

CHAPTER TEN | CASE STUDY

HONOURING
THROUGH CEREMONY:
WALKING WITH
OUR SISTERS

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SINCE 1976, THE Thunder Bay Art Gallery has operated as the sole public art gallery in the vast boreal region of Northwestern Ontario. Located on the north shores of Lake Superior, the gallery has collected, researched and exhibited contemporary indigenous art from Canada since 1982. In addition to its annual exhibition programming mandate, the gallery has endeavoured to engage regional audiences through diverse and sometimes non-traditional community outreach programs across our region. However, in the gallery's 40 year history, the commemorative art project *Walking With Our Sisters* has stood out in both its breath and impact on the cultural, social and political life of Northwestern Ontario.

Maadakamigad | The start

In response to the increasing grassroots calls for a national inquiry on missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, Métis artist Christi Belcourt issued a call via Facebook in February 2012 for the creation of 600 moccasin tops (Figure 1). The call for these decorative swatches (also known as vamps or uppers and commonly found on traditional footwear) sought to honour missing and murdered indigenous women as well as shed light on the national crisis.¹ Within a few weeks, the response to Belcourt's call far exceeded the initial request with nearly triple the number of tops submitted for the project (*Walking With Our Sisters*, 2014: website). By the time the commemoration began its tour across Canada and parts of the US, *Walking With Our Sisters* featured close to 1,800 handmade moccasin tops made by over 1,300 individuals. Along with the vamps, the art commemoration also included a sacred bundle containing several spiritual and ceremonial items such as three



FIG. 1: Moccasin Vamps by Jean Marshall, 2013.

eagle staffs, a pipe, a buffalo skull and a drum.²

By September 2014, the commemoration had travelled to communities such as Parry Sound, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Regina and Sault Ste. Marie before arriving at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. On behalf of the organizing committee, the Anishnawbe reserve community of Fort William First Nation received and welcomed the sacred bundle along with the moccasin vamps. Local Keepers of the bundle, Louise Thomas and Rita Fenton, ensured its care and protection until its display at the gallery.

When the bundle arrived at the gallery on September 15, 2014, it was greeted with a sacred fire, drumming and a smudge.³ Over the course of three weeks, the gallery was transformed into a sacred lodge in accordance with regional Anishnawbe traditions. In addition to the traditional drumming and smudging, this also meant that the vamps and sacred bundle items in the lodge were organized in a circular pathway and laid upon red and grey fabric covering the floor. Prior to covering the floor, cedar boughs were also carefully placed across the room and on the walls (Figure 2). At the centre of the gallery, the turtle design and eagle staffs faced the entrance and were flanked by altars in each cardinal direction (Figure 3). During its display at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, over 4,000 visitors – unprecedented given the gallery’s size and location – were welcomed, smudged with sage and led through the commemoration by volunteers and Elders, who with them, walked with the sisters in honour of their unfinished lives.

Zagaswe’iwe | Ceremony

Walking With Our Sisters (WWOS) was one of the most



FIG. 2: Installing *Walking With Our Sisters*, 2014.

significant grassroots projects undertaken by the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. In both its approach and process, WWOS presented a number of critical changes to the gallery's usual exhibition presentation. From the layout of the vamps – particularly the symbolic central turtle design representing Turtle Island (North America) that had been requested by Elders – and the wide-ranging community programming, such as beading sessions, teach-ins and community conversations (Figure 4), to the ceremonial protocols observed before installing and even experiencing the walk alongside the vamps (Figure 5). All these components had been informed by traditional and locally specific Anishnawbe teachings. Above all, it was this ceremonial approach to the project which challenged the ways in which “museums have historically played a central role in the inscription of specific tenants of modernist ideology”, but also I would argue, has the potential to “denaturalize the fundamental expository practices of the museum and the academy” (Phillips, 2011: 112).

For not only did WWOS adopt a ceremonial approach in the experience of receiving, presenting and experiencing the commemoration, the project's organisation also followed a collaborative, Elder-guided model. Whereas our conventional curatorial programming at the gallery is often decided by a single curator or artist, the collaborative framework adopted for WWOS included an evolving committee of up to 25 individuals alongside a committee of three to four Elders, two keepers of the lodge and two co-leaders who met fortnightly over the course of ten months to discuss, think out loud and implement the memorial. In the words of Elder Maria Campbell, we needed to take the time to create



FIG. 3: *Walking With Our Sisters* commemoration at Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 2014.

a sacred lodge that “honours our relatives in a good way” (Campbell, 2014: 6).

