

KADIST, SAN FRANCISCO
3295 20th Street, CA 94110
Wed-Sat, 12–5pm, or by appointment
kadist.org

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MERCER UNION, A CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY ART, TORONTO
1286 Bloor St W, ON M6H 1N9
mercerunion.org

Mercer Union occupies land on the traditional territory of several nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Anishinaabe, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee and Wendat. While institution-in-residence we occupy the territory of Ohlone. Acknowledging the activities of Mercer Union take place on colonized Indigenous territories is both a recognition that settler colonialism is ongoing and offers our commitment to support art and artists that might unsettle these conditions.

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KADIST, Mercer Union, and the artists would like to thank the organizations' volunteers and members, Artists Space NYC, Bard Graduate Center Gallery, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council, the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council, Christen Clifford, Tusia Dabrowska, Raven Davis, Chris Dunbrack, Debbie Ebanks, FABnyc / Fourth Artists Block, Ryan Gilliam, Christopher Green, Guerilla Girls, Sean Howe, Akiko Ichikawa, IV Castellanos, Davi Leventhal, Emily Reilly, Melissa Staiger, Joshua Peters, Arthur Polendo, Dennis Redmoon Darkeem, Tamaka, Tania Willard, and a special thanks to the Bay Area collectives for their time and generous contribution.

A Institutional ephemera, 2019

Ephemera, monitor, video, dimensions variable

In a gesture of acknowledging the long history of collective action that underpins institutional critique within the history of art, and of its presence in the San Francisco Bay Area, the artists have invited local collectives to display artwork, ephemera, and other materials in KADIST's library and street-facing windows. Participating collectives: Borderline Art Collective, East Bay Alternative Book and Zine Fest, ONE+ONE+TWO, Project Kalahati, Sanctuary City Project, Slingshot, Street Sheet/Coalition on Homelessness, and 3.9 Collective.

B Double Shift, 2018

Painted canvas, 114 x 50 inches

This reversible garment, composed of two painted hoodies sewn together, lays in an inactive state in the gallery. Traces of an ephemeral collaboration, the garment suggests the users' bodies—and the space and time they act within—while the patterns used across the sculpture are a stand-in for visual languages emancipated from culturally specific codes. The work was first used in NADI's collaborative performance at the Nocturne Festival 2018 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. During the performance, the artists wear the heavy garment and navigate through space and the audiences, constantly communicating, negotiating, and cooperating on the path to follow.

C Sovereign Empires, 2019

Wallpaper, approximately 8 x 10 feet

The large-scale work consists of a series of open-ended instructions choreographed by NADI and superimposed on a generic backdrop resembling a North American landscape. Here, NADI's instructions—placed on the backdrop of an outdoor setting—suggest enacting these actions outdoors. Yet, the viewer may choose to follow the instructions and enact a self-led performance inside or outside of the gallery space. The instructions were initially composed as an artwork for issue 136 of the Canadian publication C-magazine which was guest-edited by BUSH Gallery (represented by Tania Willard and Peter Morin), an experimental, land-based, Indigenous-led artist *rez-idency* located on the traditional territories of Secwepemc Nation. The issue focused on Indigenous and non-Western art practices outside of urban centers and gallery systems, questioning where and how art exists on land, in rural settings, and in communities. This methodology of instructions for the viewers speaks to the history of instruction-based art. A reminder of the settler land we occupy and an intervention onto colonial structures that underpin art's past and present.

D Hot Tip Tiger Tail, 2018

Sculpture, wood, paint, dimensions variable

The work underlines the continuity of time and space, in the exhibition and beyond. The work also exists as a unit of measure of the spaces we occupy and a proposal to reimagine how progress is evaluated.

E Construction, 2019

Sculpture, wood, mylar, approximately 8 x 7.5 x 7 feet

NADI often creates wooden structures that practically and metaphorically act as support edifices to experience works of art. At KADIST, no works are physically hung on the structure itself, instead, the mirrored surfaces of the structure invite viewers to reflect on their own history, space, and existence.

F Drink Bar for Two, 2016

Five sake bottles, pink light, shelf, 12 x 4 x 24 inches

The sculpture was generated during NADI's residency and exhibition at Trestle Projects, New York. The work is a signal to the artists' individual practices: the use of found material is typical of Lujan's installations and the light bulb is a nod to Hupfield's iconic objects activated through performance and later replicated in felt. As Lujan's partner and collaborator, and drawing from their deep history of experimentation based on awareness and trust, Hupfield repurposed Lujan's objects prior to his knowledge and assembled this work specifically for him. This personalized approach marks the gallery with a gift and quiet gesture for one another. They see it as a promise and reward of their commitment to sharing and collaborating.

