

Transcript

Nations By Artists Ep.1: Monuments, published Feb 3, 2022

Mik Migwans This podcast was made in Toronto on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory. Today, before we begin, we recall the felling of the Ryerson monument, and we honour those impacted by the Indian Residential School system in Canada.

[Electronic music by Ciel plays]

Sarah Robayo Sheridan There's a press image that circulated around the world in 2017. It's a huge monument of a horse and rider, floating in water. A kayaker is dragging it along the river. You can't tell from the image, but it's not actually bronze but Styrofoam. At a moment when real-life monuments were coming down, the image hits a nerve.

Amy Lam and Jon McCurley, then known as Life of a Craphead, were the artists behind the performance. Their monument was modelled on a King Edward VII statue that had originally stood in Delhi. After Indian independence, it was shelved until some wealthy Toronto patrons re-erected it in a parkette behind the Ontario legislature. Over the years, drunk students have spray-painted the horse's testicles, activists have added slogans across its ass. Each time, the city washes and polishes it so it can stand proudly on.

The Styrofoam copy has had a rougher time. After having been drenched, dragged through mud and carted around outdoors, it's been stored at a former industrial site. We go collect it because we want to put it in an art exhibition. When we find the horse, it's in a state of demise: lying on its side, half-covered in blankets, on a palette, behind a non-operative kiln. It's not exactly striking a triumphant pose.

SRS *[In large echoing indoor space]* Hm, smells nice in here...

SRS It looked like, you know, like a prop after an event, it looked like something left over.

MM It was covered in dirt.

SRS And the graffiti in there, too, told me that this is one of those spaces that's not tightly controlled.

SRS *[Over general chatter]* It's kind of nice how it's picking up this patina.

Amy Lam Like real bronze.

SRS Like real bronze! *[laughter]*

MM The shipping guys are already standing around it, they're making dumb jokes about how they can get it to gallop outta there.

Art Handler 1 *[Singing]* Ohhh a horse is a horse of course of course... *[laughter]*

SRS Also, Amy had reassured me, and Amy was onsite with us, according to her, she's like, we've carried it through all sorts of weird places...

The most likely situation in which an artwork will get damaged is in the move from one place to the other. You don't want to be that person that breaks the horse after it's been through this whole journey, right?

Shipper Don't lift it, don't lift it! Don't touch it.

SRS Not by the legs!

Art Handler 2 It's pretty light.

SRS All told, it's about 15 feet tall.

MM How did we get it out of there? Was it a forklift?

SRS The guys... I think they just lifted it off the palette.

MM They tried to stuff it in the – I mean, not stuff it – in the truck.

[Truck platform being lowered, directions being called]

SRS They had to hold it at an angle just to get it inside the truck. And that's when I knew: there's no way we're getting it through the gallery doors.

[Electronic transition music]

SRS That was only the horse. The king, the artists could store it in their storage unit. So, these two components had had different homes this whole time. The horse lay fallow, abandoned, in an industrial site, and the king was wrapped up in bubble wrap and sitting atop of all the other, smaller detritus of Life of a Craphead's production.

AL *[Conversation inside a car]* There's this little area that I usually pull into.

MM Okay, so I just keep going over here?

AL Yeah.

MM We went to the storage unit, there. Then we spent about an hour trying to break into someone else's storage locker.

[Laughter. Keys jingling]

Shipper Oh, I can cut that!

MM Before Amy remembered. She's like "Nono! It is a different floor."

SRS In her defense, that's a storage unit where the numbering system on each floor is identical.

MM No, it's just a maze.
[Door zipping open]

SRS Ah! There it is!

MM So we got it into the huge truck. We navigated out of there... and then we took it literally across the street, to the fabricator's.

MM *[Inside car]* This is actually kind of amazing. We have a procession, between King Eddie and the horse, which are both in different trucks being conveyed along to the uh...

AL It's around the corner! No, it's literally just around the corner. Yeah! *[Laughing]*

SRS They were the fabricators that made this piece in the first place. So, in some ways, it was a bit of a coming home.

AL *[Large open space with loud ventilation]* Other than the backing, everything is pretty intact. But we're just talking about whether we want to leave some of the, kind of the white haze, or some of the dings, because it was a performance object.

SRS And then there were conservation considerations too -- like, Styrofoam is the worst, possibly, archival material.

