

Eyeball to Eyeball: Tension in an Iconic Photograph of the Oka Standoff, 1990

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THE VALUE AND CONTEXT OF AN ICONIC IMAGE

If a picture is colloquially said to be *worth a thousand words*, then one deemed *iconic* must be invaluable? I suggest that from time to time a still image is made which encompasses social and philosophical elements far beyond the expressive scope of the physical subjects caught within a single frame. Such expressive possibility and value requires that such an image illuminate, describe, and explain at least partially, relationships, politics and spiritualities associated with the making of the image. Something of importance for an audience beyond the experience of the photographer, the subjects themselves, of editors and publishers, is metonymically accessible through the spatial arrangement of a photograph, through its composition, in the balance of light, shadow, colour, tone, and through the management of focus and perspective, framing and other physical elements. This expression or capture of reality, in space and in time, is effectively reinforced with contextual commentary as a three-dimensional historical event is translated into a two dimensional spatial arrangement.

An iconic photograph does not simply tell a story, or describe, incrementally, the process of an event. It presents a fragment of a meta-story which itself conditions and supports the more local story portrayed in a particular photographic project. Photography is both traditional and referential. What we have seen affects what we see, but what we see is influenced by what we expect to see. If we expect to see nothing, we will look elsewhere or cease to look at all. If our seeing¹ is broadened, over a period of say, a decade or even a century, such seeing can become highly arbitrary or prejudiced. Nonetheless, we welcome the invitation and enterprise to consider our social history, visually expressed and collected.²

For Mark Reid and the editors at Canada's *Beaver Magazine* iconic and generationally seminal photographs are photos which *captured a moment or feeling in Canadian history - perhaps, even, instances of a collective consciousness.*³ Included within the Beaver's canon of *Photos That Changed Canada* was a deceptively simple portrait of a Mohawk Warrior and a young

¹ See John Berger, *Ways of seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1986.

² Magnum ° [degrees]. London: Phaidon, 2003; also Mark Reid, *100 Photos That Changed Canada*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2009.

³ Beaver magazine, Aug-Sep 2008.

Canadian Soldier (Figure 1) staring at each other, eyeball to eyeball, which was taken during the confrontation between aboriginal warriors and members of the Canadian Forces in the late summer of 1990 at Oka, Quebec, on Mohawk traditional territory.⁴



Figure 1 - Pte. Patrick Cloutier faces warrior Brad Laroque

The photograph was taken by a young 27 year old freelance photographer, Shaney Komulainen. With other English, French and Aboriginal journalists she made her way to the various sites of protest and with a few others, ended up behind the barricades at Oka (south of the City of Montreal) in order to tell a side of the story not welcomed by the three levels of government on one side of the dispute⁵. Notes accompanying the image published in *Beaver* describe her strategy and reaction:

Canadian soldiers and armed Mohawk warriors were staring each other down in the shadows of the tall trees. "I couldn't believe this was happening in Canada," she says. "It was a really tense situation, and it could've been so much worse."

As for Komulainen, she snuck through the woods — hiding her camera under her jacket — to the disputed burial ground where she was faced with the hostile showdown between soldiers and natives. Suddenly, there was the imposing Brad Laroque, standing face-to-face with soldier Patrick Cloutier. Shooting in low light without a flash, Komulainen says she was lucky to capture the moment so clearly.⁶

Komulainen and other journalists quickly found themselves between if not *two solitudes*⁷ then

⁴ Various historical summaries from different perspectives are available including: Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, *People of the Pines: the Warriors and the legacy of Oka*. Toronto: McArthur, 1999 and other online sources including <http://www.turtleisland.org>, or <http://www.warriorpublications.com>

⁵ *At War With the Army* RYERSON REVIEW OF JOURNALISM, Summer 1991.

⁶ *Beaver* article, p. 24

⁷ *Two solitudes* usually refers to the Anglophone/Francophone divide but is used by several commentators to highlight aboriginal/colonial tensions. That said, a Graduate Thesis

between two angry and frustrated cultural groups. The immediate issue was land—land control, land use, and the thorny issue of land connection understood as ownership or custodial stewardship. Beneath the immediate conflict lay two differing versions of history. What first appeared as a municipal desire to expand a local golf course quickly exploded outward to include questions around the jurisdiction of federal, provincial and municipal governments over lands claimed by First Nations where there is no existing treaty or appropriate compliance with a mandated negotiation process. The Mohawk point to a long succession of broken promises first offered and then denied by both the Roman Catholic Church and the governments of Quebec and Canada. Both sides admitted the need for negotiation at different times. The issue was always what constitutes *good faith*.

The setting for Komulainen's still image is vividly described in a CBC national television broadcast on Sept. 1, 1990:

It's a scene of hysteria, pandemonium and high tension as more than 2,500 soldiers descend upon Oka. People prepare for the worst as the army advances to the main barricade at the edge of the sacred Mohawk territory. Images of tanks and soldiers in full combat fatigue fill TV screens. A dramatic stare-off between a Canadian soldier and a Mohawk warrior known as Lasagna (sic)⁸ comes to symbolize the gulf between the two sides.⁹

If there is a gulf between the ideologies of both sides of the dispute, there is little difference in strategy. Both groups wish to hold the ground. Both claim sovereignty, differently understood. Both view themselves as an army with legitimate grievance though the willingness to use force varies. Both seek to use the media to their advantage. Both stand physically close, literally within a few inches of each other often separated only by a thin line of razor wire.

