Robert Houle's **Palisade**

Michael Bell

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Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements

This is the third project that Robert Houle and I have worked on together. Each has dealt with aspects of the history of the encounter of Europeans and the indigenous peoples of North America.

Our engagement has been one of conversation, not the mode of collaboration advanced in recent years. In the course of the conversation there is the potential of emancipation, of moving beyond the seemingly obdurate political obstacles to an understanding of the reality of interdependence. The notion that we have a responsibility for each other, that the goal of human development is the achievement of interdependence, offers an ethical alternative to the usual short term political exigencies.

Again, I wish to thank Robert Houle for making this work and the Mackenzie Art Gallery (Regina) for agreeing to lend it for this exhibition so soon after making it a part of its collection.

Sandra Dyck and Patrick Lacasse, in their usual professional way, did their share to make this installation a success.

The Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council have supported this exhibition, and their support is deeply appreciated.

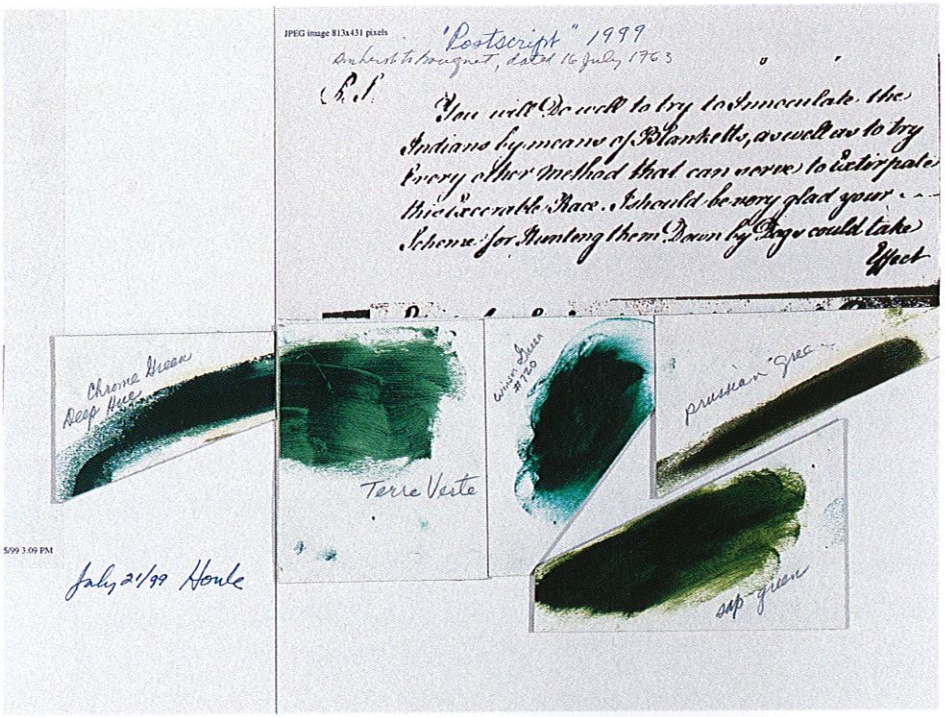
Michael Bell
Director

The deliberate reintroduction of smallpox into the population would be an international crime of unprecedented proportions. A spreading, highly lethal epidemic in an essentially unprotected population, with limited supplies of vaccine, no therapeutic drugs, and with shortages of hospital beds suitable for patient isolation is an ominous specter.

D.A. Henderson,
Risk of a Deliberate Release of Smallpox Virus

The idea of healing suggests that to reach 'whole health,' Aboriginal people must confront the crippling injuries of the past. Yet, doing so is not their job alone. Only when the deep causes of Aboriginal ill health are remedied by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together will balance and harmony—or health and well-being—be restored.

Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Gathering Strength (1996)



Detail of ***Postscript*** (1999) Cat. 3.

For where we stand in regard to the past, what the relations are between past, present and future are not only matters of vital interest to all: they are quite indispensable. We cannot help situating ourselves in the continuum of our own life, of family and group to which we belong. We cannot help comparing past and present.... We cannot help learning from it, for that is what *experience* means. We may learn the wrong things—plainly we often do—but if we don't learn, or have had no chance of learning, or refuse to learn from whatever past is relevant for our purpose, we are, in the extreme case, mentally abnormal.[1]

The set of practices in responsibility for the past are repentance, confession, forgiveness, and remembrance.[2]

Robert Houle's *Palisade*

Robert Houle's visual arts practice has successfully joined modernist formalism with activist initiatives to review the 'history' of the interactions of the North American Indian and the colonizers, military and settlers. ***Palisade*** [3] takes its place in a group of works (for example, *Hochelaga* [1992],[4] *Kanata* [1993],[5] *Zero Hour* [1989],[6] *Pontiac Conspiracy* [1996],[7] and *Premises for Self Rule: The Royal Proclamation* [1994][8] that examine the intersection of Amerindian history and contemporary issues. These intersections inform the relationship between North America's First Peoples and those Europeans who have encountered them since 1492, in the course of the establishment of a Neo-European society in North America.

