Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds
MATRIX 131
September 22 - November 24, 1996

MATRIX is supported by funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, the LEF Foundation and the Women's Committee of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Detail, Want, 1994
Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds
MATRIX 131

Statement by the Artist

As we journey through this life, affinities become apparent if eyes are open, offerings made and blessings given. To be fortunate enough to find cultural, emotional and historical alliances is truly significant.

Such relationships have been fostered between indigenous peoples of this land called America and the aboriginal peoples of the land called Australia. The affinities which are shared have positive resonance in earth awareness and respect toward personal and cultural renewal.

Sadly, in a negative shared experience, one will also find the cruel domination and near extermination of these two beautiful native peoples. The brutality based in the cowardly technique of burning the indigenous spirits alive, with their children and homes, was perpetrated by the hands of the dominant Euro/Anglo culture and its determined efforts to stamp out the independence of indigenous life world-wide.

In the collaborative artwork Learn a War Cry (Sydney, Australia, 1995), created by Fiona Foley and myself, the words “Set on Fire” were expressed to recount events in Fiona’s emotional, Eora aboriginal language.

Again these native burning screams must be heard through Dunging the Ground. With honor, Dunging the Ground seeks to remember the lives lost in the tragic Pequot massacre of 1637. In the artwork, quotes were utilized which originated in the written volumes of both Captain John Mason, Commander of the Connecticut Colony Militia and Captain John Underhill, Commander of the Massachusetts Bay Colony Militia. As this horrific slaughter was carried out by these two American colony patriots the lowest ebb of the human spirit was personified by their wicked actions, dark words and the pride which followed.

It is profoundly sorrowful that acts such as the Pequot massacre are to become a true legacy and foundation of the American nation. It is my hope that through the health of our mutual futures we can establish predominantly positive affinities of culture within this country. Respect shall be the mainstay of such human development; whereby God, through diverse belief systems, will only nurture life and not be asked to promote death.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds
Norman, Oklahoma, 1996
Dunging the Ground

This two-part exhibition features Dunging the Ground (1996), a new sculptural installation on the front lawn of the Wadsworth Atheneum by Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, and, in the MATRIX space, selections from 16 Songs/Issues of Personal Assessment

Preparatory computer printouts, Dunging the Ground, 1996

and Indigenous Renewal. 16 Songs is a collaboration Heap of Birds initiated with sixteen aboriginal Australian artists in 1994. In both of these installations, Heap of Birds, an active member of the Cheyenne Arapaho tribe and an art professor from Norman,
Oklahoma, explores both historical and contemporary issues of tribal sovereignty, land rights and race relations.

**Dunning the Ground** (1996) intends to spotlight the fiercely genocidal nature of the Pequot War (1636-1637). In late May 1637, three regiments from Windsor, Hartford and Wethersfield, under the leadership of Captain John Mason, set out for Mystic, Connecticut, along with forces sent by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Their singular goal was the extermination of the Pequot tribe. Captain Mason vowed “to cut off the Remembrance of them from the Earth.” In their attack on the Pequot fort atop a prominent palisade in Mystic, the entire village was burned to the ground. Almost all of the nearly 700 inhabitants were incinerated. John Mason himself proudly took full credit for igniting the fire from inside the fort. Those Pequots who sought to exit from the confines of the conflagration were immediately killed or apprehended by a double circle of adversaries that strategically surrounded the perimeter of the fort. Those few Pequots who escaped with their lives were enslaved by colonists and rival Indian tribes, including the Mohegans and Narragansetts, who had actively supported the English in their effort to vanquish the Pequots. So complete was the devastation, the Pequot nation was officially dissolved by the 1638 Treaty of Hartford, which the remaining Pequots were forced to sign.

Informal discussions with Edgar Heap of Birds about the possibility of a new outdoor piece for the Atheneum began six years ago. Once funding was available, Heap of Birds spent four days in residence during August 1995 and serious focus on the project began. On last summer’s visit the artist familiarized himself with a variety of local issues, visited the Mashantucket Pequot sovereign lands in Ledyard, Connecticut, including the hugely successful Foxwoods Resort Casino, which has the highest annual revenue of any casino in this hemisphere. He also spent a contemplative time alone walking the actual massacre site, and did research at the Connecticut Historical Society. Heap of Birds first learned about the 1637 Pequot massacre in an audio-visual presentation at Foxwoods last summer.

