. From mid-1980s London to late-2000s Toronto, what animated this vast gulf in time and space between Clark and his troupe performing so magnificently on the big screen, and the rows of young queers – who all converged in some way around this trashy/fashiony social hub called Hotnuts – that they enraptured? It was not so much about a shared iconography, aesthetic or identity as about a *modus vivendi* – a way of life – or more precisely, a philosophy of glamour as a powerfully democratizing force available for radical forms of creativity and kinship.

This *modus vivendi* embraces high artifice as an aesthetic and ethical playground for self-fashioning. As writer Michael Bracewell explains, Clark and his collaborators –and, I would argue, the Hotnuts circle – believe(d) that “the most interesting contemporary creativity was taking place as a consequence of subcultural lifestyle,” one that encompassed a distinctive “personal image, sexual identity, appearance



and outlook.” Deeply influenced by punk’s “dedication to amateurism, DIY aesthetics, collage and cultural archaeology” and, most importantly, its “fixation with self re-creation,” this *modus vivendi* is an embodied, viscerally performed strike against the dull and dreary abstractions of late capitalism. Forged in club culture, both *Hail the New Puritan* and *Hotnuts* represent a fantasy world that does not obscure difference and conflict, but that allows for provisional and precarious posturing and posing: a glamour not decided by those in power but donned through a communal leap of faith.

Produced by Channel 4 and WGBH-TV in Boston, *Hail the New Puritan* presents a day-in-the-life of Clark and his dance company, friends and acquaintances. Clark transformed the British dance landscape with his technical virtuosity, married with bold visuals and sound that drew on innovative fashion, music and club culture. It begins as Clark’s alarm goes off in what we shall assume to be his studio in Tower Hamlets, East London: he wakes and warms up before sitting for an interview with a visiting reporter, talking about starting classes at his sister’s ballet school in Aberdeen when he was 4, coming to London to attend the Royal Ballet School at 13 and developing his bad-boy reputation by getting caught “sniffing glue at midnight.” As the interview progresses, Atlas stays close to Clark’s boyish face – no doubt mesmerized as much as we are by the 23-year-old’s limitless charm, killer smile and bleached blond mohawk – and playfully cuts the interview up Godard-style, leaving us with upside-down images and random words. Clark discusses his collaborations with the band The Fall and his work with fashion designers, concluding: “when you’ve got no taste, you can do anything.” Much of the first part of *Hail the New Puritan* is firmly located in the space of Clark’s bright studio, though always intercut with shots of the street, and of snippets of his dancers’ lives. After a number of routines, Clark and co. venture into the outside world. Acting out for Atlas’s camera as they pass through their neighbourhood’s depressed vacant lots and grubby canals, they make their way to a performance of the quartet version of Clark’s 1984 choreography *New Puritans*, staged for a flock of cameramen.

The centrepiece of the video is a series of fully produced dance numbers that showcase both Clark’s formidable choreography and his deliriously imaginative visual design. At its heart, however, *Hail the New Puritan* is a study in the self-conscious fabrication (or fabulation?) of *personality*, the beguiling aura of a singular individual, and how the dynamic interplay with other “fantastics” can forge a cultural moment that reverberates long after its passing. It also shows how theatricality animates our lives: every moment that Clark is on screen is a choreographed one, to a greater or lesser degree, from a staged dance routine in



front of an audience to the simple act of preparing for bed. Here art is enmeshed with everyday life: an artist's touch is visible in Clark's most mundane gestures, and radical aesthetic experimentation is his and his circle's very life-blood.

Please indulge me as I discuss three sequences from *Hail the New Puritan* that spoke particularly strongly to my queer, Hotnuts-centric world nearly 25 years later.

## 1

The video begins with a prelude “dream sequence” that allows the opening credits to roll and sets the stage for the 24-hour period we are about to watch unfold. Initially it seems that a number of performers – including Clark in a white tutu and top printed with an image of breasts (the very parody of a classical ballerina) – are dancing, while a catty “chorus” of camp figures looks on, commenting on the action. Soon, however, the actions of the chorus reveal themselves to be just as choreographed as the dancers, as they rhythmically pace up and down the set toward a spread of food. We also note that the installing and decorating of the set and props are also highly theatrical, dances in themselves. More and more people arrive on scene, each engaged in their own choreographed activity (dancing, quipping, eating, applying makeup, reading, carrying décor, kissing), taking place in parallel – John Cage and Merce Cunningham’s collaborative method taken to the limit. Their densely layered trajectories criss-cross and occasionally collide, with the overall effect a barely controlled, dizzying harmony. Under this social system, people can pretty much do as they wish: a state of freedom that could tip over into utter chaos at any moment, but is all the more thrilling for its instability. The scene neatly encapsulates *Hail the New Puritan's modus vivendi*.

