



All Photos: Karen Asher

JANUARY 15 - FEBRUARY 14, 2011

**AMYGDALA**

**MICHAEL DUDECK**



## “EVERYTHING IN MY LIFE IS APPROPRIATED” a look through the Witch Doctor, Michael Dudeck

A RESPONSE BY  
Amber-Dawn Bear Robe

aceartinc., an artist-run centre located in the Exchange District of Winnipeg, is animated with an entourage of the local arts hub. As a familiar cue to those who have attended previous Michael Dudeck performances, surgical white masks neatly stacked on a table are provided for the audience to wear during the happening. Two nude women, painted white, sit motionless on individual pedestals at the entrance of the pallid and brightly-lit main gallery space. Sound artist, Andy Rudolph, is situated by the mid-gallery wall, fully clothed and dressed in a pilot's black air filter mask. Adjacent to him lays a male body on a tall, metal frame and a woman sitting on a pedestal against the back gallery wall, both painted white and naked.

Photos, drawings and sculptural art cover aceartinc.'s walls and the room is permeated with ambient sounds and audience chatter. Two by two, a



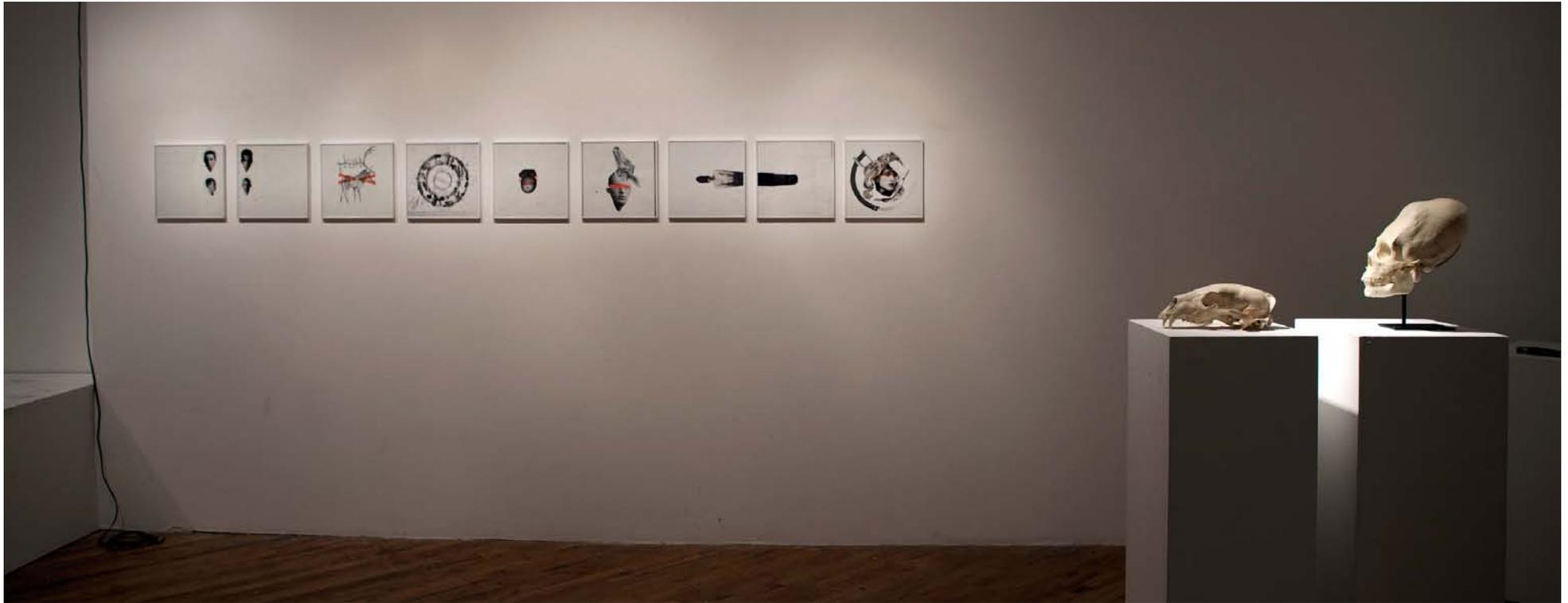
procession of unclothed, white painted, female bodies enter the room. Marching rhythmically in black army type boots; the performers are expressionless and trancelike —methodically moving into and throughout the crowd. Following this parade is the *Witch Doctor*, Michael Dudeck, who is also naked and covered in white paint. Playing the persona of a hermaphrodite figure, his torso is covered with six fake breasts, in-conjunction with wearing a long black unkempt wig, and attired in the same black mask as the sound artist. Several performers carry knives that conduct sound to speakers positioned around the gallery. Amidst the theatrical smoke that fills the air and a chant dialogue in Dudeck's invented language, the religious and ceremonial performance concludes for the night.

