Rolande Souliere's Sign Language

[Exhibition essay: New Gallery, Calgary, 2010.]

Each episode of Thomas King's CBC radio show *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour* (1997-2000) closed with the line "Stay calm, be brave; wait for the signs." The program routinely poked fun at Indian Romanticism—producing with the spin of a wheel, for example, 'genuine' Indian names for lucky callers. And, yet, as with much of King's comedy, uncomfortable truths lurked beneath the irony. *Dead Dog* often tackled *The Indian Act*, the legacy of the Residential schools, and the contrast of contemporary urban, Aboriginal identity and rez life—usually with the citified King as the butt of his own jokes. The show was both a send-up and an education. The sign off, "Stay calm, be brave, wait for the signs," sounded like both corny movie Indian dialogue and good advice.

Rolande Souliere's "I'm Just Not That Good at Directions," shares King's self-deprecating humour. The exhibition title pokes fun at the stereotype of the Indian as infallible pathfinder and scout who has an innate sense of direction. An Anishinabe (a Michipicoten band member) from Ontario, who has lived in Sydney, Australia, for the past 12 years, Souliere created for this exhibition an environment of textless street signs and barriers whose bold colours and shapes resemble several First Nations designs. Her Indigenization of these seemingly neutral objects reveals the inherent political nature of 'universal' signs and the possibility of the reversal of their homogenizing agenda.

Street markers and barriers are meant to be read the same way by everyone. They are signals that are not subject to interpretation. Street signs are to be recognized and obeyed. They remind Souliere of the 'pass' system, *The Indian Act* and other means of controlling Aboriginal people. By decorating them with First Nations designs, she shows that ubiquitous, 'neutral' signifiers are always already of the dominant culture. They are a display of power. By Indigenizing them, she breaks one kind of spell and imposes another: here is how part of the world might have looked if First Nations people had been partnered with rather than colonized.

At first glance, the markers seem slickly executed, but closer inspection reveals that the curves are awkwardly cut; the edges are not perfectly smooth and gaps appear between some shapes. The artist seems to be "not that good at (following) directions." Souliere explains that she could have had laser cut neatness but wanted a rougher look that reveals that these things are hand-made, and closer to domestic textiles than manufacturing. Handmade signs lack authority. Imperial signs should appear as if generated by a perfect, objective and rational machine. They should be expressive of 'the law' rather than of an individual person. Handmade signs suggest that the law is imperfect, malleable, a human product. An imperfect sign opens a gap in a seemingly impenetrable sign system. Ruffling the space between signifier and signified, the handmade and imperfect hints of an unruly presence, a body, even an agency and intention that exceed and even undermine the task of the sign.

Growing up in Toronto in the 1970s, the community helped urban Aboriginal children like the young Souliere keep in touch with their culture through art, singing, dance and other culture classes. The programs provided elders from a range of cultures. This variety of Indigenous teachers and urban influences continue to circulate in Souliere's work. Her signs quote Haidaish designs along with her own Anishinabe Turtle clan motif, numerous beading sources, and the curvier European abstract art from the 1930s-50s (Sonia Delaney, etc.). None of the designs quite captures the original sources, nor violates actual or moral copyright, but they do come teasingly close. Like Sonny Assu and Brian Jungen, Souliere may be underlining how North American culture is consciously or unconsciously influenced by Aboriginal design (the similarity of Nike and Haida design, for example); or, she may be actively promoting the Indigenization of mainstream material culture. Her mash-ups are a promiscuous collage of influences digested into an Indigenous urban design for the future.

One of the great powers of abstract art is its ability to stimulate a flood of associations in viewers. A few lines and colours can signal that we are in Canada and nowhere else. They can also show which Canada it is. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, well known for didactic environmentalist paintings, has recently turned to making abstract works featuring Haida shapes. These simple forms evoke a whole cultural presence while giving nothing away. Political abstraction is a means of taking up and transforming visual space. In this case, Indigenizing visual culture helps to re-orient the dominant imaginary without compromising Aboriginal spiritual content.

Abstraction can also thaw Indigenous culture by becoming a space for innovation rather than reiteration of tradition. In conversation about her attraction to the plastic, bright colours, reflectors and mirrors, Souliere referred to "powwow bling." Powwow's attract people from all over North America. Numerous tribes display their material culture for admiration and a certain amount of emulation. Nowadays, regalia of traditional beading, quilling, leather work and feathers and supplemented by flashy day-glo plastics. Innovations seen at one pow-wow (a cd used as a decoration, for instance) soon appears in next year's regalia.

One way of reading this work is to see it as an attempt by the artist to take charge of the visual field and impress her hybrid education upon it. "I'm Just Not That Good at Directions" might be read not as a failure to live up to expectations but as an expression of individuality. She is not good at taking directions; she's better at creating them.

Australian Indigenous people share parallel colonial histories and live lives similar to Canadian Aboriginal people. Australian Aboriginal artist Vernon Ah Kee, upon returning from a reserve in Alberta, told his friends in Australia that it's not that the experience of Canadian First Nations people is the same as Aboriginal Australians, but that it is "exactly the same!" However, he explains, that though the Aboriginal population of both countries is close (about 3%) he senses a distinct difference in the understanding and treatment of Canadian First Nations people who have a treaty relationship with their neighbours. Visiting New Zealand recently, where the Maori make up about 15% of the population, where their language is taught in the schools and where their culture is a

proud and substantial aspect of the place, there is an example for a possible future for those parts of Canada and Australia with similar concentrations of Indigenous people. With streets and places re-scripted in Maori, I saw non-Aboriginal people speaking Indigenous words daily, physically testifying to their sharing of that space.

In this light, Rolande's signs have a serio-comic cast. She may be making these street markers as a means not just of disturbing the dominant imaginary but also redesigning it. These signs could actually be adopted. Such a change would signal the (a)priority of a p particular First Nations culture in a specific location. It would also create a distinct visual culture for Canada's regions. Since 1967, or so, the world's signs have become nearly universalized. There has been a virtual visual colonization of street signs to make everywhere feel somewhat like home. Rolande is signaling a new possibility, one that privileges the local over the general. Indigenization is an effort to resist the prioritizing of the global over the vernacular and trouble the rationalization and colonization of direction and advice. Souliere asks us to imagine a post-Modernist, post-colonial world where design does not strive to streamline and unify the world; does not become a tidy Esperanto, but shifts from location to location and reflects the varieties of local discourse and preference. "Stay calm, be brave; wait for the signs."

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