LUCY R. LIPPARD

SIGNS OF UNREST

activist art by Edgar Heap of Birds

History, no matter how much Western culture has diminished it, is ours.
—Simon Ortiz[1]

"Indian activism." The phrase immediately recalls the American Indian Movement, Wounded Knee, Alcatraz, perhaps some posters and murals, but it is not commonly associated with "Indian art," despite the presence of an increasing number of subtly confrontational works by contemporary Native artists. They offer a starry-eyed public no nostalgic nineteenth-century imagery, no braids, no feathers, no animals, no symbols—"no beads no trinkets," as Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds titled a show he curated in 1984. "It is clear that Native peoples have chosen art as their cultural tool and weapon," he wrote in 1986, in a cutting-edge text called "Born from Sharp Rocks," in which the arrowheads of the past become the pointed phrases of the present.

The primary characteristics of activist art are a deeply felt message and a powerful need to communicate it. Then, of course, a form of expression must be found, a form peculiar enough to be art. Also essential is a certain level of anger, though not so much as to be debilitating. Through the public deployment of metal signs with texts that are both direct and enigmatic, Heap of Birds has found a way in which to speak his mind, to call attention to Native histories and ignored injustices. He has reclaimed the notion of "sign language," from the stereotypical savage gesture to a complex exercise in embattled expression. Though his tone is far from conciliatory, he has taken it upon himself to bridge the gap between in-

Edgar Heap of Birds, *Reclaim*, 1988. Metal sign panel. Purchase, New York.

Edgar Heap of Birds at the installation site of *Building Minnesota*, 1990, a series of forty metal sign panels, 18 x 36 in. each, commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

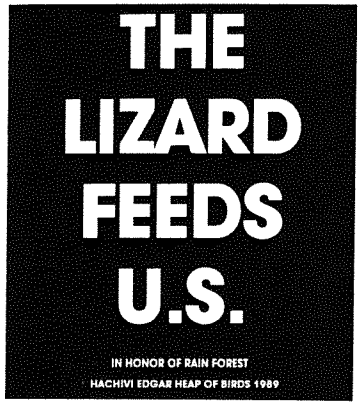
Similarly, Heap of Birds has also "repossessed" the history of indigenous peoples in the United States and around the world. "Too often," he wrote in a common complaint usually aimed at anthropologists, "we must listen to members of the dominant culture explain what it is we are."[4] There is no disputing that white mainstream American culture has appropriated Indian history as its own. But as activist artist Jimmie Durham has not-so-gently warned, "We are not part of your rich cultural heritage."[5]

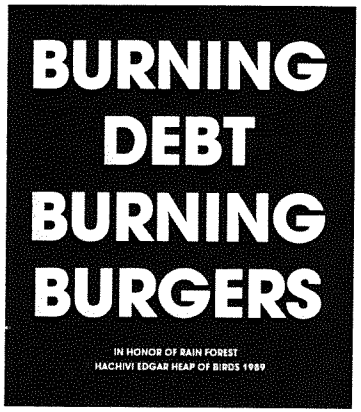
One of Heap of Birds's first major sign projects was *Native Hosts* of 1988, in which six signs were placed around New York City (and others in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and Portland, Oregon), each for a different tribe that had once occupied the area. Interestingly, Heap of Birds had originally produced twelve signs; the office of former Mayor Ed Koch permitted only six to be placed around City Hall, thus censoring the remaining six tribal sign panels. Current place names were spelled across the top, backwards, as in NEW YORK [backwards] TODAY YOUR HOST IS MOHAWK, on a sign set firmly in the ground of City Hall Park. These signs could only be read as standards, like those of the various conquerors arriving on this continent, who planted flags and claimed everything in sight. They reclaimed the land they stood upon, and by that simple act set in motion a chain of thought that was in itself a form of action.

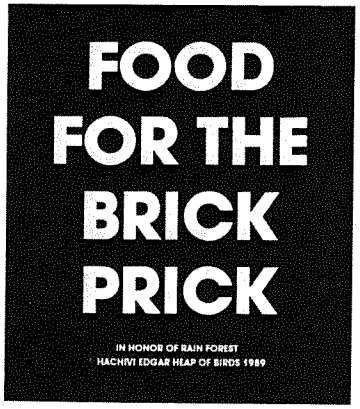
Signs, like photographs, often go unquestioned. As a supposedly literate and relatively obedient society, we are trained to read signs; when they don't seem to make sense, we read them again. Once their truths are cast in doubt, a useful habit of critical thinking is generated. The backward phrases are attention grabbers, demanding a few more seconds of time to read. In a 1984 piece titled *Native Life*, Heap of Birds made the entire message backwards, except those two title words; perhaps he decided then that the reversed lettering packed more of a punch when used sparingly. (Words in Native languages are never reversed.) It describes contradictions, foreign names imposed on the original ones, and the insidious acts of a "backwards" society. "Natural" turned around in a 1989 piece thus becomes "unnatural," turning us around in turn to look into a history we didn't know, or refused to acknowledge. (The reversed words also recall the historical "Contraries"—Tsistsistas warriors who rode their horses backwards, said hello for goodbye, and washed in mud).