*Amygdala*<sup>1</sup> is the second performance of a ten year project called *RELIGION*, initiated by Dudeck in 2010.<sup>2</sup> A packed audience is

magnetized by the artist, leaving many not able to actually witness the presentation. Critical conversation regarding cultural appropriation surrounds Dudeck's work, yet this is never seemingly addressed head on. Resentment is particularly directed to his use of and reference to First Nations iconography. As a means to approach the delicate issue of Dudeck's culture appropriation under the name of art, I have been asked to write, from a First Nations perspective,<sup>3</sup> a response essay to his performance *Amygdala*.

Interestingly, thus far *Amygdala* is void of any explicitly particular religious or First Nations reference, it appears to be exactly what the artist intends: a fantasy female warrior culture centered on an invented religion and Queer prehistory. Dudeck's vision, a complicated mythological, divine framework, is an allegorical path that huge crowds are eager to pursue with him. The "Gay Spiritual Leader," as Dudeck pronounced himself during his artist talk,<sup>4</sup> is a constructed image, identity and avatar with which to enter his spiritual journey of self-discovery. "Being an artist," writes art historian Patricia Hills, "is a matter of trying to locate one's position in postmodern culture."<sup>5</sup> This fabricated ritual, based on imagination, make-believe and make-up is void of any direct reference to my Blackfoot or other First Nations or Native American cultures. I see naked bodies in white paint following the new age beat of generic spirituality in the traditional format of performative art history and exhibitionism.

The questions become: why does Dudeck's performance work cause so much tension which results in attracting herds of people, even if their objective is to simply criticize his art? When his recent performance work is a generalized fusion of various customs, why are people annoyed by his admitted acts of cultural appropriation, specifically First Nations cultures? How do his performance works reflect western culture,<sup>6</sup> society and performance art of the new millennium?



Neither appropriation nor the premise of a self-proclaimed religious leader is foreign to art history or performance art. The 60's introduced performance art, initially known as 'happenings,' as a method for the artist to deconstruct and disable barriers between life and art; a physical method to unify art with spirit. This is compounded with a *priori* knowledge being a foundational concept for artistic history, which invites the artist to take a leadership role in connecting society beyond the physical. Some of the most notorious pioneer performers such as Joseph Beuys and Carolee Schneemann proudly announced the shamanistic role they personified when performing. Beuys believed that art initiated a healing process in which "he would assume the

shamanistic role of exercising past horrors."<sup>8</sup> This was fused with an intent to generate personal and national rebirth. Schneemann, during the 60's, explained how "in a kind of shamanistic ritual I incorporated my own naked body into the constructions-putting paint, grease and chalk on myself."<sup>9</sup> Dudeck's self-proclaimed shamanistic/ witch doctor role is an artistic declaration falling precisely in sync with preceding performance artists.

No distinct and obvious cultural iconography can be singled out here for discussion, due to the amalgamative artistic process employed. Dudeck selects ingredients from various religions, cultures, taboos and issues,



Beuys, in his performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), lived in a gallery space with a coyote to symbolize the American trauma of "the Red Man."<sup>12</sup> His goal was to assume the role of Shaman for the purpose of healing American society and its traumas. Yet Beuys' self-mythification and attempt to de-bunk old myths serves to create new, damaging, mythical strains that hide and breed among "modern"



stirs everything in a pot; what ensues is the invention of his own culture recipe. The result is a hybrid, hegemonic, religious and cultural vision to satisfy audience and artistic appetite.<sup>10</sup> Theorist and scholar Ania Loomba, in her publication *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*, highlights how this selection, picking and choosing from multiple histories and cultures and forging a unified past is a Euro-centric concept. It imposes a duty, and a glorious pre-colonial past or traditions. "Nationalism," Loomba says, "engages in a complex process of contesting as well as appropriating colonialist versions of the past."<sup>11</sup> North Americans starve for displaced, colonized, abandoned or forgotten cultural roots, leading western culture to pick concepts from diverse cultures, to then interpret or determine value in order to suit their immediate needs. And who better to take from than the romanticized culture and traditions of Native North Americans?

culture.<sup>13</sup> His myth making, even if positively inclined, is still created from the white-male nucleus that perpetuates and idealizes the act of cultural appropriation for personal gain. Yet, does this insinuate a disrespect and lack of awareness on the artists' side?



Current trends in western society to amalgamate diverse cultures under one generic umbrella of cultural hybridism are reflected in the performance art of Dudeck. His attempt and act of harmony between art and spirit through creating an amalgam religious culture, echoes a culturally lost and spiritually deprived society that collapses distinct uniqueness



into a unified whole. "Everything in my life is appropriated," Dudeck announced during his artist talk. "I take respectfully from different ideas!" He takes from different traditions and sources while questioning what a sacred image is and who has access to them. "It's the artists' role," he alleged, "to assemble new narratives with these 'taken' images." Later, he added, "How do we police what's sacred!"<sup>14</sup> Poignantly, this question reiterates current trends and attitude towards distinct cultures and Native North Americans.