Sixteen years ago the Mashantucket Pequots were struggling to hold on to their remaining 214 acres of tribal land, then homesteaded by just two female elders. A successful federal land claim combined with the perspicacity of Richard “Skip” Hayward, grandson and nephew of the two remaining elders, brought about a dramatic turn of events. Today the Mashantucket Pequots (one of two branches of the original Pequot tribe) are enjoying a renaissance. Thanks to their remarkable financial success with Foxwoods and other ventures, all active members of
the tribe enjoy excellent educational and employment opportunities, first-rate health care, and the prestige and influence that attends major charitable giving. Heap of Birds’ *Dunging the Ground* illuminates one of the earliest and most brutal events in Native American-white history. In stark contrast, the current resurgence of the Pequot’s cultural identity and economic vitality offers an almost mythic example of indigenous renewal.

Heap of Birds is widely known for his public art interventions such as *Dunging the Ground*. These are usually site-specific conceptual works which engage citizens in a reconsideration of the significant issues embedded in their own local histories. In these public venues, Heap of Birds often uses the materials of official road and park signage to present his work with authority.

Contemporary historians now view the Pequot War as one of the key events in early American history. The conflict and its outcome had ramifications far beyond seventeenth century New England and the Connecticut River Valley. It initiated the mythology of the American frontier. As Alfred A. Cave has written, “Celebration of victory over Indians as the triumph of light over darkness, civilization over savagery, for many generations our central historical myth, finds its earliest full expression in the contemporary chronicles and histories of this little war.”

All of Heap of Birds’ public art pieces raise the issue of “who writes history?” Although it is a truism that history is written by the victors, our changing understanding of the 1637 Pequot War illustrates that the first history is not the final history. For several centuries, the English initiative was understood to have been retaliation for a surprise Pequot attack on Wethersfield in April, 1637. In this hostile action, the Pequots killed nine persons and captured two young women. At the time the Puritans justified their attack on Fort Mystic as divinely ordained. They described themselves as God’s children in the wilderness, wholly righteous, threatened by the Pequots who were agents of Satan testing their faith. “Captain John Underhill proclaimed that God himself demanded that the Pequots suffer ‘the most terriblest death that may be’ in punishment for their sins. ‘Sometimes,’ he wrote, ‘the scripture declareth that women and children must perish with their parents... we had sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings.”

Several years later the witch trials in Salem began, supported by similar justifications.

Despite their cloak of religious devotion, subsequent research offers considerable evidence that the Puritans’ 1637 attack was motivated, in fact, as much by economic ambition as by concerns for public safety, legitimate though they were. The Pequots, who controlled the regulation of currency, were the strongest tribe in
the region. Even the English had to acknowledge Pequot wampum (beads ascribed with value) as the prevailing standard of mercantile exchange. In competition with the Dutch and French and eager to take control of increasingly lucrative trading opportunities, the Puritans sought to eliminate their primary rivals.

Economic considerations continue to influence our interpretation of these complex events. The current financial success of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe has led to new respect and even deference. A commemorative statue of John Mason placed in 1889 on the actual site of the massacre sat relatively undisturbed until recently. The original plaque on the statue highlights Mason’s victory over the Pequots:

“To commemorate the heroic achievement of Major John Mason, and his comrades, who near this spot in 1637, overthrew the Pequot Indians, and preserved the settlements from destruction.”

In 1992 Lone Wolf, an Eastern Pequot citizen, questioned the appropriateness of such a tribute and asked the Groton Town Council to remove the statue. After several years of acrimonious public hearings in the Mystic-Groton area, a multi-partisan and much-beleaguered John Mason Statue Advisory Committee finally decided to relocate the statue elsewhere. Twenty applicants offered the statue a new home, including the new $100 million Mashantucket Pequot Museum to be built in Ledyard. The committee selected Windsor, the oldest town in Connecticut, founded in 1635 by a group that included Mason. The refurbished statue now sits on Windsor’s Palisado Green just 400 feet from what is thought to be the site of Mason’s homestead. Re-dedicated on June 26, 1996, the statue has a new plaque which describes Mason’s life and accomplishments but barely mentions the massacre. It merely concludes: “This monument was relocated in 1996 to respect a sacred site of the 1637 Pequot War.” Feelings continue to run high on both sides of the issue.