Outreach is one of the activist artist's most effective tools. One of Heap of Birds's best known and most searing signed history lessons—*Building Minnesota* (1990)—forced the people of Minneapolis to recall the greatest mass execution in American history. In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln ordered the hanging of thirty-eight Dakotas for a totally justified uprising: their people were starving, provisions were withheld, and they were told to eat grass. In 1865, President Andrew Johnson executed two more men. Heap of Birds commemorated each one by name with a red-lettered sign, emphasizing Native people as individuals. All forty formed an arc on the banks of the Mississippi—a place of "refuge and renewal" for the dead. Placing the signs in America's Grain Belt, the artist noted that it was the potential disruption of economic progress by Indians on Indian land that led to this disgraceful attempt at extinction in the path of American expansion.[6] Descendants of the murdered forty Dakotas in Minneapolis tied ceremonial offerings to the signs.

As we know from other memorials—the AIDS quilt, the Vietnam Memorial, those after September 11th,[7] and during the everlasting war in Iraq—names spoken, read out loud, inscribed in public, take on a powerful, even ceremonial, aura. Like the improvised memorials that have







sprung up in the wake of domestic tragedies like the school shootings at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, Heap of Birds's signs, though static, are performative events. These are not the silent phallic monuments of the dominant culture, stones that only hint at their secrets. Like news bulletins, the signs are temporary and in-your-face. They are literally about a *command* of language: *Honor* these dead, Heap of Birds demands of the audience, knowing that the word "honor" itself has lost its edge in our language.

Tourism being the great re-creative/recreative industry of our day and historical memorials of one kind or another being popular destinations, Heap of Birds picks his sites carefully, working in "charged locations that can be implicated in an unsavory history of conquest."[8] Whereas rural art activism is an undeveloped field, Heap of Birds brings to his urban sites a rural sensitivity to specific place. Even when the subject appears to be something else, land

Edgar Heap of Birds, *In Honor of Rain Forest*, 1989. Photostat.

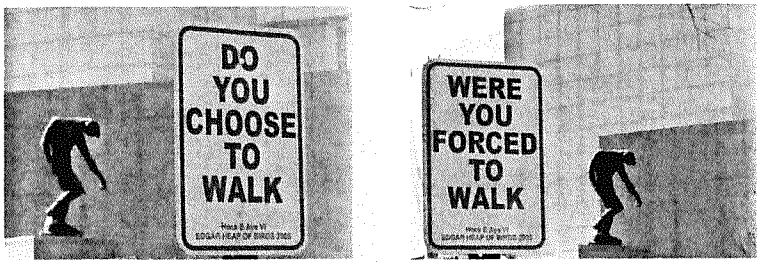
Right: Edgar Heap of Birds's work *Maxed Out Yet?* appeared on tote bags as well as in a public sign installation. *Keepers of the Western Door*, public art project sponsored by CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1996.

is the bottom line. In a 1984 show he curated, *What About War?* his own piece read: ARSENALS/OFFERING/EARTH/POISON. In 1986, on behalf of indigenous Bikini islanders, Heap of Birds created BIKINI/BOMBS/IS LAND/SCAR. In 1989, he made three photostats "in honor of Rain Forest," on behalf of Latin America's indigenous nations: THE LIZARD FEEDS U.S.; BURNING DEBT/BURNING BURGERS; FOOD FOR THE BRICK PRICK. "As with the reptile that hails from long ago, forever surviving the trials of land, sea and sky," he wrote, "the southern world strains to live through the most brutal challenge of all—a northern demand for more dollars ... it can only be satisfied in one way—by allowing the hungry heads to devour the flesh of the world, its rain forest."[9]

And since every imperial invasion brings up the bad taste of other such disastrous adventures—a kind of historical acid reflux—many of Heap of Birds's works deliberately provoke thought on American wars and their underlying social causes: THE BRUTALITY WHICH IS AMERICA; RAISES MAD DOGS; WHICH WERE ONCE BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN (*Public Enemy Care for Youth*, 1993), and signs such as HELP TRIM BAD BUSH in *Most Serene Republics* (2007). American lifestyles come under fire in a work called *Maxed Out Yet?* that appeared in a middle-American shopping mall (and on shopping bags): WE SHALL WORK, WE WON'T SAVE, WATCH US SPEND.