G Walk the Walk (Sam Durant), 2018

Neon on printed frame, 33 x 44 inches

NADI has produced various neon signs that use electrically transmitted signals and instructions to redirect the viewer's attention. The work overlays a Walk/Don't Walk Sign neon crosswalk sign onto the text "You Are On Indian Land Show Some Respect." The work signals a reminder that we—the audience and institution—are located on and occupy traditional territories. The neon appropriates and twists artist Sam Durant's *You Are On Indian Land Show Some Respect* (2008) in response to his work *Scaffold* (2012), a public art sculpture intended to commemorate the hanging of 38 Dakota men in 1868 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The installation of the project led to a series of protests followed by the museum and the Dakota community working together to remove and dismantle the structure. The sculptural remains were handed to Dakota elders who buried the material and the Dakota Oyate now retains intellectual property of the work. The neon engages with recent discussions about

cultural appropriation in the art world, namely: How can artists responsibly use images that are not their own, especially when the images are tied to the history and trauma of another culture? And how can museums display such work while respectfully engaging with communities impacted by histories of violence and trauma?

H There Is No Then and Now; Only Is and Is Not, 2018

Single-channel video, color, sound, 5 minutes

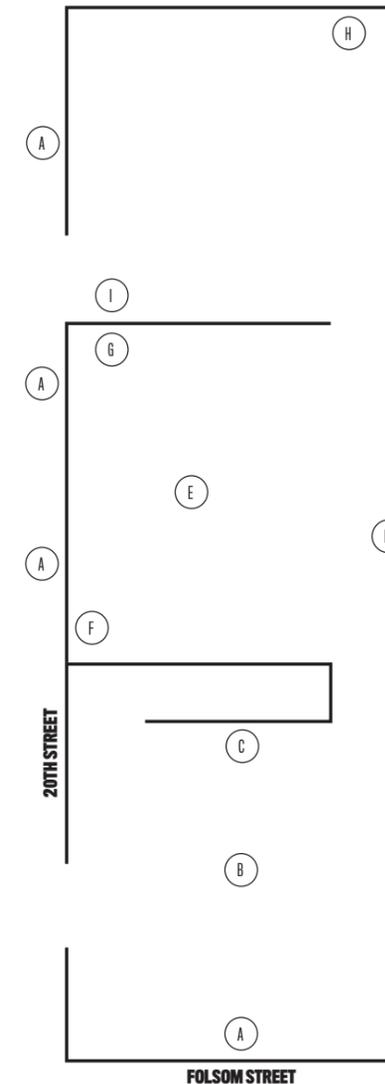
The video is a collaboration between NADI and the Bronx-based artist Dennis Redmoon Darkeem. The work features the artist, member of the Yamasee Yat'siminoli tribe, dancing in an empty theater, dressed in his Powwow regalia. His dancing is interspersed with text that describes his frustration at the ways in which his identity is restricted, limited, and made invisible by racist presumptions and visual codifications put in place by a white colonial authority. The central element of the piece is intended to confound stereotypical and problematic assumptions.

I Everything Sacred is Far Away, 2019

Single-channel videos, color, sound, 30 minutes loop

The four-part video series is modeled after experimental videography and public access television shows from the downtown New York art scene of the 70s and 80s. Chalky green screens, grainy footage, and D.I.Y sets anchor a cast of local amateur collaborators in a late 70s aesthetic fuzz. The videos present esoteric scenes dramatizing life episodes of the anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) as he navigated human relations and the social context at his time in an attempt to understand intercultural interaction and collaborative practices. The content and medium, from handmade props to lab coat costumes, highlight a space in which creativity, comradery, free expression, and the strengthening of art community and networks are prioritized over production values and narrative.

Institutional ephemera courtesy the collectives. All other artworks courtesy Native Art Department International. IMAGE CAPTIONS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE): Process on chalkboard, 2017; Filming for *There Is No Then and Now Only Is and Is Not*, 2018, courtesy Fourth Arts Block NYC; Work in progress creating *Double Shift*, 2018; Various handmade props and backdrops for *Everything Sacred is Far Away* video series, 2019 and Filming test shot for *Everything Sacred is Far Away*, 2019, courtesy BARD Graduate Center. All copyright Jason Lujan.



ABOUT

Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art is a non-profit, artist-centred space in Toronto that was founded by twelve artists in 1979. The organization has a unique track record of presenting innovative exhibitions and programs with Canadian and international artists in formative and established stages of their careers. Mercer Union is dedicated to supporting the production of new and experimental work, assisting artists in realizing pivotal projects. Mercer Union has the will and flexibility to take on ambitious projects and fosters an intimate and supportive space for artists to develop and take risks with their work.