Though best known for these thoughtful and provocative art interventions, Heap of Birds has resisted being categorized as only an articulate and outspoken spokesperson against injustice, as only a Native American activist. Though this is a role he takes very seriously, it is but one side of his artistic expression. Always, Heap of Birds listens to music when he works alone on paintings and drawings in his studio. It is a time of intense reflection. His most personal spiritual feelings are honored in his colorful, abstract Neuf paintings which reflect his deeply affectionate observations of the landscape of his ancestors. His

unmediated visceral responses to painful contemporary issues are expressed in his compelling language-based marker drawings. A small selection of both his painting and drawing is on view in MATRIX. Together they are an important counterpoint to his more strategically conceived public installations.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator
of Contemporary Art

2 Ibid., p. 2.

patience earth dance

16 Songs/Issues of Personal Assessment and Indigenous Renewal

In the spring of 1994, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds travelled from his home in Oklahoma to Sydney and Adelaide, Australia, as a recipient of the Lila Wallace/Readers Digest International Artist Fellowship. During his stay in Australia through the spring and summer, Heap of Birds exchanged ideas with Aboriginal artists about indigenous culture, discussing cultural strategies and beliefs, as well as his own work. The concept of sixteen songs that this exhibition explores is based on the words and phrases
determined by Heap of Birds and later presented to artists of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in Sydney, and to artists of the Tandanya National Institute of Aboriginal Art in Adelaide as the basis for a collaborative project. This presentation is an outgrowth of that particular artistic and intellectual interaction.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds used [the below] sixteen words and phrases as catalyst in the creation of this unusual body of work. They were chosen during Heap of Birds’ participation in the Tsistsistas Cheyenne Earth Renewal ceremonies held every Summer Solstice, and are prevalent in the artist’s thoughts on similar types of cyclical ceremonies found in all tribal/clan-organized cultures. When these sixteen words and phrases were presented by Heap of Birds to Aboriginal artists in Sydney and Adelaide as possible subjects for a collaborative work, the concepts these words signified were immediately acknowledged as synonymous with the artist’s own ancestral beliefs.

Heap of Birds called the resulting collaborations, “...a brand new way of seeing... culture/culture, without immediation back into Western culture.” [16 Songs video] Brenda Croft, Boomalli co-ordinator of the project, states: “Edgar was well received...we found similarities: the issue of land, being invisible in your own country, dealing with people of Anglo ancestry...” [16 Songs video] The idea of indigenous peoples relating their own thoughts to their audience without the filter of Western culture was foremost in the collaboration.

Heap of Bird’s large-scale, coded message drawings and the sixteen works by the Aboriginal artists reflect their shared interest in the issues of race relations, tribal sovereignty, the rights of self-representation, and the American/British custom of acquiring wealth. Combinations of images, objects, and language have been richly embroidered in this collaborative work, providing the viewer with both a literary and a visual approach to the common ideas set forth in the project’s purpose.

The large drawings by Heap of Birds are extensions of the artist’s philosophy of self-representation:

“As presented today, history and critical points of reference are a paragon of distortion. It is wrongly accepted that we should all share the vantage point of the Euro-male. This historical legacy is to be the focal point of human experience, just as once the sun was thought to revolve around the
As we have all chosen to stand on different points of this earth, we must be allowed to choose our own distinct priorities and historical references.” (1992)

The imagery in his drawings is a result of his fluid, direct, and immediate process. Heap of Birds always listens to music when he draws, which seems to contribute a rhythmic quality to the compositions overall. He has noted that these drawings represent a new approach which describes a thinking process from direct acts of daily life.

Heap of Birds’ **Neuf** paintings present the important idea of landscape and land itself. The paintings’ title refers to the “four” in Cheyenne cosmology, while the works themselves are based on the colors and shapes found in the landscape of western Oklahoma, the “landscape” of the ocean, and the colorful fish found in Australia’s Great Barrier Reef.

**Brenda Croft**’s response to the sixteen words and phrases is a radical departure from her stark, dramatic photographs of Aboriginal women and their families. Using a combination of cameo images, indigenous and English words, and painting, Croft worked with the concept of four, the number of persons remaining in her family after the recent death of her younger brother. The paintings of **Rea, Richard Bell**, and **Kylie Russell**, like Heap of Birds’ message drawings, use the written word as
both narrative and a design element, establishing a rhythmic flow across the picture plane.

