

## **IIF Symposium Toronto - Concluding Commentary**

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[pause]

**00:17 Jason:** We have a half hour. Basically, we wanna give people at least a little bit of a break before the Art Crawl starts at 5 o'clock, I know many of you wanna go and, I appreciate that. But what we wanted to do in the last hour is just open it up for commentary, questions to the people who presented or anybody across the table, whatever it might be, around this idea of the Future Imaginary and the role that it might play within the indigenous community, or about the work that we're proposing to do, and about the work that you're doing that touches on that, so this is sort of like an open space to engage a bit, shortly anyways, with what's come up today.

**00:55 Cheryl :** And I actually wanted to start it off by... I was just wondering, Cheryl? You know, some of what she was talking about the multi-sensory kind of... Looking at the multi-sensory... The return of multi-sensory maybe, I was wondering if you had a little bit of comment about the work you do with my colleague, Chris Salter, where he's looking at... He's coming at it, what I would say, from a very Western sort of space, and sort of theoretical history, but he's brought you in, as well as a couple of other of our indigenous artists to sort of participate in that.

**01:30 Cheryl:** Yeah. So that was a very evocative part of your talk, Tony, which all of it was incredible, but it made me think about the notion that, this notion of... This sort of synesthetic notion that I think, in our world views, isn't parsed out. We don't parse out smell and taste and touch, it's a multi-sensory kind of experience. And that's part of the work that I'm working on with Chris Salter and an anthropologist named David Howes, both non-indigenous, along with another, a non-indigenous anthropologist named Jennifer Biddle, who you might know, from Australia. And then there's four artists involved, that's David Garneau, myself, Rea and Brenda Croft.

**02:23 Cheryl:** And it's called 'Sensory Entanglements.' And so what we're looking at doing is creating some new work that's a way for these Western anthropologists and technologists to kind of try and make sense of some of the dendrites that we experience just on a very intuitive and regular basis. And as part of a larger work that the non-indigenous anthropologist, David Howes is doing in breaking the archive, which I think is kind of an interesting notion of, he wants to be there in aid of, let's take down this archive that we've created, that has created all these silos, that makes work not connective. I think that's as much as I can say at this point of the day.

**03:05 Cheryl :** Great. Thank you, Cheryl. Andre?

**03:09 Andre:** Yes. Thank you for this experience, it really [03:14]       ... It goes very deep and it's very challenging. One of the comment I have is about the notion of appropriation of some other [03:32]        what is not oddly the discovering of the America, this is a contact with the people of the America and the culture of South America, and this change the world that discovered us at this time, and that somehow, all of the movement that follow in the Western culture is also connected to our cultures, because we have influenced it, and it's interesting how it is really pushed away in the speech of today.

**04:20 Andre:** When you go to Italy and they say that Polenta with tomato sauce is an Italian dish, this is an Indian dish. So, you can see how this is repel our influence, and somehow we have, I think, the same estrangement within, and it can be seen with the technology as never before, because there is something that comes from us in there, but we feel that alienation because it has been twisted, it has been reinterpreted in another mindset. And I think when we say creativity, certainly is important, but I think creativity with vision, because the artist has to be the one... This is the point of the colonies, I explained in my interview. The artist is the one that can think, again, think back what is our, and reinterpret this with the tools we have somehow helped to make a pattern.

**05:44 Ellen:** You remind me of an earlier piece of work that I did, where most of the... And that was, I was interviewing women, that were doing, who were from different communities, and a large percentage of them talked about how... They had a dream or a vision and that's what inspired the piece. So, I just wanted to mention that this idea of the artist in the West as someone that is ahead of the rest of society, I think, is something that we haven't really named for ourselves, and the linkage between what we think these visionary thoughts are, and relationship to what we're making, isn't something that we've I think updated. I appreciate your comment about appropriation. Ellen?

**06:48 Jolene:** Thank you very much for your talk. I agree with Andre, it goes very deep, and I'm always inspired by what you have to say. One of the things I think is really important is how do we address overcoming genocide? How do we protect our own people's traditional knowledge without commodifying it, but yet bringing it to the youth who use it? It's just like how do we use the language? How do we use... How do we transfer that knowledge to them in a way that they can understand but not abuse? And I think as artists... Well not everybody, but there are some artists that think that they can use anything.