Waabanda’iwewin | Exhibition

As the only public art gallery in Northwestern Ontario, the project was not the gallery’s first foray into traditional Anishnawbeg teachings or practices, or into the display, scholarship and collection of contemporary indigenous art from across Canada.⁴ However, the complete grounding of the project in ceremony, which was sustained every day for three weeks and included a daily smudging of the space, a four-hour pipe ceremony during the opening, a sunrise ceremony (at both the opening and closing of the commemoration), a sacred fire at the gallery and the offering of spirit dishes and tobacco, changed not only the dynamics within the organising committee, but also between visitors and the gallery.

One of the guiding principles requested by the national WWOS Collective was one of humility, meaning that all participants leave their careers at the door, or rather, we could not let our job titles dictate the kinds of duties we would take on in the project. We strove to work within a non-hierarchical, Elder-guided approach to the organization of the commemoration and what this ultimately did was create new relationships between people in the committee.

The relinquishing of job titles had initially seemed like a small gesture towards community building (and with the bulk of our meetings at the gallery, it became obvious who worked at the gallery), however in a remote northern Ontario city with a long history of systemic racism and violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people, barriers between Aboriginals and



FIG. 4: *Walking With Our Sisters* Bead-in at Lakehead University, 2014.

non-Aboriginals continue to play out in even the most everyday interactions.⁵ As an urban hub for northern Ontario and the 49 communities in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and the 42 communities in the Anishnabek Nation, the City of Thunder Bay has long been a significant meeting point for health, social and education services. In many ways, Thunder Bay proved to be a critical site for the discussion of these larger, national issues. For its duration at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, the WWOS organizing committee strove to provide an open and judgment-free space for the families still grieving for their loved ones.

Manajiwini | Respect

For myself, a Muslim and second-generation Canadian, this was the first time I had so intensely experienced and observed Anishnawbe traditions. I was no longer the Curator (gatekeeper) of the gallery, but a committee member, who, alongside a number of volunteers, assisted with the harvesting of cedar, greeted visitors, sold tea, sang Anishnawbe songs, travelled to receive the bundle from the Manitoba/Ontario border, and assisted in the ceremonial installation and de-installation of the commemoration. Moreover, the gallery – an institution that has long legitimized knowledge rooted in Western tradition – became a space coordinated by the organizing committee. For some, the transformation into a space that was wholly grounded in Anishnawbe traditions was a surprise, particularly because the commemoration was seen as an overt political demonstration of solidarity in a mainstream venue for the discussion of missing and murdered indigenous women.

The perceived role of the art gallery reflected the need for



FIG. 5: Sage smudging with Bundle Keeper Louise Thomas, 2014.

ongoing action and engagement with community partners for discussions on a regional level – but also the need to experience and respect ceremonial practices in more public contexts – for it allowed those who needed emotional support to come out and seek the help they needed, but also created a general awareness of the impact of murdered and missing women more broadly in our community. As advising Elder Maria Campbell has pointed out, *Walking With Our Sisters* “honours our relatives in a good way, but at the same time, it builds community, using our own indigenous models of laws, protocols and governance” (Campbell, 2014: 6).

Binesii-wiikwedong | Thunder Bay

The reality of any large and lengthy volunteer-driven project is that the number of moving parts remains constant. Throughout the planning of WWOS, issues about process and direction frequently arose. The committee largely worked under the direction of the manual devised by the WWOS national collective, but the details of the ceremonial component were decided by discussion and consensus. Here it is also important to add that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal committee members had varying degrees of awareness of regional ceremonial protocols. Likewise, the conventions regarding the ceremony for housing of the sacred bundle were also discussed and debated. Within the circle of advising local Elders, practices of ceremonial customs such as smudging, guardianship of the bundle and the pipe ceremony also differed.

Such debates about ceremonial practices reflect both the broader legacy of colonialism and the generational disconnect within communities as a result of residential schooling,⁶ as

well as variances between the teachings in the diverse population of First Peoples – Anishnawbe, Metis, Oji-Cree and Cree – who call Northwestern Ontario home. The indigenous land-based ceremonial protocols observed for WWOS were, as Anishnawbe sociologist Patricia McGuire points out, part of:

...a living process. It might be a thing or a body of knowledge, but to indigenous peoples, it is much more than this. It is both a relationship with and a way of life. It is combined thought of the land, the people, and metaphysics, that is, dreams, vision, spirit, and the emotive. (McGuire, 2010: 126)

Apane | Continually

In the last week of October, the vamps and sacred bundle that is *Walking With Our Sisters* was packaged up and driven to the Wanuskewin Heritage Center in Saskatoon, where it was again greeted, installed and experienced according to the traditions of the region. The commemoration continues to travel until 2019, when the final ceremony will be held at Gabriel's Crossing in Batoche Saskatchewan.