The photograph itself is quite beautiful. It is a dual, duel portrait worthy of a gallery placement. A rectangle is evenly bisected by an imaginary line itself intimately proximate to the headgear of two opposing figures. We vicariously witness a tense moment between two infantrymen, a staring match which in the end has national, even international overtones. Obvious and extreme tension exudes from the Canadian army Private Patrick Cloutier and the forward listing stance of Saskatchewan Economics student and Mohawk Warrior, Brad Laroque.¹⁰ Both carry weapons though only the warrior's is displayed (we have no idea how the image has been cropped but journalist descriptions describe heavy firepower on both sides). It could be intuited that a balance of power exists where Laroque's greater height shadow's Cloutier's face, but the infantryman's steely gaze is anything but diminutive. What the photo cannot describe

e Oka Crisis Of 1990 by Elizabeth Andrea Keller (University of British Columbia, 1996) demonstrates a difference in coverage between the French and English press in Quebec vis. *La Presse* was less sympathetic than the *Gazette* towards the Mohawks, and that *La Presse* emphasized the need for law and order, while the *Gazette* gave greater attention to the Native perspective. Both newspapers however, tended to have negative frontpage and editorial coverage.

⁸ The warrior who confronted Cloutier was widely identified as Lasagna. In reality, it was Brad Larocque, the young Ojibway university student from Saskatchewan who had gone to Kahnawake to study the situation and had stayed to fight.

⁹ CBC THE NATIONAL Sept 1, 1990, Stable URL: http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/civil_unrest/clips/581/

¹⁰ The warrior was initially mis-identified as Lasagne.

is the context of the standoff, described by Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera in *People of the Pines*:

Late in the afternoon of September 1, the soldiers placed a razor wire barrier in front of their new position on the dirt road in the Pines, south of Sector Five. Warriors confronted the soldiers in face-to-face staring matches, challenging them to drop their guns and fight with their fists. One of the warriors grabbed a soldier's gun, put the barrel into his mouth, and dared the soldier to pull the trigger.

As (Cloutier) stood near the razor wire, a masked warrior strode up to him and glared into his eyes. Cloutier tried to ignore him by gazing straight ahead or turning away and pacing restlessly back and forth. In one of Cloutier's impassive moments, the tense stare down was captured in a photograph that became famous around the world as a symbol of the Oka crisis.

As the confrontation continued, Larocque leaned close to the young soldier and whispered a long series of threats. He asked Cloutier if he understood the damage he would suffer if a bullet bit into him. In a soft voice, he gave a graphic description of the injuries a bullet could cause, boasting that his high-powered bullets would tumble upwards and eviscerate the soldier. "Getting nervous, perhaps? You should be," he said. "You're number one on my list. Did you join the army for this?"¹¹

On another occasion however, and later in the conflict:

To break the boredom, some of the warriors chatted casually with the soldiers at the front line. Richard Two Axe, the middle-aged grandfather who drove the camouflaged golf cart, was perhaps the friendliest of the warriors, often trading jokes with soldiers on the other side of the razor wire.

Some of the soldiers, however, were blatantly racist and hostile to the Mohawks. One group of soldiers put up a large wooden sign near the warrior encampment with a misspelled message: "Lazagne Your Dead Meat (sic)." Much of their hatred was directed toward Alanis Obomsawin¹², an Abenaki filmmaker who has received the Order of Canada for her acclaimed National Film Board documentaries. All summer, she had been directing a film crew at Kanesatake, and now she was one of the last remaining journalists in the warrior encampment. Whenever she appeared at the razor wire, soldiers shouted racist insults at her and called her a "squaw."¹³

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

With this data in mind I now turn to the critical analysis of photography and photo-journalism by Alan Sekula and Susan Sontag to enrich the discussion. I am mindful of the three basic categories of photographic enterprise, those of news, advertising, and fine arts.¹⁴ Elements of all three are pertinent to my discussion, even the latter especially given the placement of the Oka portrait in contemporary collections.

¹¹ *People of the Pines*, p. 354.

¹² Who subsequently produced an extensive film documentary: *Kanehsatake: 270 years of resistance* [National Film Board of Canada, Alanis Obomsawin, Jean-Claude Labrecque, Claude Vendette, and Francis Grandmont. 2008.

¹³ *People of the Pines*, p. 375.

¹⁴ *Style as Social Process*, Barbara Rosenblum, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Jun., 1978), pp. 422-438, Published by: American Sociological Association, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2094499>

I turn first to photographer and essayist Alan Sekula whose seminal work *Photography Against the Grain*¹⁵ includes reflection on images, visual reading, meaning, social context, and semiology. It further suggests a new praxis for visual reaction. Such praxis requires that the context of a photograph which attempts to visually describe persons, events and other realities be socially considered in a community of *marginal spaces* (Sekula) which extend beyond the walls of galleries and front-pages of newspapers. Such an idea begs the question of how the Oka photograph was and continues to be received and considered. Twenty years after the event is it simply archival, or does it continue to inform and inspire? Does it express a modern standard for confrontation or a low point in diplomacy? Does it portray Canadian military professionalism or an increasingly militant aboriginal voice?