AL What happens to it?

Fabricator It gets really soft, and then one day you'll just touch it and it'll just powder apart. Like, it just becomes, sort of, nothing. So, as it gets older, it'll just have to be handled more and more carefully.

AL Or it should be like a powder, that we could just put in a baggie...
[Laughter and chatter]

SRS Just a vessel! Just keep saving it.

AL Cuz that's what happened to it!

SRS Totally, just gets reduced and reduced and reduced... To an urn!
[Indistinct voices and transitional music]

SRS So, what is the life of this piece? Is this a piece that we need to imagine has to go back into the river at some point? Will it be a piece that is performed again? I think, through that process, you know, the artists realized it's not going back in the river. And so, it was already making a transition.

It led us to the discussion of like... this sculpture is already in two pieces. Should we cut this sculpture in half to get it through the gallery?

MM Usually you don't... propose cutting art in half.

SRS No good curator worth their salt would ever propose...

MM But! You still brought it to Amy.

SRS Yeah, and there was a bit of consultation and we realized, this makes sense as part of the next trajectory for this object.

Amy was in Vancouver, so I had to send her a bunch of text message images, of different proposed cuts. "Would you like to cut through the belly? Or cut off all the legs?" It was very much like different cuts of meat, at that stage.

SRS *[On phone]* I have some updates for you.

AL *[On speaker]* Great!

SRS We did successfully sever the main body into two parts...

SRS It was the most heartbreaking part of the entire process for me, where I doubted the most that we'd be able to do this.

SRS *[On phone]* As we did that, we discovered...

SRS They'd found...

SRS *[On phone]* Carpenter ants.

SRS ...evidence of carpenter ants living inside the horse. I thought it was game over.

[Flowing electronic music]

MM I'm Mik Migwans

SRS And I'm Sarah Robayo Sheridan. And we're the curators of the exhibition Nations by Artists, at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. This podcast builds on the exhibition, by asking artists questions like: What shapes a nation? What fuels it?

MM And what does it look like when you crack it apart?

In this episode, we're gonna talk about monuments. But not just the conventional kind: like the "great man" on his horse on his pedestal on his hill in his park in some capital city... National narratives are crafted in less obvious ways, not always designated by plaque. So it could be a mountain range, or a certain colour, like Canada's official pantone.

SRS But if we take up a broader definition of a monument, it starts to seem like almost anything could be considered a monument. And maybe that's true. Instead of asking what a monument is, what if we ask what a monument *does*?

MM I put the question to the artist Will Kwan when we met up in the museum's vault, to make some decisions around installing his work in the show.

MM *[In a large space, chatter in background]* I'm excited, today we're gonna go in, we're gonna touch the art.

MM I say I'm excited, but I have mixed feelings about vaults like this. They can feel like mausoleums. Cold storage for cultural belongings.

Heather Pigat Three-headed dog. Wine and honey cakes get you everywhere.

MM Heather Darling Pigat is here to reassure me, though. She's collections manager here, and even though she likes to compare herself to Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog of the underworld, I'd say she's more birth coach than crypt keeper.

HP So, Will, if you want to make yourself comfortable, your gear you can leave on the chair. No water in the vault, though. Okay? Yeah, just leave anything that's dangerous to artwork over there. Alright! Well, come on in!

MM Alright, we're going to look at your art and make some selections, eh?

Will Kwan That sounds good.

[Heavy door closing]

MM We're here to look at Will's series, *Flame Test*. It consists of 36 flags that are actually enlarged photographs of different national flags being burned in protest situations.

WK The images were made by photojournalists, so they were taken from press images archives like Reuters, the Associated Press, the European Press Photo Agency. So there are some older images, and some that are from more contemporary times.

MM This is the...

WK The Belgian flag.

MM There's spray paint, is it? No, is this lighter fluid?

WK Possibly lighter fluid, yeah.

MM The hand spraying something on the flag to make it light up?

MM The flags are beautiful. Oranges and yellows like you'd never see on an actual state flag. Each image is cropped so that it approximates the shape of the original, but there are new elements now. Hands and arms grabbing at the edges, a face, someone shouting. Pavement through burned out holes. As we unfold and lay out each one, the fabric flutters and the flames come briefly to life. Will tells me about the burning flag that started it all.