Taking a literal approach to self-representation through language, Shawn Dobson’s contribution utilized a copy of the Arrernte language dictionary which his mother had co-authored. The book cover features Dobson’s landscape painting of his ancestral land. The broken bottle which rests upon the book refers to his mother’s struggle to support his family while working for a local bottling company.

Several of the artists appropriated traditional painting techniques to illustrate their contemporary concepts. James Simon and Mark Blackman incorporated the dot painting style from Central Australia along with the fine line painting found in the Northern Territory art styles. Both artists chose important clan totems as subject matter. Blackman’s Four Bungaroo, which relates to his family’s sea turtle totem of Fraser Island, has four turtles interconnected by a series of dotted “song lines” to form a rough circle. They are contrasted against a very busy, dense background of overlapping lines which represent the urban side of contemporary Aboriginal life. Simon’s depiction of two kangaroos travelling in tandem denotes the traditional symbol for strength. The animals are painted in the white outline style usually associated with bark painting, while the forms of the kangaroo are surrounded by an aura of dense red ocher dots and multicolored dotted spirals.

Max Mansell and Kelly Scott expounded upon the traditional dot painting to produce two unique works relating to very urban concerns. Mansell reduced the dots on his canvas to a fine spray of color in which brightly painted fish seem to merge, appear, and disappear. The artist approached this composition as an environ-

water resistance sky

mental statement about the importance of water and the need to respect it as the source of life. Scott’s appropriation of the dot technique takes on a new twist with the introduction of large round buttons scattered over the canvas. The shapes of the buttons are contrasted with small cameo portraits of women printed on a flowered fabric which again echoes the dot-like shapes in the background. The overall effect gives the impression that one is looking at an enlarged detail of a traditional dotted sand painting.

Harry Wedge and Gerard Scifo tackle the urban dilemma of the Aboriginal person who remains true to tradition while residing in the city. Wedge has a distinctive painting style which often
features the colors of the Aboriginal flag: red, yellow, and black. This color combination automatically signals his support of Aboriginal sovereignty and firmly places his work in a political genre. Wedge states that he receives the subject matter for his paintings from his ancestors, who come to him in his dreams. His untitled work in 16 Songs refers to the Aboriginal dancer in the city who listens and dances to Western music, while his outback relative looks on in display. The painting’s message is a warning to Aboriginals not forget their traditional dance and customs. Gerard refers to himself as an evolving artist, looking at the difference between urban and outback lifestyles. His contribution to 16 Songs illustrates the duality of urban Aboriginal life. The figure in the foreground represents the new and the urban person, while the shadow is a symbol for the old and the traditional.

Elaine Russell, Gordon Hookey, and Judy Watson each have a distinctive style of painting which relates to traditional painting methods in spirit: communicating a specific message of pride in their Aboriginality and their homelands. Elaine Russell paints in a narrative style, using bold combinations of contrasting colors and bright yellow outlines, to define the main characters of the story. Her work in 16 Songs focuses on the importance of sharing among her people which she chose to illustrate by describing the hunting of kangaroos and the distribution of their meat among the group. Gordon Hookey was inspired by the great fires which almost engulfed the Syndey suburbs. While the press
and the majority of the Anglo population perceived the fires as a threat, he looked upon them as a renewal of the land. This idea was based upon the traditional practice of setting fires to cleanse the land and capture game. In his painting, Hookey contrasts the major landmarks of Sydney against a raging fire tended by several Aboriginal people who are guiding the fire’s progression.

Judy Watson layers her images of place and ancestry with translucent veils of pigment. She states, “my work attempts to reveal concealed histories, cover-ups in the colonization of Australia.” Working on an unstretched canvas placed upon the floor, Watson recreates the same perspective used by traditional sand painters in their ceremonies. Red Earth Blood in a combination of pigment, acrylic, and oil pastel which flows across the canvas as a unified symbol of identity with earth and ancestry. . .

Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris
Assistant Curator of the Arts of Africa,
Ocean, and the Americas
St. Louis Museum of Art

(Excerpted from 1995 exhibition brochure)

The installation in MATRIX has been selected from 16 Songs/Issues of Personal Assessment and Indigenous Renewal, organized by the University of North Texas Art Gallery, and was supported by a grant from Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Arts International program.

green trees four

PLEASE NOTE:

Edgar Heap of Birds will deliver a MATRIX Lecture on Sunday November 3, 1996 at 2:00 pm in The Hartford Courant Room. A reception in honor of the artist will follow.