For Sekula there can be no photographic exhibition (formal or otherwise) without reflection upon the social context of the subject.¹⁶ A photography which is unframed by at least captions and better still informed reflection over time is of little value. The aim is not to didactically convince the viewer of a particular social or political outcome, but to profoundly engage the viewer, an engagement deepened through social understanding. The children running from the Vietnamese Village of Mai Lai (Figure 2) for example, are running *from* something, *to* somewhere.



Figure 2 Nick Ut, LIFE Magazine, June 1972. Vietnamese children running from napalm

¹⁵ Allan Sekula, *Photography Against The Grain: Essays And Photo Works, 1973-1983*. Halifax, N.S., Canada: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984.

¹⁶ Such a notion opposes any understanding of a photograph, even a journalistic creation, is intrinsically truth-telling. That said, and in a Jungian sense, photographs can embody archetypes and benefit powerfully from their presence and identification.

We need to understand why this is so and how such a horror has occurred if the journalism is to succeed. The terror on their faces is real for them in the moment, and becomes slightly more real for us as we engage the tragedy. The photographer was present for a reason--as a fact-finder, an emotion-collector, as a documentarian. These motivations (really vocations) emboldened the photographer to place himself¹⁷ in danger for a greater purpose. *Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message.*¹⁸ Culturally, we send and receive such messages all the time. Communication is necessarily content-ridden. When literary and image data effectively combine, something outside the frame appears.

“. . . (T)he photograph represents the real world by a simple metonymy: the photograph stands for the object or event that is curtailed at its spatial or temporal boundaries or, it stands for a contextually related object or event. An image of a man's (sic) face stands for a man, and perhaps, in turn, for a class of men.”¹⁹

If such images point to political, even philosophical truths, Sekula goes further: *What I am suggesting is that we can separate a level of report, of empirically grounded rhetoric, and a level of spiritual rhetoric.*²⁰ The discovery of multiple functions of an image piques the curiosity and causes this author to pay greater attention to images and to spend more time with those previously considered arbitrary. The connection between *empirically grounded rhetoric* and “spiritual rhetoric” is of special interest. Sekula takes *spiritual* in a social sense as he discusses the work of Lewis Hine, in terms of the photo as both *witness* and *seer*.

Hine is an artist in the tradition of Millet and Tolstoy, a realist mystic. His realism corresponds to the status of the photograph as report, his mysticism corresponds to its status as spiritual expression. What these two connotative levels suggest is an artist who partakes of two roles. The first role, which determines the empirical value of the photograph as report, is that of witness. The second role, through which the photograph is invested with spiritual significance, is that of seer, and entails the notion of expressive genius.²¹

It is not possible, and possibly prejudicial, to invest Komulainen with the role of seer but her strategic positioning and timing afford her picture a particular expressive genius. Sekula describes at length a similar genius in Martha Rosler's exhibition *The Bowery*. The work takes on a particular documentary power, especially as the images are combined with a streetwise alcoholic street vocabulary.

The photographs consistently pull us back to the street, to the terrain from which this pathetic flight is attempted . . . Among other things, I wanted to portray the conditions under which people stop obeying orders.²²

For our discussion of the Oka photograph the notion of being *pulled back* into the action is gripping. If then we are forcefully engaged, what next? Sekula continues with the idea of

¹⁷ Nick Ut, LIFE Magazine.

¹⁸ Sekula, p. 5-6.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 18.

²¹ Ibid, p. 20.

²² Ibid, p. 62.

resolution, which I develop as a process of reconciliation as I seek to identify a way forward for photo artists. Sekula quotes Tolstoy:

“The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, now attained only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and instinct of all men (sic).

. . . (U)niversal art, by uniting the most different people in one common feeling by destroying separation, will educate people to union and will show them, not by reason but by life itself, the joy of universal union reaching beyond the bounds set by life. . . .²³

In the chapter **Dismantling Modernism** Sekula suggests a functional and communal context for appropriate socially minded art:

“Nearly all the work I am discussing here demands a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between artists, media workers, and their "audiences." I am not suggesting that the mass media can effectively be infiltrated. Mass "communication" is almost entirely subject to the pragmatics of the one-way, authoritarian manipulation of consumer "choices." I think "marginal" spaces have to be discovered and utilized, spaces where issues can be discussed collectively: union halls, churches, high schools, community colleges, community centers, and perhaps only reluctantly, public museums.²⁴

It is in these *marginal spaces* that Sekula finds room for an informed discussion, an appropriate reflection and engagement with issues of consequence for contemporary men and women. If the photographer has a role to play, s/he must surrender a position of privilege in order to accomplish such tasks.