## 2

There are two “dressing up” scenes in *Hail the New Puritan*: the first observes Clark and his dancers as they prepare their outfits, hair and makeup for the New Puritans. The second takes place in Clark’s collaborator Leigh Bowery’s elaborately designed flat, and the scene’s combination of wardrobe changes, alcohol consumption and amiable shade-throwing was intensely familiar to me from many nights spent gussying up for Hotnuts at Mary Messhausen’s attic apartment on Northcote Ave. Like an aftershock of the video’s prelude, the scene is a complex symphony of figures, gestures and dialogue, primarily involving the flamboyant Leigh and equally fabulous friends Rachel and Trojan, though Clark also briefly stops by. The foursome trot out different outfit possibilities as the others weigh in with their bitchy *bon mots* and cutting observations.



### 3

*Hail the New Puritan* culminates in a nightclub, which becomes the stage for the artists' most dazzling aesthetic gambit. Atlas follows Clark into the club, and under his camera's gaze, the dancer's trajectory through the space becomes a carefully plotted choreography: the kisses hello, the "spontaneous" collapsing into a lap; taking a sip of a drink here, striking a pose there; affectionately squeezing one mate's arm and shimmying briefly with another; unzipping a jacket, bumping and grinding, even snorting poppers – all are orchestrated parts of the dance, almost as if the maneuvers of Clark's club-going routine were so familiar as to be performed by rote. The following scene shows all the denizens of the club speaking into the camera, one at a time. In these fleeting character sketches lasting mere seconds, the scenesters' declarations teeter between arbitrary nonsense, jaw-dropping brilliance and the numbingly mundane. They smile and grimace, flirt and antagonize in the same breath. The sequence culminates when Clark leads the entire club in a communal dance routine drawing on the physical gestures (such as flirting, drinking and dancing) that this subcultural enclave – which Atlas so vividly brings to life – is ruled by. The crowd collapses to the floor and Clark "resurrects" them before dancing out the door. He walks home as a new day in East London dawns; the music, street life and atmosphere all conspire to make this scene feel like a poetic documentary from the postwar Free Cinema movement, which poignantly memorialized England's most humble moments. Clark undresses, cools down with a solo dance (in the same white underwear he woke up in) to Elvis crooning "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" The clock strikes and *Hail the New Puritan* comes beautifully to a close:

I wonder if you're lonesome tonight  
You know someone said that the world's a stage  
And each must play a part...

*Hail the New Puritan* echoed so loudly and clearly to me that evening in no small part because of its status as a "docufantasy," one that imagined a glamorous and exciting lifestyle into being for Clark and his kin, who lived by hook or by crook in Thatcherite England. This mantra of "fake it 'til you make it" is the very life blood of Toronto queer culture, going at least as far back as General Idea and carrying on through the queercore mecca imagined into being by entities like the pioneering zine *JDs* and band Fifth Column. Arguably, we finally "made it" through these queercore efforts of GB Jones, Bruce LaBruce and many others, and there was no greater evidence of this "coming of age" than the life and work of artist, activist and nightlife wiz Will Munro (1975–2010), who catalyzed a politically and artistically radical queer scene that now must carry on – growing and evolving whichever way it will – in his tragic absence.



It was also the specificity of Clark's self-consciously decadent subculture that made a mark on me, particularly in the ephemerality of youth and the vast potential for innovation and reckless energy it represents. There was no way that such an era could ever last or be replicated – cut short as it was by so many deaths from drug addiction and AIDS (Clark himself disappeared into heroin addiction for about three years in the mid-1990s) – but it acts as a shining beacon for the like-minded who would follow. One could trace this scene's tentacles as they've reached through the last thirty years, from its influence on the American club kids we all watched on *Sally Jessy Raphael* in our formative years to Toronto performers Kids On TV, whose songs and stage acts invoke the very pantheon of queer counterculture figures we see mincing through *Hail the New Puritan*. (Tracing Leigh Bowery's influence on Toronto alone would require a PhD dissertation, though his presence in Munro's work would be a fine starting place.)