WK I was living in Europe in 2005, and there was an image in The Guardian, I think it was, and it was the protestors burning the Danish flag. It was when the Danish Newspaper, it was called the Jyllands-Posten published the cartoons of Muhammad.

I was seeing that in the news cycle during that period and thinking about how that image was almost kind of meant to be circulated. It was meant to be performed, and then circulated. And so I was thinking about that image. I was thinking about the image of the cartoons, and that as a provocation. And this looping back and forth. And then once you start to search in photo archives, it just becomes... it's such a common image.

MM Even though it originated with a provocative image, he's careful to explain that the work itself isn't meant to be a provocation. These aren't his flags to burn. His focus is on the image itself, and what happens when it's circulated

WK I don't think I'm interested in images of protest necessarily, especially in this work. I think I'm more interested in them as images where a symbol is put back into a social context, where that symbol actually starts to do some work. Like it starts to reveal something about what that symbol is meant to communicate.

MM Are we looking at an American flag?

WK Yup.

MM It's nice.

WK So, I had... plenty to choose from.

MM *[Bursting out laughing]* Yeah? Did you!

WK When deciding which image to use.

MM I asked Will if he had a favourite piece, and he pulled out one that's hard to identify through the flames, but it looks like a hand-painted Sri Lankan flag. A blur of bodies and hands to either side...

WK ...and behind those hands is the face of a woman who is screaming something. Most likely this is one of her hands, grabbing at the flag, I'm guessing?

MM There's many hands here, all pulling up the flag and it looks like they are turning it towards the camera as it's burning.

And now I'm wondering... if they didn't have a flag, something so portable and burnable. What would we use, if not a flag, to make this point? It'd have to be something. I guess there's monuments to pull down, but that's a lot harder than burning a flag.

WK But there's something about the flag which is standing in for something so much more general. It's trying to represent something that is in some ways such a fiction. It's not a fiction insofar as there's force behind the construction of the state, the policing of a

border, and all of those things, but it can be so de-historicized. Maybe that's the way to put it, because a monument is so tied to a person and a moment, but this is such a...

MM A totalizing fiction, almost.

WK Yeah, that's a good word for it. Very totalizing.

I think the flag when it's displayed in its proper form is meant to erase the specificity of all that sits underneath it. When the image starts to go through this process, then we actually think what is this 'state' that is being represented, who it is, what are the circumstances in which it was constructed. So, I think it's more about how the image or the symbol actually starts to be a much more accurate representation.

[Electronic music]

SRS Like a flag, a national park is a fiction with a force of its own. To designate nature as a monument is to put a frame around a mountain. Nature is put on display like a museum artifact that needs care and preservation—a curated version of the wild. According to the Parks Canada website, “National parks tell the stories of Canada’s natural beginnings.” They are “a country-wide system of representative natural areas of Canadian significance... being maintained in an unimpaired state for future generations.”

What qualifies as being ‘representative’ of Canada? And what do they mean by ‘unimpaired state’? To get an insider’s look at the National Park system, I spoke to two park service members, whose work takes them into the most protected parts of mother nature.

[Birdsong and paddling]

Narrator clip from the video “LNPS: A Force of Nature” Avid outdoors women Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan had long experienced frustration in the bush. They knew that scientists and conservationists had allowed lesbian flora and fauna to wither and decline to survive in isolated communities, often invisible to a casual observer. Such official indifference perturbed these conscientious naturalists. However, during a sortie through the lesbian wetlands, they struck upon an idea that would change the face of conservation history. What if, they wondered, an organization existed to service and protect the lesbian wild?

Shawna Dempsey Testing one two three? Well, you know, whatever? Yeah, I'm Lesbian Ranger Shauna Dempsey

Lorri Millan And I'm Lesbian Ranger Lorri Millan.

SD We're Lesbian National Parks and Services.

[Frolicking brass music]

LM We discovered early on that there was absolutely no interest in the lesbian wilds. And having spent a lot of time in the lesbian bush, we really felt committed to sharing our knowledge with the world to protect and to help proliferate lesbianism everywhere.

SD The habitat had been degraded and lesbian species overall were endangered.

[Wind and birds]

Ranger LM from video clip It's advantageous that we're in the geographic center of North America and I think we should head straight up the lake and the Nelson...