“A naive faith in both the privileged subjectivity of the artist, at the one extreme, and the fundamental "objectivity" of photographic realism, at the other, can only be overcome in a recognition of cultural work as a praxis. As Marx put it: It is only in a social context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity cease to be such antinomies. The resolution of the theoretical contradictions is possible only through practical means, only through the practical energy of man (sic).²⁵

I now turn to Susan Sontag's photographic essay *On Photography*.²⁶ Her insights enrich my discussion of Komulainen's historic photograph viewed first in newspapers, newsmagazines and more recently in anthologies and electronic collections. Sontag notes the many ways we view an abundance of images which help us access persons and events. Such abundance is problematic when viewers are confused by contradictory images or find their compassion fatigued:

Through photographs, we also have a consumer's relation to events, both to events which are part of our experience and to those which are not—a distinction between types of experience that such habit-forming consumership blurs. (One) form of acquisition is that, through image-making and image-duplicating machines, we can acquire something as information (rather than experience). Indeed, the importance of photographic images as the medium through which more and more events enter our experience is, finally, only a by-product of their effectiveness in furnishing knowledge dissociated from and independent of experience.²⁷

²³ Sekula, *ibid*, p. 20.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 70.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 74-5.

²⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 155-6.

Photography informs our knowledge especially when such knowledge births a unique perspective. The presence of *insider*²⁸ journalists at Oka provides a privileged glimpse into a moment in time, a moment framed by cultural animosity, heated by emotion, but experientially distant from the lives of most Canadians and some First Nations. Our vicarious participation, aided by photography, provokes a reaction, itself coloured by our situation in life, our experience of power and its subsidiary apportionments of wealth and freedom.²⁹ We are motivated, repulsed, frustrated or inspired, as much by personal circumstance accompanied by the verdict of history, as by our visual encounter. A certain epistemological redefinition occurs:

Photographs do more than *redefine the stuff of ordinary experience (people, things, events, whatever we see—albeit differently, often inattentively—with natural vision)* and add vast amounts of material that we never see at all. Reality as such is redefined—as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing.³⁰

Given Sontag's role as author and essayist her limiting of the impact of writing surprises, if only to demonstrate the profound effect of the visual image on understanding. I find her phrase *interminable dossier* intriguing, almost haunting. A record is being formed, over time, a record which is accurate on many levels.

Even the most compassionate photojournalism is under pressure to satisfy simultaneously two sorts of expectations, those arising from our largely surrealist way of looking at all photographs, and those created by our belief that some photographs give real and important information about the world. The photographs that W. Eugene Smith took in the late 1960s in the Japanese fishing village of Minamata³¹, most of whose inhabitants are crippled and slowly dying of mercury poisoning, move us because they document a suffering which arouses indignation—and distance us because they are superb photographs of Agony, conforming to surrealist standards of beauty.³²



Figure 3 Mother with daughter who suffers from mercury poisoning, Minamata, Japan, photo by W. Eugene Smith

²⁸ *At War With the Army*, cited above.

²⁹ See John Berger. *Che Guevara: The Moral Factor*, The Urban Review, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, Volume 8, Number 3 / September, 1975. (On the photograph of the dead Che Guevara) . . . (O)n many who saw it its effect may have been very different. What is its meaning? What, precisely and unmysteriously, does this photograph mean now? I can but cautiously analyze it as regards myself.

³⁰ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 156.

³¹ (Figure 3) and see discussion in Peggy J. Bowers, *Through the Objective lens: The Ethics of Expression and Repression of High Art in Photojournalism*, The American Communication Journal, American Communication Association: Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA, Vol. 10, Issue 5, Special Issue 2008, p. 11.

³² Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 105.

If we take specific information and emotion from Smith's *pieta* what do we take from the Oka image? How does our reaction compare with the testimony of a participant in the standoff?³³ Is one account more accurate than another and how can the viewer decide? Sontag argues ardently for an authority which comes close to that of an *actual eye-witness*, an argument she will further develop in suggesting a moral voice for images:³⁴

. . . (A) photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a *trace* (emphasis mine), something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask³⁵

She will however argue the other side of the coin, that even authoritative images will lose their poignancy over time unless supported by similar and supportive evocative images.

Socially concerned photographers assume that their work can convey some kind of stable meaning, can reveal truth. But partly because the photograph is, always, an object in a context, this meaning is bound to drain away; that is, the context which shapes whatever immediate—in particular, political—uses the photograph may have is inevitably succeeded by contexts in which such uses are weakened and become progressively less relevant.³⁶

She joins Sekula in advocating at the very least for a caption as speech-aid:

What the moralists are demanding from a photograph is that it does what no photograph can ever do—speak. The caption is the missing voice, and it is expected to speak for truth. But even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph which it is attached.³⁷

If we posit that something is *said* in the Oka image we can also consider what is left *unsaid*. The image screams *tension*, but is vague on the path to development or resolution. The two adversaries are hardly joining hands, walking together, relaxing or even negotiating. Sontag: *Photographs are often invoked as an aid to understanding tolerance. In humanist jargon, the highest vocation of photography is to explain man (sic) to man.*³⁸ If in this instance human is unexplained to human, what do we learn about human community? When a person resigns to fight or argue in allegedly just situations, that same human being requires intimate space for those moments when words fail, or when equal and opposite forces stalemate. What does the Oka image acknowledge—that there is a power struggle, that at times a struggle of nervous tension is a necessary prelude either to violence or resolution? Neither the outcome nor the way forward is clear.