At one point in *Hail the New Puritan*, Clark runs through a train station accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of a mob of screaming fans. The pursuing fans, however, do not actually exist, and their cacophony was added in post production. The scene is a succinct moment of fantasy, and their sound echoes in my ears as I think lovingly of Hotnuts and of the play of glamour, performance and queer world-making here in Toronto.

*Hail the New Puritan* is distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix (link to: [www.eai.org](http://www.eai.org)). Unfortunately as *No More Potlucks* is a zero-budget initiative, we were unable to pay EAI the royalty fees they requested to reproduce more than one still from *Hail the New Puritan* in this essay. However, several excerpts of the work are available for viewing on YouTube (link to: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)).

All Hotnuts photos from: [www.flickr.com/photos/produzentin/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/produzentin/)



**Jon Davies** is a curator and writer based in Toronto. In 2009, Arsenal Pulp Press published his book on Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol's film *Trash* (1970). His critical writing has appeared in *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Fillip*, *Little Joe*, and *Cinema Scope*, and in many anthologies. He has also contributed to publications on Daniel Barrow, Candice Breitz, *FASTWÜRMS*, Todd Haynes, Luis Jacob, Jack Smith, Ryan Trecartin, and Andy Warhol. He has curated numerous screenings and exhibitions including the touring retrospective *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008, catalogue) and *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* (2012–13) for Oakville Galleries, where he is currently Assistant Curator, as well as *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (2010, with Helena Reckitt), *The Otolith Group: Otolith III* (2010), *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?* (2011) and *Coming After* (2011–12, catalogue) for The Power Plant, where he was Assistant Curator from 2008–12.



# Concrete (Indian) Futures: In Conversation with Nadya Kwandibens

*Andrea Zeffiro*

When word of Idle No More – specifically, the issues that spurred Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence to a hunger strike – spread across the country, Canadians were confronted with both the real and symbolic violence enacted against Indigenous people by the Government of Canada. This is not to suggest that Indigenous people are victims. Indeed, we cannot ignore Canada's long historical past/present, in which Indigenous people were/are treated with raw inhumanity, but we – the collective 'us' who want to etch a future Canada – can not perpetuate the victimization of Indigenous people. These are not Nations of people once great; these *are* Nations of great people. Nadya Kwandibens of Red Works Studios has focused her lens – literally and figuratively – on the decolonization of representation of Indigenous people. Kwandibens' work, while never forgetting the past, is very much attuned to forging a strong future.

**Andrea Zeffiro: First, thanks so much for taking the time to respond to these questions, and for sharing your photography with *NMP* readers and viewers. My first question – I suppose it isn't really a question per se – I'm interested in your story; what lead you towards photography as a medium for your art practice? Could you share a little bit about your journey as a photographer?**



Nadya Kwandibens: I never sought to become a photographer but things have a way of coming full circle. I had enrolled in Film Production studies in college, and although I never completed my studies, what I learned in those introductory photography courses stayed with me, and photography remained a hobby for years. I developed a real passion for it. I went on to continue my education in a different area of study in university. It wasn't until I moved to Arizona five years later, that I began to take that passion for photography seriously; my partner at the time encouraged me to start shooting portraits. It has been twelve years since I first picked up a camera, and my love for photography is bringing back opportunities and invitations to serve as Director of Photography (DOP) on films. I have a solid base of supporters and will eventually open a studio for my photography company, Red Works Studio. The dream of becoming a filmmaker is still strong in my thoughts, and it's a role that will no doubt come naturally after shooting and gaining such relevant experience over the years. I still have a few more projects and series I'd like to photograph before focusing on filmmaking. I won't ever stop shooting.

**AZ: Before I ask specific questions about your projects and/or photographic series, could you contextualize your work broadly, including your aesthetic sensibilities and thematic preoccupations?**

NK: My art is concerned with empowering Indigenous people. The vision statement for my photography company, Red Works Studio, lays the foundation upon which all my photographic work is based:

We, as Indigenous people, are often portrayed in history books as Nations once great; in museums as Nations frozen stoic; in the media as Nations forever troubled. These images can be despairing; however, my goal seeks to steer the positive course. If our history is a shadow, let this moment serve as light. We are musicians, lawyers, doctors, mothers and sons. We are activists, scholars, dreamers, fathers and daughters. Let us claim ourselves now and see that we are, and will always be great, thriving, balanced civilizations capable of carrying ourselves into that bright new day.