LM We start well before dawn. We go well after dusk. There is a tremendous amount of research that we need to do. That can mean going into all sorts of different environments and assessing the needs of that particular environment,

SD Plumbing the depths of each lesbian species we encounter.

LM And that can not only mean accruing information on these, these missions, but we also then end up writing reports and sending to the relevant government officials.

SD They don't always reply. In fact, they've never replied. We've encountered something we refer to as Ranger Envy. We find that sometimes they are threatened by our presence. We think it's our superior uniforms that might make them feel a bit insecure. Sometimes they're concerned that we're impersonating an officer. But in other instances we're embraced warmly by our sister forces, so it does run the gamut.

[Rock crunching, birds]

Ranger SD (clip) Well, where should we begin?

Ranger LM (clip) I don't know, it's been a big day. Um, I'm quite concerned about the catfish we saw earlier.

Ranger SD (clip) Oh yeah, three eyes. That's not good.

LM We can't even begin to fulfil all the educational needs required. But that can mean anything from visiting day camps to...

SD We've judged dog shows.

LM That's right.

SD We've travelled all over the world, talking to people wherever we can find them, essentially.

LM And then, of course, recruitment, the third prong of our three-prong approach, is also exhausting, and that work takes us well into the night.

[Outdoor sounds]

Narrator (clip) Only the finest woods women, driven by a desire to right wrongs, to help others and to touch and be touched by a plethora of needy lesbians would embark on a mission so wide ranging and so all consuming.

Ranger SD (clip) What a privileged existence we live here in Mother Nature's playground.

Ranger LM (clip) True enough. Hard work, though.

LM Mainly, very few people want to wear the full uniform, that's been our experience. Maybe it's the level of commitment required. But Junior Lesbian Rangers are numerous, as Shawna has pointed out, and that is a widely accessible force to join.

SD And of course, there's also the Lesbian Ranger Reserves. Those who are called upon in times of great need. We firmly believe there's a place for everyone to take the lesbian ethic back to their home community, and foster that spirit. "Doing until lesbians as you would have lesbians do unto you."

[Parade drumroll]

Eager Beaver 1 (clip) And it's the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life. If I'm successful at passing the induction process, I will have truly earned the right to call myself a ranger.

[Supportive lesbians cheering on]

Eager Beaver 2 (clip) You have to be in tip top shape, especially emotionally.

SD The national park systems in North America were really based on the idea of the white male conquering the virgin outdoors. And we know that that model of thinking is flawed in so, so many ways. And that masculinist, hetero-centric model of relating to the wild is a fiction. And it's a dangerous fiction. Science has been used to reinforce notions of heterosexuality as being natural, as well as whiteness being natural, and those outmoded models urgently need to be dismantled.

LM The Rangers quickly discovered when we started doing our own research that the natural world is entirely queer and that without that understanding, you cannot understand the natural world. And you can't understand anything, from evolution, to the communities we find ourselves in.

SD The way perhaps others might refer to the birds and the bees we refer to lesbianism as a way to really talk about ecological diversity. And diversity is the engine of evolution. Diversity of all kinds is essential to a healthy ecosystem.

LM So, would we object to a lesbian nation? No. But it's not our primary focus.

[Electronic transition music]

SRS It's easy to get behind the idea of a future without borders. But it's hard to imagine how to get there. For Slovenian art collective IRWIN, you'll need a trampoline.

[Triumphant marching music]

SRS IRWIN are a group of artists based in Ljubljana.

Miran Mohar Okay. My name is Miran Mohar, and I am a member of the group IRWIN.

Borut Vogeltnik And I'm Borut Vogeltnik. As well a Member of IRWIN group.

SRS In 1984, they joined forces with other groups active in theatre, graphic design and music. And they formed a collective of collectives called NSK. Together they embraced an aesthetic you might call "totalitarian kitsch."

This is their national anthem.

[The Great Seal by Laibach plays]

SRS In 1992, the Soviet Union was crumbling, and Yugoslavia was breaking apart.

BV The world as we knew it was disintegrated. How we functioned as artists changed profoundly as well.

SRS In response, they took their creative act a step further by founding the "NSK State-in-time." This would be a state, freed from the bounds of physical territory, devoted to the question: what is a state?

They were invited to do a residency in a Moscow apartment, when a lot of culture was being made in private.

M Mohar We discussed, and we proposed to open, to organize the transfer of NSK groups, most of NSK, to Moscow for a period of one month. And we called this "NSK Embassy Moscow."