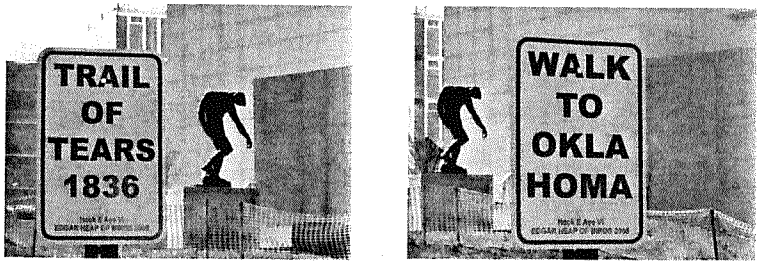
The sign is the vehicle. The art is in the language, which is simultaneously straightforward and slyly subversive. While it might seem that Heap of Birds has forgone the emotional impact associated with conventional art forms, since words alone must convey his strong feelings, this strategy pays off in interaction. Wisely avoiding some conceptual artists' temptation to use too many words, his terse sentences are all the more explosive in their contraction. They stand for larger wholes, including the predicament of Native artists as they struggle to unearth their place as heirs to

tradition and innovators in a larger world. Sometimes the newly displaced words are juxtaposed with words in foreign languages. Sometimes they are turned backwards. Sometimes they take on new meanings by their juxtaposition, as in a Surrealist collage. The way in which Heap of Birds's works rise unexpectedly in the urban belly of the beast also evokes the diverse and scattered sovereign Indian nations to which they are dedicated, as well as individual urban exiles who survive within what is (at least for the time being) the most powerful nation in the world.



Edgar Heap of Birds, *Ocmulgee Sign Project*, 2005. Installation of metal sign panels, 18 x 12 in. each. Atlanta College of Art, Georgia.

By omitting articles (which can be seen as a parody of movie Indian pidgin English) and punctuation (except for occasional question marks), Heap of Birds achieves an urgency rarely found in historical texts. "I would rather just go on record with a certain viewpoint instead of having a debate. The sign works do this for me," he says about the force of the opinionated vignette.[10] His clipped delivery provides a defense and preserves a certain privacy, freeing him from the questions inevitably asked of Native people about their histories, their ways, their beliefs. As Jean Fisher has observed, "Language most clearly demonstrates the unbridgeable distance that exists between Anglo and Indian perceptions of the world,"[11] which is precisely why Native languages have been systematically suppressed for over a century (most notably in the infamous government boarding schools well into the twentieth century), burying oral histories and rendering whole cultures mute. Only today is there some support for recording and propagating what is left of the mother tongues. These excruciating cultural losses fan out from political to personal. Like immigrants whose names were stolen at Ellis Island and Angel Island, the artist's own family name was altered to Heap of Birds from the name of his great-great-grandfather—Many Magpies (MANY MAGPIES DIED IN A FLORIDA PRISON/DEAD HOUSE DEAD MAN). The artist sees the original name as temporally and spatially vital, reduced to a static noun. Similarly, any number of Native place names have been forgotten or distorted beyond recognition. Ongoing language battles encompass even the generic names for the first peoples of this continent; within the Native, Aboriginal, or indigenous communities there are disagreements about the use of "Indian" ("colonial relic") and Native American/Canadian ("not our nation").



Obvious words take on new meanings when they are wrenched out of syntax and forced to stand on their own. Their displacement from sentences, from home, echoes one of the artist's major themes about Native life in the United States. In a statement obliquely about place, Heap of Birds once defined home as "where you walk."[12] Yet "walk" is a loaded verb in Native history, referring as much to displacement as to place. In *Ocmulgee Sign Project* of 2005, an installation of forty-eight signs in the streets of Atlanta (plus two pyramid mound sculptures indoors), he asked: DO YOU CHOOSE TO WALK/WERE YOU FORCED TO WALK/TRAIL OF TEARS 1836/WALK TO OKLAHOMA. The notion of life, and death, away from home carries tragic overtones for Native people, for whom homelessness is history.

Heap of Birds could, alas, have made a career out of commemorating massacres. He has remembered Sand Creek in *Uterine Hats* (in the *American Policy* exhibition, Derry, Northern Ireland, 1988); the 1637 Pequot massacre in *Dunging the Ground*, in which he used the perpetrators' own words to incriminate them (Hartford, Connecticut, 1996); and the 1868 Washita Massacre in *Death from the Top* in the *Preparing for War* ex-