**07:34 Jolene:** And I don't know if these people here are familiar with ownership, control, access and possession, which the National Aboriginal Health Organization came up with. And I thought about the lady that presented it before you, intellectual property rights. Once you put something on the web it no longer belongs to anybody, it doesn't even belong to you. And so the discussion of how do we approach this traditional knowledge? How do we approach things that our ancestors knew? How do we acknowledge that they were scientists before Columbus arrived here, that they understood things at a molecular level? And how do we get that back?

**08:22 Jolene:** This is something like the DNA that's in trees is in us, the DNA that's in the stars is in us, and it's having that cosmology and understanding, and bringing it to the community, because the communities are suffering. I mean this is a wonderful discussion we're having, but a lot of our community members are just getting by, so how do we bring this? And I think this is a really nice tool, it's an interesting tool, but how do we get it to them, and it's how we make it interesting to them. How do we get past the cigarette wars? How do we get past the despots in our band councils? How do we get to the point where we are actually revitalizing it and coming back with those institutions that were devastated by genocide? It goes really beyond just creativity.

**09:18 Jolene:** And I liked when you said, you're gonna bring in people who are not artists, people who are involved in healing, who are involved as counsellors for drug and rehabilitation, or involved in counselling women who are suffering violence, who have... These are all the things that

we are thinking about as artists, and we bring with us, and I think it's a really interesting idea of having a holistic perspective on who's gonna be involved. And I really love this thing about the wampums just reflecting and embodying those senses and that part of... Like all our relations, it doesn't just mean like, "Oh yeah, once upon a time," it means now, and it's connecting that at a very molecular level. Thank you. Archer?

**10:10 Archer:** I'd like to echo the appreciation for your really inspiring profound talk, Jolene. It's been such a long time since I've heard you speak, and it's really beautiful to see how you're... I think the last time I heard you speak was... It feels like 20 years ago, but I'm sure it wasn't that long but...

[chuckle]

**10:28 Archer:** But you know what I mean? It's a very long time, and it's amazing to see how specific your point of view has become, and I feel like it was a real honor to hear what you had to say. I would challenge you in one place where... At one point you said, "I'm sure we're all aware of the work of blah blah blah..." And I thought, "Oh, this is where they start talking in a language I don't understand anymore," and I wasn't familiar with that person's work, so I just set it aside and gave a note to Brian, "Can I have a dub of what she's talking about so I could review it later?"

[chuckle]

**11:00 Archer:** Because not all... And I think Ellen, this actually speaks to what you... I think the points you are raising are critical, and I think we all as aboriginal people, first, and artists second, feel them really sharply, which is, "Okay, I'm doing all this fun stuff in Toronto and I'm building all this cool... I'm building all these cool [11:19]       , and I get to take them to imagineNATIVE and they lift off and everybody goes, 'Ooh, actually those are really cool, look at them go.'" And my family back home are suffering under a bunch of despots in the tribal council, some of whom are named the 'Chalice', right? Which is a source of ongoing angst in my personal life, but these are realities, and these are the things that we face.

**11:38 Archer:** And the brown-skinned oppressors who we so despise are our relatives and our community members, and those things are real, and I think the answer really lies within what we see is that, more and more of the company things, I see people whose work is more and more being... It's that process of osmosis, and the work is penetrating deeper and deeper in to Indian country all the time. We used to have these conversations and it was just... It just seemed pointless to talk about making digital art, when you couldn't get a phone signal an hour out of Saskatoon. My mom just moved back to the res three months ago, my mother who's almost 80 years old, she lived there for a month and she moved to PA, Prince Albert, and I said, "Why did you move?" And she said, "I couldn't get internet."

[chuckle]

**12:30 Archer:** So, these are struggles that we're all facing, right? But the fact is, all the kids have mobile phones. You can actually get a signal now on the res if you stand in a certain spot.

[background conversation]

[chuckle]

**12:40 Archer:** So, the truth is that we... I think it's a fact that we do not... That more and more... What I see less and less, are people kowtowing to these completely alien, invasive, Western structures and paradigms of thought, where we, as artists, are somehow separate or different than. More and more, I see that we are weaved into community, and to me that's the answer.

