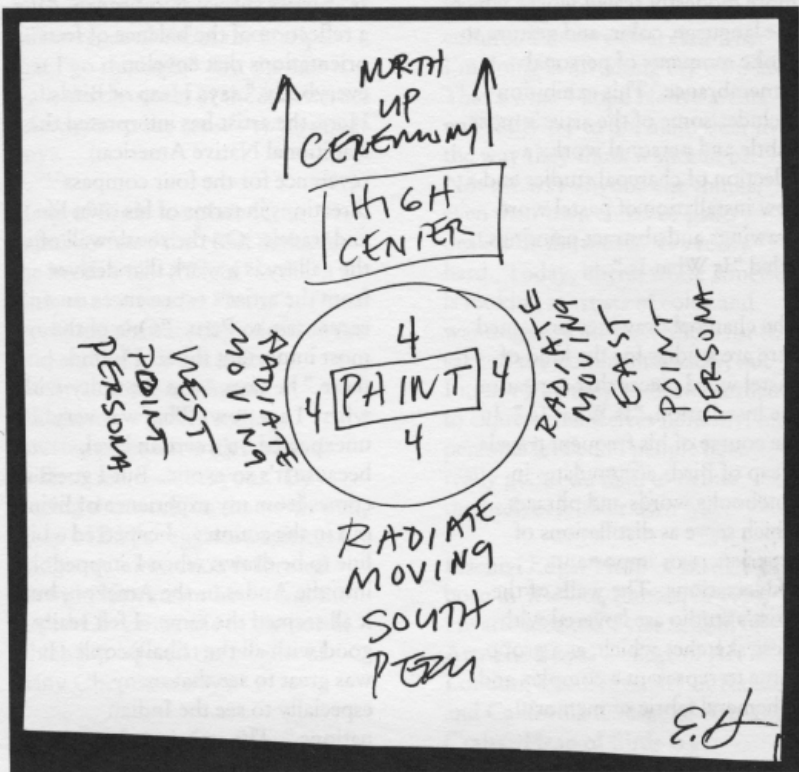


Untitled, 1991



The art of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds is an expression of self-location; a generous, deliberate, and, when necessary, critical articulation of the artist's identity within the context of language, society, geography, family, and history. His work ranges from agit-prop style public art pieces which forcefully assert the presence of a Native American voice within contemporary social discourse to more modestly scaled works which use language, color, and gesture to evoke moments of personal remembrance. This exhibition includes some of the artist's most subtle and personal work: a selection of charcoal studies and a new installation of pastel word drawings and abstract paintings titled "Is What Is."

The charcoal drawings presented here are studies for the kind of pastel word pieces that appear in the installation, "Is What Is." In the course of his frequent travels, Heap of Birds accumulates in notebooks words and phrases which serve as distillations of experiences or important conversations. The walls of the artist's studio are covered with these sketches which, as a group, come to represent a complex and ephemeral fabric of memory.

The unpredictable interrelation of memory fragments is underscored in Heap of Birds' arrangement of his pastel word drawings into grids. In these compositions, which take up three of the four walls in the "Is What Is" installation, the artist juxtaposes fifteen individual panels so that while they may be read sequentially, relations of meaning also develop at random across the composition. In these works, the sparseness of the words is offset by the colorfully rendered gesture of

the words themselves. Heap of Birds makes language appear dynamic and open to change, as if words themselves were vulnerable to the transforming force of nature. Such mutability serves to make the English language seem more permeable to an expressive content drawn, in part, from a specifically Native American experience.

Each of the four walls of "Is What Is" carries special significance. "It's a reflection of the balance of four orientations that envelop everybody," says Heap of Birds. Here, the artist has interpreted the traditional Native American reverence for the four compass directions in terms of his own life and travels. On the south wall of the gallery is a work that derives from the artist's experiences on a recent trip to Peru. "One of the most important things I found there," he says, "was the unity with where I am now. That was very unexpected on a certain level, because it's so exotic. But I guess it comes from my experience of living out in the country. I expected a big line to be drawn when I stepped into the Andes or the Amazon, but it all seemed the same. I felt really good with all the tribal people. It was great to see that many, especially to see the Indian nations." The artist's generally positive observations were tempered by his awareness of the entrenched social and economic inequities, an awareness expressed in this work with the panel which reads simply and hopefully, "A Better Age." The works on the west and east walls concern, respectively, a recent trip that Heap of Birds made to the Bay Area and his family and home in Oklahoma. The artist relates the kind of personal transformations which can occur during travel, and

which are expressed here on the west wall, to the importance given to voyages in his native Cheyenne culture. "When you came back from a trip things changed for you. They could even change your name when you came back. A lot of that had to do with war. But for me, these trips when I go out to do a public piece and face society, it's similar to that. I have to face-off the TV reporters or whoever takes issue with what I've said. There's a funny renewal about those trips that I go through." On the east wall, the direction of the sunrise, are references to the artist's two young boys.