An accepted hybrid culture veiled by multi-culturalism remains a structure of European colonial reform, cloaked as being progressive but still based in racial hierarchy.<sup>15</sup> Native North Americans are reduced to a generic cluster without distinction or respect to the vast differences among



diverse Indigenous groups. Dismissing the importance and usage of cultural iconography is a social practice and method of continuing racial hierarchy and colonialism.<sup>16</sup>

While Dudeck is responding from his worldview, displacing responsibility onto the artist is too simple. Acts of cultural appropriation have been made into naturalized, internalized truth and normative practice. In the imaginative, artistic space, an artist can pick and discard various cultural segments, express a structured experimentation within the safe environment of the gallery, and return to everyday life with no intrinsic ties to content. Dudeck's plight for social change, to de-centre the "normative" of a white, male dominated culture only works to magnify the hierarchies pervasive in western society. Distinguished theorist Michele Foucault



writes, "Human beings internalise the systems of repression and reproduce them by conforming to certain ideas of what is normal and what is deviant."<sup>17</sup> Suggesting that ideas about culture, race and sexuality are institutionalized and difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle from one's ideology.

"What makes a great work [of art] 'great,' " writes theorist Keith Moxey, "is what we bring to it when we come to it: the attitudes and values of our own culture and our own time which have taught us to organize and hierarchize the experiences that constitute the world in which we live."<sup>18</sup> Dudeck's search for identity reflects the nation's identity crisis, mirroring the reasons behind western society's disposable attitudes towards cultural diversity and iconography. The artist holds a mirror to his audience and it is the viewer's role as much as his, to question and examine issues brought forth and reactions to his work.



### Notes

- 1 The amygdala is a nucleus of the human brain responsible for processing memory and emotional reactions.
- 2 The first performance, *Ritualiz'd*, was held at Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts, Thursday May 20, 2010.
- 3 I am Blackfoot from Siksika Nation, Treaty Seven of Alberta, Canada.
- 4 Artist talk at aceartinc. February 2011.
- 5 Robert C. Morgan, "The End of the Art World," in *The End of the Art World*. (New York: Allworth, 1998) in Patricia Hills, *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century* (Prentice Hall Inc. New Jersey, 2001), 351.
- 6 This term is used in reference to European civilization, cultures of European origin who base normalcy on their own traditional, religious, ethical, technical, political and epistemological belief systems, world-view.

- 7 Schneemann is best-known for creating *Interior Scroll*, 1976 in which she stood naked in front of an audience while reading from a paper scroll that she was slowly extracting from her vagina. She was also concerned with reinterpreting women's role in western society, to commemorate the pre-history and history of female figures.
- 8 Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era, From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (Westview Press: Colorado, 1996), page.
- 9 Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era, From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, 131.
- 10 In an email conversation between Dudeck and I, he said the name Witch Doctor itself is a term he chose because it is a fusion of concepts: "Both Witch and Doctor refer to practitioners who can assist in helping them through the complexities of the path of the human condition." He claims it is a "merging of gender roles."
- 11 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism: the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM* (Routledge: New York, 1998), 196.
- 12 Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era, From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*, 92.
- 13 While artists such as Beuys and Dudeck are busy creating new worlds and myths through performance, Native North American artists are working intently to deconstruct myths. For example, performance artist James Luna confronts the Western viewer in a very subtle but powerful way. In *The Artifact Piece*, Luna lays in a museum specimen case as an "artifact" in the San Diego Museum of Man. He exposes the Western, anthro/ethno-pological construct of the *Indian* as a spectacle and object created for Western consumption. Many Indigenous artists focus on unearthing buried histories and constructed myths in order to make room for distinct, alive and wonderfully complex cultures of Native North Americans.
- 14 Artist talk at aceartinc., January 27, 2011.
- 15 Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism: the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM*, 172.
- 16 No matter where Dudeck goes, he claims the burden and role of a politically engaged and active artist is getting in trouble for taking ideas and images. Dudeck is not alone in his dilemma of image use; the difference is that he has the luxury of choosing his quandary. Native North American artists are also caught in a "double bind." Karen Coody Cooper writes that once an artist is labeled *Indian* the expectation begins concerning one's work, "Native American artists can be criticized if their work does reflect Native life and themes, and they can be criticized if their work does not reflect Native

life and themes." This can lead to Native artists being pigeonholed into a category of traditional or contemporary art. Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices*. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2008), 49, 50.

- 17 Michael Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, trans. R.Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 93.
- 18 Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, 98.

## References

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- Email conversation, February, 2011.
- Artist Talk at aceartinc., January 27, 2011



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Tuesday-Saturday 12 - 5pm

Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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**aceartinc.** is an Artist-Run Centre dedicated to the development, exhibition and dissemination of contemporary art by cultural producers. **aceartinc.** maintains a commitment to emerging artists and recognizes its role in placing contemporary artists in a larger cultural context. **aceartinc.** is dedicated to cultural diversity in its programs and to this end encourages applications from contemporary artists and curators identifying as members of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender), Aboriginal (status, non-status, Inuit, Métis) and all other cultural communities.



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