Native Art Department International is a collaborative long-term project created and administered by Toronto-based artists Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan. NADI focuses on communications platforms and art-world systems of support while at the same time functioning as emancipation from essentialism and identity-based artwork. It seeks to circumvent easy categorization by comprising a diverse range such as curated exhibitions, video screenings, panel talks, collective art making and documenting, and an online presence, however all activities contain an undercurrent of positive progress through cooperation and non-competition.

Christopher T. Green is a New-York-based art historian and writer whose criticism, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Art in America*, *Frieze*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*, amongst others. His scholarly research has been published in *ARTMargins*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, *ab-Original*, and *BC Studies*.

Native Art Department International

Bureau of Aesthetics

CURATED BY
Mercer Union
a centre for contemporary art

*Resistance to indie
Obsessive academicism
Simulating stereotypes*

INTRODUCTION

This project began with an invitation to San Francisco. In 2018, KADIST invited Mercer Union, a nonprofit artist-run center in Toronto, Canada, to participate in its Art-Space Residency program in San Francisco. Considered a leader amongst artist-run culture in Canada, Mercer Union places artists at the center of the organization's activities to operate as an exhibition space, production platform, research site, and resource for the dissemination of knowledge. Fostering new perspectives on discussions taking place locally and beyond, the KADIST program offered Mercer Union a delocalized space for experimentation to reflect on their programs, working methodology, and current institutional inquiries through an exhibition.

Mercer Union conceived the residency as an incubator to consider the approach to institutions working small-scale. For the organization, the ethos of long-term and close collaborations with artists to articulate the stakes in their practices is vital to working small-scale, enabling the development and mediation of critical and complex artistic endeavors. This objective offers the starting point for Mercer Union's residency and their invitation to Native Art Department International's (NADI), a collaborative project by Toronto-based artists Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan.

Together, KADIST and Mercer Union have taken up a series of questions around collaboration with NADI, which they developed in their exhibition, *Bureau of Aesthetics*. Through a multi-disciplinary practice—comprising performance, sculpture, and video—NADI works toward liberating artworks and aesthetics from reductive classifications and fetishization ingrained in colonial systems of power and interpretation. More specifically, NADI engages collaborative and collective action as strategies to challenge essentialist readings of contemporary artworks projected onto Indigenous cultural producers. The exhibition presents a selection of objects that takes up varying methods of collaboration that NADI has employed throughout their process of making art.

Focusing on collective actions while working small-scale, *Bureau of Aesthetics* highlights how collaboration and cooperation might strengthen communities and interrogate art history.



NO U-TURNS: NATIVE ART DEPARTMENT INTERNATIONAL AND THE BUREAU OF AESTHETICS

Christopher Green

Native Art Department International (NADI), the collaboration between Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan, is a survival strategy. Surrounded by the stifling reception of their art through the reductive terms of identity politics, the husband-and-wife team circumvents categorization and short circuits the expectations and stereotypes built into its name. NADI communicates in terms that are broader than and strengthened by the individual practices of its members and collaborators, creating an independent position free from bland universalisms and essentialized forms. NADI is unfixed by whether what it does is “Native Art.”

A key illustration of NADI's ongoing subversion of and liberation from expectations is the video *There Is No Then and Now; Only Is and Is Not* (2018). The work features the Bronx-based artist Dennis Redmoon Darkeem dancing in an empty theater, dressed in fiery-hued powwow regalia. Darkeem is a member of the Yamasee Yat'siminoli tribe, and he is black. His dancing is interspersed with text that describes his experience as a black Indigenous man, namely the ways in which his identity is restricted, limited, and made invisible by racist presumptions and visual codifications put in place by a white colonial authority. While the central element of the piece is straightforward—a Native

American with a black body—the work thoroughly confounds the popular, stereotypical image of the “Indian.” It shocks one's deeply ingrained presumptions into the light, such that the video preempts answers to questions we thought we knew, and which NADI asks of us anew: *What is Native? What is part Native? Who is allowed to be Native?* We are surprised to see our own expectations reflected back at us, and are unprepared to face NADI's interrogation: *What exactly were you expecting? Take a look in the mirror.*

Electronic communication platforms and multimedia technologies are tools that NADI frequently deploys to confound and refuse categorical limitations based on identity. NADI often indicates a physical presence in the gallery for the otherwise ephemeral airwave-filling content. For example, a lightbox installed in the storefront window of Artists Space, New York, was lit up to signal that the daylong audio broadcast *Maintaining Good Relations* (2017) was live and on location. The bright red lettering “ON AIR ON AIR” was a beacon for the streamed radio program, which had on a variety of guests for interviews and conversations ranging from art reviews and oral histories to news, current events, and a music playlist. The guests, like the cast of their public access television-styled video series *Everything Sacred is Far Away* (2019), were drawn from the local NADI network: artists and peers with whom NADI builds solidarity and pursues progress through collaboration that promotes non-competition. Other sign works use electrically transmitted signals and instructions to redirect the viewer: Do Not Walk – on “Indian land” without respecting it (*Walk the Walk (Sam Durant)*, 2018); No U-Turns – except to *détourne* a work of Indigenous art into an object of value beyond fetishized identity (*Untitled (Carl Beam)*, 2018).