. . . (P)hotographs do not explain; they acknowledge. Robert Frank was only being honest when he declared that "to produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation." If photographs are messages, the message is both transparent and mysterious. Robert Frank was only being honest when he declared that "to produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation." If photographs are messages, the

³³ The most detailed visual account is Kanehsatake: *270 years of Resistance* cited above.

³⁴ Susan Sontag employs the image of *witness* throughout *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

³⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 154.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

message is both transparent and mysterious. "A photograph is a secret about a secret," as Arbus observed. "The more it tells you the less you know."³⁹

What finally is the value of an iconic photograph in shaping and encouraging polemical discussions? If images embody meanings which are both transparent and mysterious how can these outcomes encourage and not confuse participants on all sides? In truth, confusion gives way to insight, if and only if all sides allow themselves to be challenged by the image. The image can elicit a message which is suggestive and has social consequences. For Sontag the image possesses extraordinary powers:

. . . (A) society becomes "modern" when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images, when images that have extraordinary powers to determine our demands upon reality and are themselves coveted substitutes for firsthand experience become indispensable to the health of the economy, the stability of the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness . . . For the images that have virtually unlimited authority in a modern society are mainly photographic images; and the scope of that authority stems from the properties peculiar to images taken by cameras.⁴⁰

So what is the special authority emanating from the Oka image? If its force arises not from any sense of community, its gravitas must arise from its feeling of tension. There is some pre-explosive moment recorded here. We glimpse an instant prior to another instant, but what will the future bring? We are caught in a strange circumstantial potential moment, and herein lays the particular force of the image. It is not unlike the picture called *Falling Man*⁴¹ (Figure 4) where a victim of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 plunges to his death. Karen Engle describes this image as *searing the eyes, this photograph . . . of a body immobilized between life and death*.⁴²



Figure 4 Falling Man, September 11, 2001, AP photo by Richard Drew

³⁹ Ibid, p. 111.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 153.

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis see the chapter in Karen Engle. *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.

⁴² Ibid, p. 31.

PHOTOGRAPHY, FAITH AND ART

With the above commentary in mind I turn now to consider how contemporary photography, especially that within the *concerned*⁴³ and *fine art* tradition can assist and further encourage a helpful and popular cross cultural discussion in Canada today. I note sadly that little concrete resolution of the land and governance issues which gave rise to the 1990 standoff has occurred between the Mohawk Nation and Canada these past twenty years. I write these notes only weeks before the twentieth anniversary of the 1990 standoff. One would hope for more progress through two decades. A recent letter however, sent to The Honourable Chuck Strahl, Federal Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development by KAIROS Canada (A Canadian ecumenical justice coalition which includes Indigenous Justice in its portfolio of activities) provides a somber assessment of the prospects for resolution.

KAIROS is concerned that almost 20 years later the land rights issues have not been resolved. These ongoing issues have had profound and lasting negative impacts not only on the Kanienkehá:ka people, but also on their neighbours in Oka and its surroundings. This situation has created divisions between people, both within and beyond the community, and has eroded trust . . . We strongly encourage government representatives at all levels to greatly increase their efforts to engage in good faith dialogue with all the Kanienkehá:ka of Kanehsatà:ke to address outstanding concerns.⁴⁴

If little has happened since 1990 to address unresolved conflicts, the nature of the impasse itself must first be considered and only subsequently can I muse on how an arts and photographic community might contribute to resolution, especially within faith communities. Does this procedural impasse arise through a lack of good faith as the Mohawk suggest or a convoluted and compromised aboriginal politics as the Federal government often suggests? Both assertions are simplistic and reductionist. I suspect that new or recovered images of multi-cultural community must be taken up in order to encourage a new understanding of the place of indigenous communities within a Canadian political structure, one which admittedly has failed to resolve the issues of Anglo/Francophone relations and the reasonable accommodation of other ethnic groups within the Canadian multi-cultural milieu.⁴⁵ Michelle Jack questions whether Canadians have the *imagination* let alone the *will* to appropriately incorporate First Nations within Canada.⁴⁶ People require images of destination, something more than signposts, in order to generate ideas about the path for travel. In Hebrew biblical literature this was the *Promised Land*; for twentieth Century North Americans, it was the *earth filmed from space*. What images then encapsulate a reconciled aboriginal/colonial culture, not organically blended (assimilation) but a full and respectful communion (reciprocal inter-dependence)?