SRS About a week after Slovenia was established as a state, they pulled some strings with the newly minted Minister of foreign affairs, who happened to hangout in their circles. And they got NSK passports printed with the official state printer.

BV It was like child's play! It was obvious that it was not professionally done.

SRS And since NSK has a pretty devoted fanbase, someone started a fan site that featured the passports. Pretty soon, people were reaching out to become citizens. Mostly artists, curators, fans of Laibach (the musical wing of NSK), but also people who went looking for EU passports and took a wrong turn.

Like putting a urinal on a pedestal and calling it a fountain, NSK took the state and made it into an artwork.

[Background noise of an Italian public space]

M Mohar In Venice we were exactly on our terrain. Fully on our terrain. This NSK State Pavilion was probably the most, I would say, from flesh and blood.

SRS In 2017, IRWIN faked their way into the Venice Biennale. They camouflaged themselves amongst the “official” national participants, by renting their own space and constituting their own unauthorized pavilion -- one that defied the laws of physics, true to the spirit of The “NSK State in Time.”

[Tinkling electronic music]

SRS Imagine an airport terminal through the looking glass. First stop: a tilted cube that you clamber up, fighting an unfamiliar gravitational pull towards an elusive horizon line. Like navigating a crooked house.

M Mohar When you go to this room where you lose your balance, you know, this is a kind of journey that immigrants have, or travellers, and so on. When you go down, you come to the place where there’s a trampoline.

[Springs bouncing]

SRS Next stop: the passport information kiosk, a circular countertop with a trampoline at its centre. Enjoy instant citizenship approval and a celebratory bounce overseen by passport officers who are real-world asylum-seekers. Though they don’t hold currently hold EU passports, they are full citizens of the NSK.

M Mohar They were normally paid. They cannot work eight hours, four hours, so they would exchange. And as far as I remember, they were very happy with it.

SRS Final stop: board a jetway staircase to a levitating platform where an agent ceremoniously accords the official stamp on your new citizenship document.

Because they got a lot of media coverage – none of which mentioned that they weren’t officially part of Venice – the biennial sent them a cease-and-desist letter. So they made a large stamp of the words “Not Official”, and stamped all the NSK Newspapers they had self-published for the pavilion. But because the press was already circulating, it was too late to retract. They came to compete with real nations in the official Olympics of the artworld, and they won.

[Electronic transitional music]

MM So, maybe the making of a nation state is just a matter of successful PR? What is clear is that nations need monuments to tell stories. And that artists can reveal, and maybe change, those stories. Artists can turn passport-seekers into passport-officers, become rangers who defend lesbian wildlife, they can fly burned flags, and send an equestrian monument down the river...

We left our story about the Styrofoam king at the moment he was discovered to have bugs. At the time, the carpenter ants felt like the end of the line. Until our collections manager, Heather, stepped in. Over the course of a day, she called in her favours, and

found us a giant freezer at the natural history museum big enough for a whale carcass. And it rested there for 10 days. To make sure that everything living inside—discovered and undiscovered—was no longer.

So after a long journey and a lot of body work, the Styrofoam king finally got to the art museum. It'd gone down the crick, got warehoused, drawn and quartered, stuck in the deep freeze and packed in tuck tape and plastic. In some ways it mirrored that prior voyage from Delhi to Toronto, sixty years before. But all the work it took to make, transport and repair the foam copy is just a drop in the bucket compared to how much capital it takes to maintain a permanent public monument.

Our foam King Edward is sitting cut in three pieces now. Each piece is on a dolly on the gallery floor, like it's ready to be moved again. When the show comes down, it will all be wheeled into the art museum's collections vault.

Will the original bronze sculpture be torn down before the styrofoam one crumbles to dust? Well. Someone's still gotta write that story.

[Electronic transitional music]

SRS

In the next episode of Nations by Artists, we look at what happens when artists go to the border.

This podcast is written and hosted by me (Sarah Robayo Sheridan) and Mik Migwans. The music on this episode is by Ciel, except for the NSK official anthem which is performed by Laibach. Aliya Pabani is our producer. Marianne Rellin does our communications and social media, Hana Nikcevic handles public programs and outreach. Special thanks to our researchers Sanniah Jabeen and Zana Kozomora.

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