**AZ: Your 'Concrete Indians' portraiture series is incredibly haunting, especially in its evocation of contemporary Indigenous urban experience while summoning the past. I wonder if you could comment on this thematic thread/imagery.**



NK: This series asks the question: How is your identity affected as an Indigenous person living or working in the city? Since launching the series five years ago, I've read hundreds of emails from people who want to be photographed for this series. Not one portrait idea in response to the question has been negative; there exists such pride in one's own culture that no urban environment can ever diminish it. The series is about decolonization, being aware of it, and strengthening collective cultural identity. I've also received several emails from people who are reconnecting with their cultural roots and history; it becomes clear just how essential knowledge of the past is in forming and shaping one's cultural identity.

**AZ: On your website, an excerpt from the 'Concrete Indians' project description reads:**

**Native people from across Turtle Island have been submitting portrait ideas regarding what it means to be urbanized and how living in urban centers either strengthens or weakens (or both) ones own cultural identity.**

**I think that in challenging and confronting issues of visibility, the series also renegotiates visibility/power. What does it mean to be rendered visible? Who has the right or holds the power of visibility? Does the process of portraiture submission contribute to such a renegotiation? – How does the series engage and/or confront these questions?**

NK: For far too long society has viewed the Indigenous people of Turtle Island (North America) as living in the past – for example, in tipis on vast untouched prairies, and riding on horseback – or as seen in the media, news of Indians protesting. The noble savage or the angry Indian. Those stereotypes are slowly starting to fade away. So for me the series is also about reclaiming the Indigenous image. It is an empowering experience when people write in to participate in the series. And I'm just one of many Indigenous artists creating work that addresses those stereotypes.

**AZ: You also completed a photographic series documenting Idle No More, including the march from Victoria Island to the rally on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. In what ways does Idle No More (as a movement and shared politic) engage in dialogue with your 'Concrete Indians' series?**

NK: My coverage of the Idle No More rallies can certainly be connected with the concept of Concrete Indians in how Indigenous people are stepping forward to



uphold tradition. Idle No More, to me, means actively taking part in affirming traditional rights, which are very much rooted in who we are as First Nations of this land. So again, it's a question of identity and pushing collective identity to the forefront, so that society may better understand how Indigenous knowledge and philosophies can inform and address contemporary issues.

**Andrea Zeffiro** is a researcher and writer whose work intersects contemporary media history, the political economy of emerging technologies, and visual cultures. She teaches in the Faculty of Culture + Community at Emily Carr University of Art + Design

**Nadya Kwandibens** is Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) and French from the Northwest Angle #37 First Nation in Ontario, Canada. She is a self-taught, dynamic photographer specializing in artistic natural light portraiture and event photography. In 2000, Nadya began exploring photography, and while working in video and radio production, she gained the professional experience to easily connect with people and groups. July 2006 marked the start of her portraiture work, and since then, she has travelled extensively, photographing people and events throughout Canada and the U.S. Nadya has worked for numerous groups and organizations, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, Indspire, imagineNATIVE, Native Earth Performing Arts, Centre for Indigenous Theatre, Kaha:wi Dance Theatre, Big Soul Productions, and Manitoba Music, as well as with several individual artists, actors, musicians and role models. In October 2008, she founded Red Works Studio and in the same year, she began photographing 'Concrete Indians,' a portraiture series and exploration of collective Indigenous identity. Her photographic work has been featured within the pages of National Geographic Magazine, FACE Magazine, THIS Magazine, SAY Magazine, Red Ink Magazine, and several educational print and online publications for Oxford University Press, McGraw-Hill, and Pearson Canada. Nadya was also the invited artist-in-residence for the Native American Indigenous Cinema & Arts online exhibition, and has exhibited in several group and solo shows throughout Canada and the U.S. Nadya tours twice each year for photo sessions and to document 'Concrete Indians' portraits, and she also delivers empowering photography workshops for Native youth across Canada. She currently resides in Toronto, Ontario.