As one of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery's most important and widely-experienced community-focused projects, *Walking With Our Sisters* was much more than an art exhibition. While the project not only fulfilled the Thunder Bay Art Gallery's institutional mandate, it more importantly it went a step further to reaffirm Anishnawbe ceremonial traditions and in the process, resist the often universalized and normative experiences of visitor engagement at the gallery.

Following the commemoration, the Thunder Bay

organising committee hosted a community consultation on International Women's Day where participants engaged in a World Café-style conversation to find solutions to local public safety concerns. The event involved representatives from the Thunder Bay Police Services, the City of Thunder Bay and post-secondary institutions as well as citizens. Co-organiser Leanna Marshall emphasized that:

The heart of this conversation will be around embracing solutions and ways forward that make sense to us: the community. Each of us brings strengths and ideas and we want to hear them. (Murray, 2015: website)

The findings and recommendations of the community conversation were then presented to Thunder Bay City Council in 2015 during an open session seeking community input on the City's Four Year Strategic Plan. A subsequent documentary, *Canada's Lost Women* (2015) produced by Al-Jazeera English both captured the committee's personal experiences and the current political indifference to murdered and missing indigenous women across Canada.

Owing to the overwhelming community support for *Walking With Our Sisters*, the gallery forged new and strengthened old regional relationships alike. An increase in requests for community access for tours, exhibitions and facility rentals followed the commemoration. With the gallery seeking to relocate to a new waterfront building in the next six years, the project also confirmed in the need for Elder input in the design and programming of the new gallery space. On a professional and personal level, my own understanding of the interconnected

nature of Anishnawbe ceremonies and oral traditions deepened – an experience which has ultimately enhanced my own knowledge and practice as a curator of contemporary indigenous art.

The work of the Thunder Bay committee continues. As it travels, the commemoration very publicly and pointedly addresses national calls to the Government of Canada to address the issue of murdered and missing indigenous women. During its time in Thunder Bay, the commemoration provided a space to speak on the clear disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives in Northwestern Ontario. *Walking With Our Sisters* demonstrated that a desire and ongoing need for indigenous perspectives and practices exists, and that galleries can play an important role in supporting these ways of community engagement, and more critically, serve as a public venue to honour the unfinished lives of Aboriginal women and girls. As Anishnawbe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes:

As more and more Aboriginal Peoples look to their traditions and to their knowledge for the strength and courage to meet the demands of contemporary society, the process of cultural revitalization will be recorded in our oral traditions and will become part of our indigenous knowledge, just our experiences with the process of colonization, assimilation and colonialism is part of our body of knowledge. (Simpson, 2001: 143-144)

NOTES

1. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police estimates that between 1908 and 2012, there were 1,181 murdered and missing indigenous women in Canada (RCMP Report, 2014). According to the federal agency, Indigenous and Northern Affairs, the calls for a national inquiry have come from families, communities and non-governmental organizations such as the Ontario Native Women's Association and Amnesty International for over a decade. It was only with the election of the Liberal Party in October 2015 that the calls for the inquiry were finally heeded. The pre-inquiry process began in January 2016. For more see: <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/>.
2. Most simply, a Sacred Bundle (also known as a Medicine Bundle) can be described as a wrapped collection of ceremonial items such as a pipe and drum that are used for ritual practices. Moreover, with each bundle comes the necessary "detailed knowledge of the design, contents, ritual methods of care, restrictions, and certain associated technical and spiritual knowledge". For more, see <https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/ippd-dppi.nsf/eng/ip01233.html>.
3. As described in the *WWOS Installation and Information Guide*, a smudge is when "sage or sweetgrass is burned frequently to help cleanse and transform the space. All volunteers must smudge before they take their shifts. Smudge will also be available for visitors who may have an emotional response".
4. In addition to the gallery's mandate to showcase contemporary indigenous art from Canada, its permanent collection has been both feasted and smudged according to Anishnawbe traditions on several occasions.
5. As the result of the Robinson-Superior Treaty (1850), the city now known as Thunder Bay sits on the traditional territory of Anishnawbe Peoples. While the colonial dispossession of indigenous peoples continues to inform the current relationship between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, in the past two years, events such as the fire damage of the James Street swing bridge (which connects Fort William First Nation and Thunder Bay) and the polarizing 2013-2014 election

MUSEUM PARTICIPATION

campaign of former Conservative candidate Tamara Johnson highlighted both the lack of understanding of historic treaties which define contemporary Canada and the ongoing need for dialogue and education on indigenous political and social life.

6. From the 1880s until 1996, the Government of Canada established mandatory residential schools for Aboriginal children across the country. Administered by churches (Anglican, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian) these schools, along with other various assimilationist policies sought to remove children from their families and communities in order to “kill the Indian in the child.” For more see: <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-residential-school-system.html>.

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