I. *Palisade*

palisade: noun, verb, a fence of pales or stakes set firmly in the ground, as for enclosure or defense.[9]

The installation ***Palisade*** comprises eight vertical canvases, each 8 feet high and 2 feet wide,[10] a group of studies for the project, and a digitally collaged graphic, produced originally to be used in the production of outdoor billboards in the first occurrence of the installation in Saskatoon.

The eight green canvases are each painted a solid, distinct hue, moving sequentially in value from the first panel, from the lightest to the last one, which is the darkest. The sequence of colours is: Cobalt Green, Winsor Emerald #708, Chrome Green Deep Hue, Terre Verte, Winsor Green #720, Prussian Green, Sap Green, Olive Green. Pontiac's intended signal to his warriors to attack the occupants of Fort Detroit was to turn the wampum belt to show its green side.[11] Each of the eight panels stands for one of the eight forts captured by the tribes in Pontiac's Confederacy in 1763. The panels are installed in three groups: one group of two, one group of five, and a single panel. Each group occupies, in a 'virtual' manner, the same conceptual space on the wall: precisely 17 feet, 9 inches: 16 feet for the panels and 3 inches between each panel. Where you see two panels, you must imagine all eight; where you see five panels, you must imagine all eight; and, where you see one panel, you must imagine all eight. The result is to construct around the gallery walls the conceptual effect of a ***Palisade***.

The digital graphic collages many of the elements developed in the studies. In addition Houle introduces disturbing documentation. The first is a *National Post* column (after the *New York Times*)[12] discussing the fate of the last live stocks of variola virus—commonly known as smallpox. The other documentation, reproductions of the postscripts of letters exchanged between Lord Jeffrey Amherst, Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in North America during the Seven Years' War (1756-63) and the Swiss mercenary, Colonel Henry Bouquet, stationed at Fort Pitt, advocates the 'inoculation' of the Indian's gathered loosely under the leadership of Pontiac, with gifts of blankets infected with the smallpox virus.[13]

II. Smallpox past

smallpox: noun, an acute, highly contagious, febrile disease, caused by a virus, and characterized by a pustular eruption that often leaves permanent pits or scars.[14]

Eurasians have a long history living in close proximity to their domesticated animals; Amerindians do not share this history. In this difference rests the reason for the presence of smallpox in European and Asian societies, and the total susceptibility of the Amerindian population to the same virus.

> Most and probably all of the distinctive infectious diseases of civilization transferred to human populations from animal herds. Contacts were closest with the domesticated species, so it is not surprising to find that many of our common infectious diseases have recognizable affinities with one or another diseases afflicting domesticated animals ... smallpox is certainly connected closely with cowpox and with a cluster of other animal infections.[15]

As William H. McNeil so amply demonstrates in *Plagues and Peoples*, "Disease and parasitism play a pervasive role in all life. A successful search for food on the part of one organism becomes for its host a nasty infection or disease."[16]

Smallpox is one of the many microparasites—tiny organisms like viruses and bacteria—that sustain their own vital process by finding a source of food in human tissues. Unlike many microparasites, smallpox provokes an acute disease in humans, killing most that it attacks, or producing an immunity that gives the human host a means to kill off the infecting microparasite. Sometimes the host shows few, if any, symptoms, yet harbours the microparasite and becomes a carrier, infecting others. There are yet other microparasites that establish stable relations with their human host, hardly interfering with the normal functioning of their host. Smallpox cannot be counted among these.

By the time Europeans encountered the Amerindian population, epidemics of smallpox had raged throughout Europe, killing many and leaving survivors with lifelong immunity and disfigurement.

Smallpox is a breath-borne 'droplet' infection, as are many childhood diseases in societies (European and Asian) with dense populations in cities (*civilized*). It is also possible to acquire the disease by physical contact with a person in the infective stage, from a corpse up to three weeks after death, and rarely, from 'fomites'—objects that have been in close contact with a patient can remain infective for up to a year.[17]

From an epidemiological standpoint, smallpox's most important features are: its rapid and fully effective transmission, resulting in infection rates of close to 100% in non-immune populations; its short infective period of fourteen days; and survivors' acquired immunity to second attacks. Once infected with the variola virus, the disease must run its course. There are two varieties: variola major and variola minor. The former is classic smallpox, extremely lethal, with a fatality rate of some 30%. The latter is less severe, with a fatality rate of 1%. In America identified epidemics of variola minor did not occur until the late 1800s. Both varieties are now extinct, with the last recorded cases reported in 1978. By 1980, the World Health Organization, following an extended campaign to eradicate the virus from the globe, could document success with a parchment certificate dated 9 December 1979.[18]

III. The Amerindian and smallpox

Amerindian, noun, a member of any of the aboriginal Indian and Eskimo peoples of North and South America.