Visually, Canadians and First Peoples are not well served by restorative inter-cultural images. Neither the notion of assimilation espoused by the Federal *White Paper of 1969* nor the

⁴³ A better term might be *conscientious*, vis. <http://www.jmcolberg.com/weblog/>

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http://www.kairoscanada.org/fileadmin/fe/files/PDF/Letters/2009/Letter_ChuckStrahl_Kanehsatake_6Aug09.pdf

⁴⁵ Recent informal discussions at the CSRS with David Seljak have been helpful in this regard. Aboriginal relations are an important component of any discussion of a *post-secular* Canada.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Are First Nations Imagined Within The Construction Of Canada?* Michelle Jacks, 2005 at <http://libarts.wsu.edu/amerst/michellejack/PDF%20Read%20Files/Oka.Final.pdf>

historical legacy of the Sulpician Order (who broke a series of promises dating back to Mohawk displacement from the town site of Montreal by the end of the seventeenth century) offers anything helpful. The Mohawks however can turn to the visual imagery of the Wampum Belt (figure 5) to illustrate their historical and political understanding, an assertion which I believe may suggest a structure for contemporary visual experimentation.



Figure 5 Wampum Belt, Aboriginal: Iroquois, Mohawk, 1775-1780, 18th century

Here is Chief Agneta's description:

You see this white line that shows the length of our land. The figures holding hands who rejoin the cross respect the loyalty we owe to the faith that we hold. The body represents the council fire of our village. The two dogs on the outside are supposed to guard the boundaries of our land. And if anyone attempted to interrupt our possession it is their duty to warn us by barking.⁴⁷

The language of *figures holding hands* is beautiful, meaningful and relevant. The credibility of the image is debatable (was such inter-cultural unity really in place?) but the morality is moving. History, law, negotiation, cultural relationship, spirituality and political ethos each find a voice in the Wampum image. Georges Emery Sioui, Historian and Traditionalist assisted by Miguel Paul Sioui, Ecologist and Traditionalist summarize both history and current experience thus:

Even if their territories were unjustly taken from them in the 18th century under the law of “the White Man”, the Mohawks of Kaneshatake possess the proof – sacred in their eyes – that the land does still belong to them. The main proof lies in the wampum belts, made of tubular beads carved from shell. The beads are mauve and white. At the time of the treaty, the First Nation custom was to make these kinds of belts (a laborious task) as a way to cement an agreement, contract or treaty in the presence of all the parties involved and for all time. The wampum belt, confirming the original land concession at Kaneshatake, shows the representatives of the Nations hand-in-hand as a sign of friendship. At the centre is a cross, signifying that the First Nations peoples would always be loyal to the Catholic Church; and at each end of the belt is a dog, representing the common will to protect and watch over the land.

When the British began to rule the territory in 1760, they were careful to confirm the First Nations' possession of the land and their freedom to practice their own customs and religion and to do business

⁴⁷ *Kaneshatake 270 years*

with them, the new conquerors. The Mohawk of Kanesatake are, therefore, in their own eyes and those of many other people, sovereign owners of their own land which no one will ever be able to change. The only road to agreement is still respect. The circular vision of the First Peoples should perhaps be taken into account once again.⁴⁸

So the imagery of the belt, with the Mohawk memory of their story itself suggests additional imagery, called here *circular vision*. In a different context, this author remembers sharing the stage with Grand chief Stewart Phillip head of the British Columbia Council of Indian Chiefs in the run-up to the BC Aboriginal Treaty Referendum of 2002.⁴⁹ I asked the chief what he imagined a reformed multi-cultural BC politics would look like. He suggested that in the late nineteenth century, first nations and settler nations worked well together and such an interdependent society was again possible in our day. If Chief Phillip's image is not circular, it is certainly mutual.

I am impressed with attempts by visual artists to highlight aspects of the inter-cultural tension which exists between First Nations and Canadians. Noteworthy is the work of Jeff Thomas (Figure 6) on *Indian-ness*⁵⁰. Self-described as *Urban-Iroquois* Thomas takes up the older work of Edward Curtis, a historical photographer who sought to portray the last days of the North American Indian, a corpus which produces many caricatures along with some accurate documentation. He pairs his work with Curtis' in order to enable *the North American Indian . . . to engage in a future dialogue with their descendents*.⁵¹



Figure 6 from Jeff Thomas, *A Study In Indian-ness*

Then consider *Life on the 18th Hole* (Figure 7) which enjoyed both a fine art presentation through limited edition prints and an underground distribution across Canada.

⁴⁸

<http://www3.onf.ca/enclasse/doclens/visau/index.php?mode=theme&language=english&theme=30663&film=33793&excerpt=612155&submode=about&expmode=3>

⁴⁹ CBC News backgrounder: http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/aboriginals/bc_treaty_referendum.html

⁵⁰ <http://www.scoutingforindians.com/biography.html>

⁵¹ See above

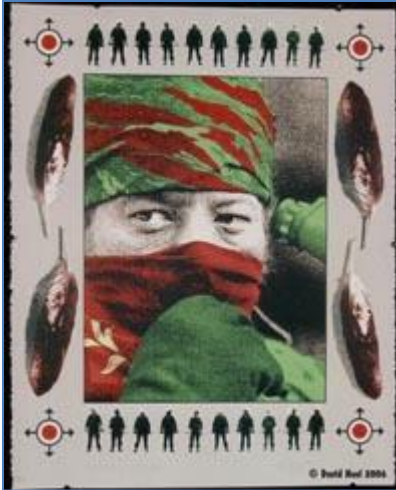


Figure 7 Life on the 18th Hole, David Neel, 26" x 22", Serigraph on Arches Rag paper