Heap of Birds has placed four paintings from the Neuf Series on the north wall. ("Neuf" is the Cheyenne word for "four.") These works are abstract depictions of the land and light of the artist's ancestral home in central Oklahoma, a gently rolling, forested place cut with sculpted, brilliant red rock canyons. By placing this work on the north wall, Heap of Birds suggests a spiritual bridge. A connection is formed between his current home and the sacred Cheyenne site in the north, which has offered the origins of many Cheyenne ways.

Also included in the exhibition is the large-scale screenprint, *Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi*, 1989. In this work, Heap of Birds alternates his own voice, in the first and last line, with that of a hostile society aimed at denying the reality of Indian people while exploiting their "names, mascots, machines, cities, products, buildings." The abstract pattern surrounding this interchange recalls the style of the artist's abstract landscapes, implying perhaps that even such

conflicts will ultimately be swallowed up by the earth.

Commenting on his aims for this exhibition, Heap of Birds said, "The important thing is to have the latitude to be inventive about your own persona. That's what I hope the show gets across. People of color have the right to invent their lives. It's not about how it can relate to the white man or even just back to their own indigenous culture. I'm very clear that what I'm doing is inventing my own life. That's what I hope Native artists will really try to do, build their lives the way they think it should be. Not the way anyone else thinks, even their own chiefs or gallery dealers or the media. It's really hard. Today, liberal white America is looking at artists of color and wanting answers from them for the sake of the dominant society, but I'm not sure they really want them to express themselves honestly, on a personal level, and people have really got to do that, to define themselves in their own way."

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds was born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1954. He attended the Tyler School of Art, The Royal College of Art in London, The University of Kansas, and California College of Arts and Crafts. Heap of Birds is a Headman in the Elk Warrior Society, a traditional tribal group dedicated to the preservation of the Cheyenne People. He currently lives and works on lands of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Nation, near Geary, Oklahoma.

Lawrence Rinder

All quotes are from an interview with the artist on 30 October 1991.

Works in MATRIX (all works are courtesy of the artist):

*Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi*, 1989, screenprint, 42 x 60".

*Boost/West*, 1990, 15 pastel drawings, ca. 22 x 30".

*Peru/South*, 1991, 15 pastel drawings, ca. 22 x 30".

*Color in Sky/East*, 1991, 15 pastel drawings, ca. 22 x 30".

Untitled (from the Neuf series), 1990, acrylic on canvas, 56 x 72".

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Working drawing, 1990-92, marker on paper, 12 x 18".

Working drawing, 1990-92, marker on paper, 14 x 17".

Ten working drawings, 1990-92, marker on paper, 18 x 24" ea.

#### Selected one-person exhibitions:

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, *Born from Sharp Rocks: Edgar Heap of Birds* '86; University of Oklahoma Museum of Art, Norman, OK, *Sharp Rocks* '85 (traveled to 911 Contemporary Art Center, Seattle, WA '86; CEPA Gallery, Bethune Gallery, SUNY Buffalo, NY '86; Art Culture and Resource Center, Toronto, Ont. '87); American Indian Community House Gallery, NYC, *Heb No Wah Maun Stun He Dun, What Makes a Man* '87 (traveled to ICA, Boston, MA '87; Galveston Art Center, Galveston, TX '88; Matt's Gallery, London, England '88); Orchard Gallery, Derry, N. Ireland, *American Policy* '88; EXIT ART, NYC, *Claim Your Color* '90 (catalog; opened at Lawrence Arts Center, Lawrence, KS '89; traveled to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA); Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., *Hard Weed* '91.

#### Selected group exhibitions:

Red Wheat Allotment, Clinton, OK, *Four Directions: Cheyenne Art Festival*

'77; Documenta 8, Kassel, W. Germany, *In Memory of Native Americans, In Memory of Jews—Relocate Destroy* '87; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *Committed to Print* '87; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, *Modes of Address* '88; Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago, IL, *Tenth Annual Exhibition* '89; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition, Los Angeles, CA, *Self Evidence* '89 (catalog); Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, *Mid-America Biennial* '89; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., *Lost Illusions* '91.

#### Selected public commissions:

Spectacolor Light billboard, Times Square, NYC, *In Our Language*, sponsored by Public Art Fund '82; Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Art Center, Banff, Alberta, Canada, *Imperial Canada* '88; Mississippi embankment, Minneapolis, MN, *Building Minnesota*, sponsored by Walker Art Center '90; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., *Native Hosts* '91; Pioneer Square, Seattle, WA, *Day/Night*, sponsored by the Seattle Arts Commission '91.

#### Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Berkson, Bill. "Image/Word: The Art of Reading," *Artforum*, Feb. '86.

Fisher, Jean. "Edgar Heap of Birds," *Art Forum*, Jan. '88.

Matthews, Lydia. "Fighting Language with Language: Edgar Heap of Birds at the San Jose Museum of Art," *Artweek*, Dec. '90.

Interview with Phyllis Price, *Front Magazine*, Vancouver, B.C., Sept./Oct. '91.

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