> Smallpox is a disease with seven-league boots. Its effects are terrifying: the fever and pain; the swift appearance of pustules that sometimes destroy the skin and transform the victim into a gory horror; the astounding death rates, up to one-fourth, one-half, or more with the worst strains. The healthy flee, leaving the ill behind to face certain death, and often taking the disease along with them. The incubation period for smallpox is ten to

> fourteen days, long enough for the ephemerally healthy carrier to flee for long distances on foot, by canoe, or, later, on horseback to people who know nothing of the threat he represents, and there to infect them and inspire others newly charged with the virus to flee to infect new innocents.[19]

Recent scholarship, following the lead of Alfred W. Crosby, has investigated the singular role of imported plants, animals, and diseases in modifying the environment soon to be occupied by Neo-European nations following the European explorers who eventually, with Magellan's extraordinary deed, circled the globe in 1519-22. For the indigenous populations, the introduction of Eurasian diseases, was the most catastrophic. And smallpox, a most lethal pathogen, figured most prominently in the decimation of 'virgin soil' populations encountered by white Europeans, questing for the fabulous Indies.

From early in the sixteenth century, when the first smallpox pandemic spread like wildfire in the Americas, destroying whole civilizations from Mexico south to Inca land, smallpox was a recurrent visitor, eventually killing either directly or indirectly upward of 95% of the indigenous population. Once the virus entered a 'virgin soil' population, especially a small population with no immunity, it burned itself out, leaving a small remnant of now-immune survivors who, because of reduced numbers and infertility, were unable to replace the lost population. When the survivors died, leaving a smaller population unexposed to the virus and thus lacking immunity, it too was totally susceptible to the next wave of infection. Through cycles of first pandemic, and then epidemic infection, the 18 million Amerindians who occupied North America alone were reduced by the late nineteenth century to less than 300,000.[20]

We are accustomed, because of the historicization of the cruel adventures of the Spanish *conquistadores* in Central and South

America, to think only of those areas as being the locale for advanced civilizations like the Mayan and the Inca. Closer to home, in the area to the south and west of the Great Lakes, there is ample evidence of an art-producing and monument-building culture, the Mound Builders. Its disappearance can only be explained by impact of disease, in all likelihood smallpox. The argument is convincing. Swords and gunpowder did not achieve victory for the Europeans. Disease, especially smallpox, consistently arriving before the ragtag 'armies', cleared the way for exploitation, conversion, and settlement.

> The impact of smallpox on the indigenes of...the Americas was more deadly, more bewildering, more devastating than we, who live in a world from which the smallpox virus has been scientifically exterminated, can ever fully realize. The statistics of demographic decline are cold, the eyewitness accounts at first moving, but eventually only macabre. The impact was so awesome that only a writer with the capabilities of a Milton at the height of his powers could have been equal to the subject... [21]

George Sioui suggests that we put 'the microbes on trial,' rather than insisting that the burden of guilt be borne by the carriers of the smallpox virus (or any other pathogen).

> Since the first coming into contact, both the carriers and receivers have suffered from an inability to recognize the true instigators of the great disaster in which they have been plunged; to recognize this situation would serve, not only to indict the guilty party [the microbes], but also and most importantly to enable all of us to work together towards a reorientation of human thought.[22]

The claim here is that the Amerindians, through their understanding of nature, can offer a new model of thinking about 'life and the universe by studying the spiritual essence of America.'[23]