**13:05 Cheryl :** So, Beth and then Chara?

**13:07 S7:** Yeah, thank you. That was very meaningful to hear, especially as somebody who's been involved in the game industry for so long, and it's very difficult, you cannot even talk about games as art, and where I am coming from, in my own work, is games from dreams, and it's just not even a place I can begin to go and be safe, so I appreciate so much your voice, it was very inspiring. And then, to follow up, I should have mentioned in my talk, and what I usually say about the Gift of Food, the board game that was at the very beginning, it came to the point where the community decided it was so good at what it did, passing on knowledge about traditional foods, medicines, plants, the land, the different ecosystems and how they relate to one another, but it was actually not safe to put it out on shelves, so it is only played within the community. I only have one physical copy, which I actually lost in a fire, so I actually don't even have the game myself anymore.

**14:10 S7:** But it is held only by the community and only played within the community, so I think it's important. And what I wanna do with my work are have discussions, and open discussions about what is appropriate to share and what is not appropriate to share, and for each work, there is some understanding of what can be said. So for that game, I can talk about the mechanics, I can talk about the game design. And the community wants other communities to make these games, so that's why they want to encourage presentations or academic publications about the structure, of both how it was made, but also how you play the game, but the content itself, the foods, the language, all of those different aspects, there are no screenshots of that, that can be shared, that cannot be put in text and writing. So that was a way we decided that it could be shared, but then also be kept safe.

**15:14 S8:** Thanks. I wanna just follow up what Ellen was talking about with regards to access and maybe it's a challenge to absolutely everyone in the room, and also with regards to your initiative, which is so visionary, but the challenge would be is, I work in prisons, I have a project, a generative music project I've been doing since 2008, and prisons in Canada have libraries and they also have literacy units. And I think if you wanted to access people, and the joke is 'a very captive audience', but really, it's a really amazing way to be able to provide content to many of our relatives. As you know, Canadian prisons are about 47% of our population, and we're what? 6% of the Canadian population, so our population is inside prisons. So it's just a way, if you've got... If you make a CD, a DVD, a book, anything, please just look on the Corrections Canada website, they list all the addresses, they all have libraries. You could get a lot of content inside.

**16:27 Cheryl :** Thanks. Joseph?

**16:27 S9:** Yeah, I think the medium for communicating with people locally, like at the community

level, is somewhat indirect in language, we're always indirect with communicating our way of doing things, because eventually, the word will get down, but it has to come through, like you're kind of like the intermediary for that community. I've seen that, I've heard that before, where people like myself, the old people who say, yeah...

[foreign language]

**17:08 S9:** You could walk two paths, so you're the one that's gonna speak for us on our behalf, because you have the language and this technology and digital medium. So, I don't think there's a problem there. Maybe if... Your best connection probably would be the sweat locker at a pipe ceremony, [chuckle] for an example, that kind of tower, that kind of a...

**17:31 S?:** Reception or a transmitter.

[laughter]

**17:32 S9:** Yeah. So that's what I wanted to say. I really appreciate what's happening. I think you're delving into areas that are maybe on the edge of sacredness, as we consider them, but be sure to follow proper protocol and you'll be fine. Go to the lodges, go to the pipe ceremonies, go to the sun dances. Stick close to the elders and I think you'll be okay. We've always done that, shared it with my group, all along the projects, and that's really helped us a lot along the way. Thank you.

**18:10 S?:** Thank you very much.

**18:11 Cheryl :** Archer?

**18:13 Archer:** Just a footnote, when we were talking about thinking about what this is in the Future Imaginary and why we're here, I reviewed all the essays in Coded Territories this morning to kind of put me in a space for this, and then the one phrase that really leapt out at me, and I'm sorry I can't remember whose it were, Sacred Technologies, which is going back to what you're talking about...

**18:34 S?:** What's Coded Territories?

**18:36 Archer:** What's that?

**18:37 S?:** What's Coded Territories?

**18:38 Archer:** Sorry. Coded Territories, it was a publication by imagineNATIVE and... Who else?

**18:44 Cheryl :** University of Alberta.

**18:46 Archer:** Thank you.

[overlapping conversation]

**18:48 Archer:** And published by the University of Calgary. Thank you. Essays written by myself, Cheryl, Jason, Steven... Who am I missing? Help me.

