Frank Shebageget: *Quantification*
[Catalogue essay for Tribe, 2003]

Frank Shebageget's exhibition, *Quantification*, uses dominant culture modes—repetition and Minimalism from Modernist art, and lists from Statistics—to demonstrate how people are made into colonized subjects. But his work is not dispassionate or burdened by black and white moralizing. Shebageget, an Ottawa-based Ojibway artist, translates these rather cool methodologies into handmade poems that resonate with hearts as well as minds. He presents facts and images, he hints but leaves conclusions to us.

"The Tongues Were Never Brought Back to the Post" is a sculptural installation that is at once a storm and a graveyard. Thirty, four-foot high, vertical cedar posts stand like sentinels. But, because of the rhythm and arrangement, they seem to pour into the room. Each post is mounted with a thick and drooping light grey form made of plaster and hydrocal. They are casts of very large bison tongues. That they all face the same way reinforces the sense of flow to these otherwise static objects. The tongues are at the right height to suggest a stampeding herd. But this sense of active life is arrested. Like ghosts, the parts stand for the whole animals, but they are also just parts, tongues wrenched from their owner's mouths and attached to stakes. It is not hard to see this as both an essay on the loss of wild Buffalo and as a metaphor for the silencing of Aboriginal people.

Historically, "Tongues" may refer to settlers' slaughter of buffalo in the mid to late 19th century, especially the taking of tongues as delicacies, but leaving the rest of the animal to rot. This is a reminder of both wastefulness and the attempted genocide. The contrast of the rigid geometry of the machine-milled posts with the organic tongues may be symbolic of the general tension between the settler's vision for the Prairies (fences posts) and the Indigenous populations' traditional use. Bison tongues were also used in ceremonies. Perhaps this is a sacrifice, atonement. And, if the posts were read as pedestals and the tongues as the voices of First Nations artists, what might Shebageget be saying about the relationship between First Nations people and art galleries?

Quantification is the act of measuring, of determining amounts. It is a process of signification, of making things count—a means of naming and locating. In one realm, the statistician's, numbers are thought to be neutral. In another realm, the world of living people, such measuring is not so disinterested, it is attached to a history, the measuring and engineering of people. Who in Canada has been counted, measured and studied more than the First Nations? And, for all this quantification, what does the dominant culture know of our individual lived humanity? The beings the tongues stand for in Shebageget's installation are enumerated, made to count, but at the expense of their unique identities.

While *Tongues* evokes an immediate visceral response, "Communities" is more conceptual. On a huge tarpaper surface (9 x 16 feet) are written the names of 688 Aboriginal and Métis reserves, communities and bands. The drawing can operate like Maya Lin's *Vietnam Memorial*. While I was with the work, people were scanning for their homes. A few wondered why some were missing—others knew why. I was happy to see Métis communities recognized. For most

viewers, however, this is a blank wall. To others, reciting a name recalls smiling faces, the smell of specific earth, perhaps darker images, too.

Unlike other memorials, this one is drawn on a cheap and impermanent material. That the names are not carved in granite suggests pessimism about the endurance of these communities. But this is not the first version of this piece. Perhaps it must be temporary because the list will need updated—which comments on the contingent status (under dominant culture reckoning) of Aboriginal people and communities. There are other positive aspects. At least the names are here, and, an Aboriginal man, for his own reasons and meanings, records them. Significantly, rather than just positing generic "Indian" or "Aboriginal," this work lists the numerous Nations. I think that the number and diversity of these communities will surprise many people.

Shebageget explains that his "focus on intercultural history attempts to locate positive connections that have been established between native and non-native cultures without falling into tropes of stereotypical issues about native culture." I am not sure that the work in this exhibition is as optimistic as his artist statement. But it is clear that Shebageget *is* avoiding clichés and is construct fresh images that knit these intercultural histories. However, there are loose threads that our best wishes cannot always hide. Because his generous and evocative works are so available to interpretation and memory, they will always speak more richly than he can account for.

Many contemporary First Nations artists are struggling to create work that expresses their whole experience. But university-trained, urban artists seem the most self-conscious in their creative negotiation of a space between the dominant culture, indigenous cultures and histories, and their personal experiences and temperament. Their practices struggle to engage all three realms without being overwhelmed by the demands of each. It's quite a balancing act—tense and intense.

Few who take on this task in their own, authentic way, are ever assimilated by the dominant art world. [In fact, it is much easier to lose yourself in mainstream culture's idea of "traditional Indian art;" that is, the world of vaguely historical reproductions and confections designed to rhyme with mainstream culture's imaginary "Indians."] Rather, these adventurous artists can subtly transform both dominant and First Nations cultures. Contemporary First Nation artists appropriate dominant culture forms and styles, combine them with older ways of making, knowing and being, or add a history lesson or other home truth and return them to the art world as visual time bombs. These actions have not only allowed First Nations people to be heard, but they have also revitalized the art world, and have shown both communities new ways to be Aboriginal.

Frank Shebageget is a fine example of this cultural exchange and transformation. His sculptures and installations play on post-minimal and conceptual art but exceed the usually cool formalism or intellectualism of these approaches and invigorate them with a living content. His works evoke intense emotions and memories, and they generate as many thoughts and feelings as there are people.

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