

**Edward Poitras:
On Things Made, Mixed, and Performed on the
Meeting Ground**

Trevor Herriot

The afternoon I met Edward Poitras we had to remove our shoes to walk into the middle of the New Dance Horizons rehearsal studio. I picked up two white plastic stools and arranged them on the black, flexing floor; Ed set out a third. We sat down and began to look at some photo albums, using the third stool as a table. The photographs showed people caught in moments of some of the NDH performances Ed has helped stage since the mid 1980s. Bodies in strange postures surrounded by strange materials - the images, like the two of us sitting there shoeless on the empty dance floor, were utterly remote from the context and livelihood of the moments they inscribed. Hunched over snapshots of dancers - junctures of energy, time and space extracted from the many performances conceived on that floor - we might have been something of a performance piece ourselves.

Ed flipped the pages of an album and smiled. It's always difficult to document such performances, he said. I'd seen his installations in galleries many times, read of his work as a bold and internationally-acclaimed Aboriginal artist, but I knew nothing of the work he had done at NDH. These photos, I thought as we looked at shots from "Dido and Aeneas" and "Welcome Back Buffalo Bill," aren't much help. A still image of a contemporary

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dance performance rests, on the scale of clumsy representations of the living, somewhere between taxidermy and an ethnologist's translation of a traditional story. It says very little of the original, because the original was alive.

Making things, things that have some life in them, is what attracted Ed Poitras to NDH and performance art in the first place. Working alongside Sarain Stump in the 1970s, Ed was exposed early on to ideas about movement as an element within ritual expression, about the creation of art objects not merely for display but for use in ritual. He remembers when the question of use came to him first.

"I took some workshops on carving traditional masks with west coast artist Walter Harris and with Joe Jacobs, an eastern woodlands carver. Made about four masks altogether. Thing is, I'd carve a mask, but then what do you do with it? Do I just put it up on the wall? No, it has to be used. That was a significant moment."

NDH has given Poitras a chance to cross into new territory, beyond the limitations of art installation and into pure, participative expression within new forms that deepen his re-examination of cultural narratives. As a young artist, he had some experience with art and dance collaboration but it was meeting NDH's Robin Poitras that gave him a venue, a way to see his creations being used and not merely displayed.

"It was 1984 and there was a lot of excitement here because the

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World Assembly of First Nations was being held in Regina. Robin and I collaborated on a piece for the Assembly. That was the beginning, and the end, of some things. . . ."

It was, among other things, the beginning of a period in which dance performance would be enlivened by the art and imagination of Edward Poitras.

Curators and art critics will tell you that Edward Poitras' art is about indigenous deconstruction of the colonial enterprise in the New World. That is what I had heard, and that sounded fine, I thought. We need a trenchant critique of our mythologies and appropriations. But the man I sat beside in the middle of the NDH studio could not hide his obvious delight in the process of making new things, and in all the materials, tools, and methods of creation available to a maker here and now. No mere deconstructor, Ed Poitras is afoot in the world building objects, organizing ritual-like encounters between our expectations and his expressions, participating in what he calls "the meeting ground of culture." For Poitras, that ground is changing beneath us, for he recognizes that life, culture, art, everything, is a work in progress. As we spoke that afternoon, I was struck again and again by his efforts to resist as far as possible the urge to declare something complete and definitive.

He told me about "Das Cheval Dance," a "horse piece" he remembers doing back in '84. The performance, he said, combined two world views, two visionary works. He described the piece as

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something that was "in the process of solidifying" even as they performed it on stage. The dancers (some were "non-dancers") had their choreographed movements but he walked and acted spontaneously among them, interacting with others on stage and with the objects and performance space. As we talked of the show, he paused once and let a smile spread over his face. I asked if he was remembering something. "It was just so unpredictable," he said, "anything could happen."

"It was always the totality of the experience that I liked, I think. And the metisse of things, the mix of things in process . . . and I liked that it didn't require a lot of funding. I could make objects - that oversized chair, for instance - that were sometimes large, but it still didn't cost very much."

The totality, for Ed Poitras, is a performance's blending of visual, aural, and kinetic elements within a space and in relationship to an audience. It is exciting for its enfleshment, its incarnation of ideas and imagination.

Ed was heading to Ontario the next day to install some of his work for a gallery opening. He'd be away for a month and, though he didn't know it then, during that time he would receive a Governor General's award for achievement in the visual arts. Before we said goodbye, he told me how his interest in performance was taking him outside the stage to alternative spaces. He had recently been part of a piece where he and several others dressed in workman's coveralls walked from place to place on the Treaty Four Grounds

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at Fort Qu'Appelle, putting up signs and in effect creating a kind of park space within the public environment officially set aside for First Nations.

Afterward, I thought about Ed and the others in their coveralls, enacting this familiar modern ritual so characteristic of our estrangement from the land beneath our feet. But there is something else there too in such a mischievous gesture: a new breed of hope, albeit tentative, but born of the blending of life - the "metisse, the mix of things," Ed had said with that disarming smile of his. "I'm in process. . . . It's all in process."

Trevor Herriot is a Saskatchewan naturalist, writer, and illustrator who has published feature articles in Canadian Geographic and Nature Canada magazines. His first book, *River in a Dry Land: a Prairie Passage* (Stoddart, 2000), was a finalist for the 2000 Governor's General Award for non-fiction and received two Saskatchewan Book Awards, including Book of the Year as well as a prestigious national award, the Writers Trust Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize. He is currently working on a second book.