[overlapping conversation]

**19:00 S?:** Candice Hopkins.

**19:01 Archer:** Candice Hopkins.

**19:03 S?:** Steven Loft?

**19:03 S?:** Steve Loft, that's it.

**19:06 Archer:** And Steve Loft, thank you. And Doina, who was one of the organizers of the project. So, 'Sacred Technologies' was the phrase that popped into my head for this, so here's the sentence that came out of... And I was thinking what we were talking in the very beginning: "We are in an interstitial period where we are building, creating, conceptualizing, realizing structures that have existed in the past, and are facsimiles or prototypes of structures that will exist in the future," and that's what we're doing here.

**19:32 Cheryl :** Actually it's good. And one of the things that sort of excites me is... That touches on your talk and what Ellen said I think is, there's this kinda weird double-moment, double-movement. I'm not quite sure how to describe it, movement and tension where, part of what we're interested in is training, particularly our youth, to become deeply fluent in this technology, right? So that they can come out, not just so that they can be fluent in the technology, but so they come out the other side with the ability to create their own technology, like they can see the technology in their terms, and maybe in the terms of their people.

**20:15 Cheryl :** It's very tricky, 'cause the formation is all very much dictated by a Cartesian sort of approach to hardware and software, mind and body, etcetera, but there's a lot of power there as well, as evidenced by the world we live in. And so part of the interesting thing is to figure out how to get it to the point where we're not just bending that technology to our purposes, but we're actually creating new forms of technology, that better reflect the ways that we wanna engage in the world and we wanna engage with each other.

**20:51 S?:** One point, and we'll [20:54]        from that, and then also to Jolene's, I just really wanna say thank you so much for your presentation. It touched on a lot of things that I've been thinking about, and in particular, one of the things that I really appreciated that you raised is this idea of the absence of a broader cultural critique around this, and to Jason's point, thinking about what kind of structures we create that out of our own understandings of the world and our place within it, rather than building on top of a given set of structures that are not of our own making and I feel like maybe disproportionately, particularly right now in the moment that we're in there's an over-investment in creating indigenized versions of the digital in whatever form rather than thinking about the kind of...

**21:39 S?:** Particularly as Jolene spoke, I think, so eloquently and so deeply about, if you recast the notion of binary code is something ordinary to, or at least found in indigenous thought or indigenous understanding of the world, an ability to perceive into the world and through and with the world at that level, then the West fitting into an indigenous understanding in terms of what we build becomes a completely different articulation, rather than the inversion that we normally experience, which is trying to fit the indigenous into the given parameters established by particularly the way the West has structured our participation in technology. And I think at this point we have that kind of opportunity to kind of disrupt that, and also to do...

**22:20 S?:** I feel like this is maybe the obligation or the responsibility that I feel working in this world, which is to do the work of a critique, so that we don't blindly buy into the very Utopian narrative established by most technologists, which presume not only a linear ordering of time, but also that inevitably our participation in the given system is what makes all of it better, rather than questioning that structure and logic and code that we're then building on top of, and I feel like maybe that's the opportunity for us here is also to think about, if we build it from... Whatever the metaphor is, if we build it from that up, from our understandings up, we produce a different establishing kind of code within which to work, rather than trying to do it the other way around.

**23:01 Cheryl :** I just wanna do a really quick analogous point and then turn it back over to Jolene. So part of the reason why the symposium is called the 'Future Imaginary', not the 'Indigenous Future Imaginary', is because we wanna say, "Look, we're discussing the future, and we invite other people to come in and discuss the future with us, but we're not a little subset of the future over here," right? And so, maybe in seven years this becomes the place where other people come and talk about the Future Imaginary from their community's perspective, not the indigenous perspective, instead of like you said, sort of like trying to fit in to some preexisting conversation.

[background conversation]

**23:35 Cheryl:** I think my comment kind of dovetails with both of you guys, 'cause something that I think about all the time is, in the 20th century we embrace the notion of homogeneity in conjunction with heterogeneity, and it comes at a sort of formation when, for a period of time in the field of anthropology people were actually looking at this notion of discreet worldviews, and that idea of course has been since sort of set aside, because this idea that everything is everything, that we're all in each other's world in such a way that we can't actually have distinct or discreet spaces, and I would like to actually have more conversation about that, because I think that that's exactly what we're saying, that around the table here there are probably 10 different epistemes, of which there are maybe... We have an ontology that maybe is similar to each other's, but it's distinctly different than... Perhaps a Christian, or some people would maybe push back and then say a Judea-Christian, maybe Muslim ontology.