The technological aesthetic of NADI's collective work might at times evoke a



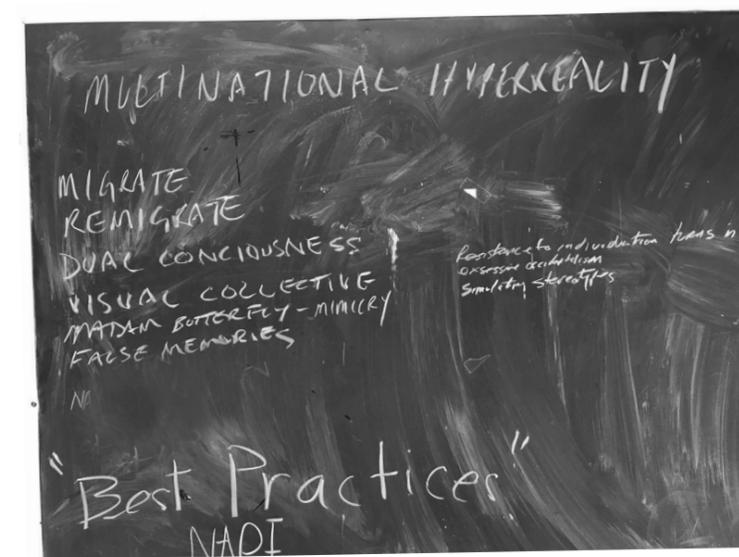
Futurist sensibility. Fluorescently-painted constructs awash with digital screens and the hum of electronic signage can suggest sci-fi environments, and the reflective space-blanket materiality in their recurrent use of mylar recalls the crunchy satellites of space-race efforts to colonize the sky's final frontier. Yet there is an intentionally retrograde aspect to NADI's multimedial experiments. Rather than futurist directions, their use of the aesthetics and technologies of radio, public

broadcast TV, and neon tubes points rather to the 70s and 80s, a period in which experimental artist collectives of the downtown art scene looked to newly available electronic media as potentially expansive distributive networks for radical action and messaging. Analog communication technologies—the radio receiver, the magnetic recording tape—are further the electric stuff of Hupfield and Lujan's childhoods. NADI's nostalgic call-back to this moment and material seems to push towards a reconnection through those analogic nodes, paying homage to the slow pace of the changing cassette tape and rewinding VCR, rather than the hyper accelerated time signature of the digital future.

Instead of the social network, NADI has stated its interest in the locality of place. NADI has organized film screenings, poetry programs, and podcasts that have incorporated Native and non-Native guests and contributors, taking advantage of local networks and online distribution alike, namely through its rigorously catalogued web platform, to seek broad conversations



and audiences. Local access TV and public radio are programs rooted in community organization. Yet their technologies evoke the electronic-information movement that the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) famously hypothesized would connect the planet and decentralize the family of man. What is local community in the face of McLuhan's global village? Radio, public TV – these were the forces of electric media that, for McLuhan, would “retribalize” society on a global scale, resulting in the reconnection of man as “a new state of multitudinous tribal existences.” McLuhan deployed the term “tribal” out of an intentionally racist hierarchy of human evolution to suggest that society would face moral failings and the collapse of modern values if it were to uncritically fall into “primitive” societal structures once “man is tribally metamorphosed by the electric media.” It is hardly the departmental dictum of NADI to “retribalize.” Rather, NADI's entire output seeks to demonstrate that the “tribal” is untenable as an essentialist concept, that “tribal identity” cannot possibly be contained within the racist social frames to which McLuhan perceived electronic media leading. Their use of public access TV and radio programs is a pastiche, one which mocks and betrays the idea that the medium could be reduced to any “retribalizing” message.



NADI is bureaucratic in its dismantling of expectations. It deploys a set of procedures to confound the viewer's preconceptions, scrawled like instructions on a blackboard of process; the refusal of reductionist imagery; the deployment of the unwonted and the flexible in medium and form; and the evasion of overdetermination through mutable collaboration rooted in the local. The implacability of bureaucracy is deployed towards NADI's refusal to be denied an existence. Their work exists on their terms – take a ticket. Inevitably what Hupfield and Lujan produce is a magic act. Misdirection is the medium of choice. With a fluorescent broadcast or a neon flash, NADI sends the viewer looking elsewhere in the search for essentialist form. Until, *voilà!* The trick is revealed. It was a Native Art Department International all along.