One description of Life on the 18th Hole notes:

David Neel's silk-screened portrait of Ronald Cross, the Mohawk warrior known as Lasagna, with its grimly decorative border of "ten little soldiers" reversing the imagery of "one little, two little, three little Indians" in the children's nursery rhyme.⁵² In a footnote Elizabeth Leiss-MeKellar adds (the) soldiers stand with nightsticks like tap dancers in a chorus line."⁵³

Experiment with imagery, its manipulation, even reversal, provides powerful commentary on history and experience. In another context, such art joins with the policy of faith groups who have a significant history of intervention. These include Quaker, Anglican, Mennonite and other protestant voices. Here are three typical statements:

United Church of Canada in Quebec⁵⁴

Understood as a religious minority within Quebec, the United Church remains committed to an inter-faith, inter-spiritual and justice-seeking path. The UC acknowledges First Nations as *generous welcomers* to whom gratitude is owed, and who have an important presence in a multi-cultural church. As a socially progressive church, the UC has grown in understanding of their relationship with the faiths and cultures and has spoken in relation to debate on reasonable accommodation and social mixture of Quebec society. Quebec UC constituency includes:

. . . Aboriginal Protestants in historic First Nation communities, in which our faith and identity is lived out in relation to the unique cultural history and spirituality of our people. Aboriginal First Nations are the bed-rock of this land and have been the most generous welcomers and "accommodators" this land has ever seen. We are all deeply indebted to them. Since the last three decades, we have tried to walk

⁵² Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Seattle, Wa: University of Washington Press, 1999, p. 232.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *United In Our Diversity: Presentation from The United Church of Canada in Québec to the Commission de Consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles*, Novembre 2007.

faithfully with Aboriginal peoples, presenting them with an Official Apology in 1986, accompanying them during the Oka crisis and beyond, and endeavouring to live with them in a new way in “Right Relation”.⁵⁵

In our shared political culture “nous” is an “inclusive “nous”. This “nous” excludes no one or any group. It is a dynamic “nous”, always in evolution, always redefining its identity by the components of Quebec society: aboriginals (with their ancestral rights), French Quebecers, English Quebecers (with their constitutional rights), and immigrants who have chosen to live in Quebec.⁵⁶

Ontario Mennonites⁵⁷

A Mennonite voice is found in an inquiry submission arising from a similar confrontation between provincial police and First Nations activists at Ipperwash, Ontario in 1995. In characteristic fashion, these Mennonites value a human connection with land, thus:

. . . our governments, and yes even our police are in fact reflections of us and of our attitudes toward First people. Until we as a newcomer community make two fundamental changes, relations with First Peoples will be strained, volatile and at times violent. The first change . . . is the essential relearning of the history of our being welcomed to this land. What are the principles of understanding land, and of people belonging to land rather than land to the people? . . . What does it mean to be side by side on the same land when our understandings of sharing the land versus exclusive use of the land are so widely different? . . . What we are proposing is a thoroughgoing effort to re-build or in many cases simply build strong, honest, informed relationships with First people who are our neighbours. For us in the Christian faith community, this grows heavily out of our commitment to justice, but it has many roots throughout our community.

An Indigenous Anglican Voice⁵⁸

Finally I want to include some comment by Bishop Mark MacDonald, National Anglican Indigenous Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada who reflects on the importance and presence of Spirit in cross-cultural discussions:

Central to the proposal to develop a truly indigenous American Christianity – the Gospel of and for Turtle Island - is the re-conception of the communion of God and humanity as essentially a communion between God and Creation. This communion is conceived as a dynamic ecological relationship between all that is and the Creator. Humanity plays an important but entirely dependent role – dependent upon the integrity of the web of life itself, with Spirit at the center. It is critical to note that this point of view contradicts many of the central premises of the missionary efforts of the Western churches, especially among the indigenous peoples of North America and around the world.

It remains for me to suggest some ways in which photographic art might embody the ideals advocated above. In a strictly practical sense, and on the USA side of the Akwasasne Reserve, the American Photo Magazine DAYLIGHT has established since 2003 a documentary studies project where a darkroom was constructed as part of the local Freedom School. Children and adults learn how to represent their community photographically along with language studies.⁵⁹

Moving from the practical to the conceptual, I wonder about a photographic approach similar to that of Vancouver photographic artist Jeff Well, whose conceptual image *Dead Troops Talk*

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

⁵⁷ *Final Submission: Ipperwash Inquiry, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario*, July 28, 2006.

⁵⁸ September 2007 Newsletter for the Forum on Religion and Ecology, and at http://www.anglican.ca/im/2007-09-06_mm.htm.