James Rondeau, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, will present a gallery talk on the exhibition on Tuesday September 24, 1996 at noon. Andrea Miller-Keller will present a gallery talk on the exhibition on Tuesday November 5, 1996 at noon. All events are free with museum admission.

Special thanks to Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris and Kristen Evangelista.
Outdoor Public Sculpture:

Dunging the Ground, 1996; silkscreen ink on aluminum; two panels each 5’ x 6’ on four metal poles.

Works in MATRIX:

From the Tandanya National Aboriginal Institute, Adelaide, Australia,

Richard Bell, born Charleville, Queensland, 1953, lives in Sydney, New South Wales; Growth, 1994, oil on canvas, 24” x 30”. Mark Blackman, born Innisfail, Queensland, 1963, lives in Adelaide, South Australia; Four Bungaroo, 1994, oil on canvas, 30” x 24”. C.V. Shaw Dobson, born Alice Springs, Northern Territory, 1969, lives in Adelaide, South Australia; Untitled (Book and Bottle), 1994, mixed media, dimensions variable. Max Mansell, born Hobart, Tasmania, 1965, lives in Adelaide, South Australia; Water, 1994, oil on canvas, 30” x 24”. Kelly Scott, born Geraldton, Western Australia, 1965, lives in Adelaide, South Australia; Awareness, 1994, mixed media with fabric, 30” x 24”. James Watson, David Wilson, Wayne Surka; Untitled, 1994, photograph, 16” x 19 3/4”.

From the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists’ Cooperative, Sydney,

New South Wales; **Red Earth Blood**, 1994, pigment, acrylic, and oil pastel on canvas, 30” x 24”. H.J. Wedge, born Cioura, New South Wales, lives in Sydney, New South Wales; **Dance**, 1994, oil on canvas, 24” x 30”.

**Works by Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds,**


All works courtesy of the artist.

**Public Commissions:**


**Selected One-Person Exhibitions:**

Tyler School of Art, Tyler Gallery, Philadelphia, PA **Lizards** ’79; The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia, PA **Move Towards the Mound** ’80; Southern Plains Indian Museum, Anadarko, OK **Foreign Bodies** ’82; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE **He Said, She Said** ’82; CEPA (Center for Exploratory and Perpetual Art) and the Bethune Gallery, the State University of New York at Buffalo, NY **Sharp Rocks** ’86 (traveled also to Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; 911 Contemporary Art Center, Seattle, Washington; Art Culture and Resource Center, Toronto, Ontario); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, **Born from Sharp Rocks: Edgar Heap of Birds** ’86; American Indian Community House Gallery, NYC **Heh No Wah Maun Stun He Dun, What Makes a Man** ’87 (traveled also to The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Galveston Art Center, Galveston, TX; Matt’s
Selected Group Exhibitions:

Red Wheat Allotment, Clinton, OK *Four Directions: Cheyenne Art Festival* `77; C.N. Gorman Museum and Richard L. Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis, CA *Confluences of Tradition and Change: Twenty-Two Native American Artists* `81; National Museum of the American Indian Smithsonian Institution, NYC at The Kitchen Center for Video, Performance, and Dance, NYC *Native American Video Festival* `83; Philadelphia Art Alliance, PA *Modern Native American Abstraction* `83 (traveled also to American Indian Community House Gallery, NYC; Marilyn Butler Fine Arts, Scottsdale, AZ; Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe, NM); Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC *The 1984 Show* `84; New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA *Image/Word* `85; Alternative Museum, NYC; *Liberty and Justice* `86; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC *Committed to Print* `87; Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Center, Alberta, Canada *Re-Visions* `88; Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago, IL *Representation/Re-Presentation* `88; Hong Kong Art Center China, June 4, 1889—Don’t Believe Miss Liberty `89; Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX *Blood Beat* `90; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada *Land Spirit Power* `92 (traveled also to Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX); Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH *Will/Power* `93; Betty Rymer Gallery, School of The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL *Death, Reverence and the Struggle for Equality in America* `93; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia *Localities of Desire, Contemporary Art in An International World* `94; Mairie du 6ème Arrondissement, Paris, France *La Jeune Gravure Contemporaine et Ses Invites des U.S.A* `95; Museum of Modern Art, NYC *Thinking Print: Books to Billboards, 1980-95* `96.
Selected Bibliography by Edgar Heap of Birds:


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