**24:54 Cheryl:** And in the world today, it's actually not very politic to actually kind of like frame things in this way, or talk about things in this way, and so our distinctness, which I think [25:06] described is, of course... People talk about it in this coded theoretical language, 'the state of exception', etcetera. We never really get the opportunity to kind of declare our posts, and so it leaves it kind of like... It leaves I think us in this kind of really destabilized space, and this is where this sort of question of, "What is our presence then in relationship to this larger construct of nation,



these other superstructures, the ongoing formulation of the financial, the corporate space, etcetera?" So these are real structures in the world that are in constant state of movement, and we're trying to understand our place caught in relationship to it without ever really kind of being able to firmly market, because we're always in a state of defense.

**26:13 Cheryl:** And so, I think that this is really difficult and complex, but I appreciate just the space here, to actually be able to consider some of these ideas, because the other thing I want to say is that, whether we want to acknowledge this or not, the world lives here now, this is the world, and that we have to have a purchase in this in order to understand how we fit, we just can't disconnect from it. And so, I don't know, just to get back to Ellen's point about the ethics of what knowledge is then brought forward... I mean, one of the things I think about is that if it was... If there weren't the power imbalance, and if our knowledge wasn't appropriated to be used against us, which has been the model that we've lived with for a long time, this kind of knowledge would actually make the world a better place. I mean, it brought us this far, even under the forces of genocide, and so there's power in these structures, but because this knowledge...

**27:32 Cheryl:** And in particular people, of course, for a long time, have been really racing towards the biological knowledge, the plant knowledge, the healing knowledge, etcetera, and that's like the biggest race right now. And it's not a new story, it's like the commoditization of that knowledge is the objective, it isn't healing, right? And so just something like that. But part of the problematic of this, and this really comes from my academic and intellectual mentor John Mohawk, who actually wrote 'The Basic Call to Consciousness', what he points out is that, for most of us, vast amounts of this stuff was written down in that salvage period of anthropology in the late 1900s, early 20th century, and so it's there.

**28:23 Cheryl:** And it's interesting, because I see that people that want to, artists, makers that want to participate in a kind of extraction of knowledge, kind of practice, you can see their minding of the archive in a particular way, and that coupled with people trying to understand the language, seems to be the new hyper formula for, kind of positioning oneself as both an authority, and at the same time the extraction of this knowledge. And so, I mean it's happening, it's present. What are the ethics of it? I think all of this is part of the discussion.

**29:13 Cheryl :** So, we're out of time.

[laughter]

**29:16 Cheryl :** It's 4:30. Do you wanna go first, or you want me to... Do you wanna end?

[background conversation]

**29:23 Cheryl :** Okay, so, I just wanna...

**29:25 S?:** I usually talk a lot more. I'm a little under the weather today. I'm gonna let my better half do a little bit more of the work today.

**29:33 Cheryl :** That was on videotape!

[laughter]

[background conversation]

**29:42 Cheryl :** So, I'm very happy. I mean, this has accomplished what we were hoping it would accomplish, and it was to get a conversation started, right? That we think is an incredibly rich conversation with many veins to follow, and to continue discussing and to work on and things like that. And I wanted to say that, please make sure if you... 'Cause there's some people who came in, please make sure that you send us your contact information. We're putting together a list of people who are interested in this stuff. We'll have information up on the website. The website's [www.abtec.org/iif](http://www.abtec.org/iif), so you can follow us there. We're gonna have a blog and etcetera.

**30:23 Cheryl :** So this is the beginning of what we're hoping to be a long-running, very big conversation with lots of different people and lots of different communities. I wanna thank you all for coming and being present with us and bringing your good minds to share your thoughts about these sorts of things with us and we look forward to sharing with you more in the future. I very much wanna thank our team. So Erika and Guy Denoro and Mikael, our research assistants who really made this thing go, and made sure that everything was in place that needed to be. I wanna thank Skawennati for her work collaborating with me to make this sort of thing happen as well as all the other people involved in Initiative for Indigenous Futures. Thank you all.

[applause]