⁵⁹ <http://www.daylightmagazine.org/programs/akwasasne>

(A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986) (Figure 8) imagines dead combatants in a most peculiar conversation. This is no typical war photograph:



Figure 8 *Dead Troops Talk*, Jeff Wall, cibachrome on light-box 1992

What we see in Wall's transparency are thirteen soldiers of the Red Army, all displaying fatal wounds, who have come back to life, or some kind of living-dead afterlife. They mostly form groups of two or three, gesticulating, grabbing, playing, thinking, or just lying, not yet roused or playing dead. On the left side of the image, a young Mujahideen dressed in white and in trainers, has put down his gun to look through a bag. On the path above him we see the dark-trousered legs of two more Mujahideen beside the stacked guns they have presumably taken from the corpses. Theirs is a different view from ours . . . *Dead Troops Talk* refers back to a time when the United States was financing, arming, and training the Islamic Mujahideen to fight the Soviet army, which had come to the support of its client communist government in Afghanistan; the cost of the war in Soviet resources was to contribute to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the demise of communism. *Dead Troops Talk*, in representing metonymically the defeat of the Red Army, is a reflection on the end of communism as well as an invocation of its unrealized possibility.⁶⁰

In Wall's staged and manipulated work, we glimpse the reality of life, death and violence. We glimpse in Susan Sontag's words, the ultimate anti-war protest.

The antithesis of a document, the picture, a Cibachrome transparency seven and a half feet high and more than thirteen feet wide and mounted on a light box, shows figures posed in a landscape, a blasted hillside, that was constructed in the artist's studio. Wall, who is Canadian, was never in Afghanistan. The ambush is a made-up event in a savage war that had been much in the news. Wall set as his task the imagining of war's horror . . .

The figures in Wall's visionary photo-work are "realistic" but, of course, the image is not. Dead soldiers don't talk. Here they do . . .

Engulfed by the image, which is so accusatory, one could fantasize that the soldiers might turn and talk to

⁶⁰ Jeff Wall and Michael Newman. *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings*. 20-21 collection. [Barcelona?]: Poligrafa Ediciones Sa, 2007. p. 153-5.

us. But no, no one is looking out of the picture. There's no threat of protest. They are not about to yell at us to bring a halt to that abomination which is war . . .

These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? "We"—this "we" is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right.⁶¹

We gaze at possibilities for re-creation. We understand, if only partially the social and political forces which places the subjects together at a particular moment in time. We see not the aftermath of conflict, but a complex icon crying out for communal reflection, study and transformed action.

How then would such a reconstructive artistic image be created as witness to the Oka standoff and to provide support and encouragement for truly reconciling dialogue between governments and Canadians as a whole? Such a work must include some of the themes mentioned above—justice, reconciliation, history, land, women, faith, spirituality, culture, community and so forth? And of course . . . tension! Tension, embodied in the Oka photograph, experienced by all participants, a life force affecting all ancillary participants, is both bane and blessing to a present and future process. To admit it is honest; to covert its energy into fruitful social change is a real challenge.

Something in my own white, male, Anglo-Canadian body simply wants to find a solution to end the tension. This is my own need and moreover, a false solution. Sometimes, we must live within the stretched bounds of a creative tension, even for a long time. Truth about ourselves, our culture and even human and environmental potential, can emerge through patience accompanied by diligence. Creative photography may have the tools, the practitioners, the talent, the opportunity and the passion to express such tension in a hopeful frame. Deny not the past or present, live with its consequences and imagine a new future together. Art can sustain such a hopeful passion.. Recall with me the images of Martin Luther King (Figure 9) at the Lincoln Memorial at Washington in 1963.



Figure 9 Martin Luther King Jr., "I have a dream" Washington DC, 1963

⁶¹ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, pp. 123-126.

Consider somewhat more obscurely the work of Diane Arbus⁶² and Nan Goldin⁶³ in witnessing to the realities of New Yorkers who live on the fringes of social life, but live and in some cases, live well. Such a project would require at the very least an aboriginal and colonial voice working in partnership. It would need to state clearly and honestly something of the Oka event, replete with weapons, emotion, steely nerve and the possibility of death. If Jeff Wall's image can show us, powerfully, the futility of violence, a post-Oka photography might show us the life-denying reality of racism, both inherited and enacted this very day. It might further strengthen the resolve on all sides to strategize together, in a way which gets to the *soul* of the matter.

I conclude with a secular voice, which uses the spiritual language of *soul*. John Ciaccia was Quebec Minister of Aboriginal Affairs in the summer of 1990. In *The Oka Crisis: A Mirror of the Soul* he writes:

Our relationship with the Native people is a microcosm of all the issues that face a society: our relationships with each other, the notion of justice, the way we treat those of a different culture or faith or ethnic background. Name the issue — individual rights, societal rights -and you will find it in the problems we are facing with the Native people. To bring solutions will take not only an effort by governments, but also by each individual in our society. We may have to learn new views about Native people and, perhaps, about our duties as citizens. And this applies also for Native communities. Governments must be more idealistic, the Native people more pragmatic . . .

Our capacity to establish a healthy, mutually satisfactory relationship with Native people will determine the degree to which we can resolve our society's other problems. If we can't face them, we can't face ourselves. Our ability to come to terms with Native people will determine the quality of our society.⁶⁴

⁶² Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*. New York: Random House, 2003.

⁶³ Nan Goldin, Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn, and Suzanne Fletcher. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York, N.Y.: Aperture, 1996.

⁶⁴ Ciaccia, John. *The Oka Crisis: A Mirror of the Soul*. Dorval, Quebec: Maren Publications, 2000, p. 354.