Chronology of the Indian Defensive War

22 February 1761	Amherst forbids presents of food and arms to Indians.
3 July 1761	Senecas present a war belt to Detroit Indians; it is rejected.
Summer 1762	War belts circulate among western Indians, encouraged by Senecas and Frenchmen.
23 August 1762	Major Henry Gladwin takes command of Detroit.
27 April 1763	Pontiac proposes to Ottawas, Potawatomies, and Hurons near Fort Detroit that they attack and plunder the fort. He inspires them with the teachings of the nativist Delaware Prophet Neolin. Pontiac's ruse is betrayed to Major Gladwin.
9 May 1763	Pontiac lays siege to Fort Detroit with Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomie, Huron, Shawnee, and Delaware warriors.
Summer 1763	Tribal allies destroy forts at Venango, LeBoeuf, and Presque Isle. Senecas wipe out a convoy near Niagara. Forts at Detroit, Pittsburgh (Fort Pitt), and Niagara hold out against attackers.
July 1763	With sanction from Amherst and Bouquet, the garrison at Fort Pitt starts an epidemic among the Indians by infecting besieging chiefs with blankets from the smallpox hospital.
1 August 1763	Indians withdraw from siege of Fort Pitt.
5 August 1763	Colonel Bouquet fights off an attack at Bushy Run and forces attackers to withdraw.
1-28 September 1763	Sir William Johnson treats with the Iroquois and admits Senecas back in the Covenant Chain.
31 October 1763	Pontiac lifts siege of Detroit.
17 November 1763	Amherst embarks on return to Britain. He is succeeded as Commander-in-Chief by General Thomas Gage.
Early April 1764	Iroquois attack eastern Delawares and turn prisoners over to Johnson.
12 August 1764	Bradstreet, on his way to Detroit, treats with Delawares and Shawnees at Presque Isle.
7 September 1764	Bradstreet treats with Detroit chiefs (but not Pontiac) for peace under Britain's sovereignty. He immediately applies for a grant of lands to make a new colony.
July 1766	Pontiac treats with Johnson for peace.

IV. Amherst and the infected blanket[24]

infect, verb, to affect or contaminate (a person, organ, wound, etc.) with disease-producing germs.

In the Americas, the Seven Years' War was a dispute between the English and the French. France, with its colony New France, along the St. Lawrence, and a series of posts south and west of the Great Lakes and into the Mississippi River valley, reaching as far as the Gulf of Mexico, seemed to be closing off the potential for expansion by England's Thirteen Colonies, ranged along the eastern seaboard.

By 1760, the English forces and their Indian allies had vanquished the French forces and their Indian allies, and sought to establish their military presence wherever the French had set down posts.[25] The Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in North America, Lord Jeffrey Amherst, systematically took charge. He sent small detachments to forts scattered around the Great Lakes, restricted trade to these forts, thus controlling the flow of liquor and ostensibly stopping the worst trading practices, and halted the practice of giving 'presents' to the indigenous groups.[26] The Indian allies of the French felt some degree of disappointment, especially as they realized that settlers would continue to move into and occupy their territory.

Rumours abounded, and hatchets and Seneca war belts circulated among the disaffected groups, culminating in what conventional Neo-European 'history' has called the Pontiac Rebellion or Conspiracy, and what contemporary First Nations call Pontiac's Confederacy. In front of the Ottawas and a Huron band, Pontiac proclaimed:

> It is important for us, my brothers, that we exterminate from our lands this nation which seeks only to destroy us. You see as well as I that we can no longer supply our own needs, as we have done from our brothers, the French. The English sell us goods twice as dear as the French do, and their goods do not last.

> Scarcely have we bought a blanket or something else to cover ourselves with before we must think of getting another; and when we wish to set out for our winter camps they do not want to give us any credit as our brothers the French do...we must all swear their destruction and wait no longer. Nothing prevents us; they are few in numbers, and we can accomplish it.
>
> All the nations who are our brothers attack them—why should we not strike too? Are we not men like them? Have I not shown you the wampum belts which I received from our Great Father, the Frenchman? He tells us to strike them...I have sent wampum belts and messengers to our brothers, the Chippewas of Saginaw, and to our brothers, the Ottawas of Michilimackinac, and to those of the Thames River to join us. They will not be slow in coming, but while we wait let us strike anyway. There is no more time to lose.[27]

Loosely confederated under the leadership of Pontiac, who in turn was influenced by the Delaware Prophet, Neolin,[28] the tribes captured eight palisaded forts and killed or took captive the British soldiers: Fort Venango (13 June, 1763); Fort LeBoeuf (18 June, 1763); Fort Sandusky (16 May, 1763); Fort Miami (27 May, 1763); Fort Ouiatenon (31 May, 1763); Fort St. Joseph (25 May, 1763); Fort Michilmackinac (2 June, 1763); and, Fort Edward Augusta (15 June, 1763).[29] The Amerindians also laid seige to Fort Pitt (where Amherst corresponded also with Captain Simeon Ecuyer) and Detroit. The latter siege lasted from 9 May to 31 October, 1763, under the direction of Pontiac, whose original plan to attack from inside the fort during talks with the commander had been revealed to the British, who could then be prepared.

continued on page 27

Note: In the following portfolio of illustrations, the two, five and one panel installations emulate the scale of the installation in the gallery: the 'extra' white space stands for the gallery wall, and is not a mistake.

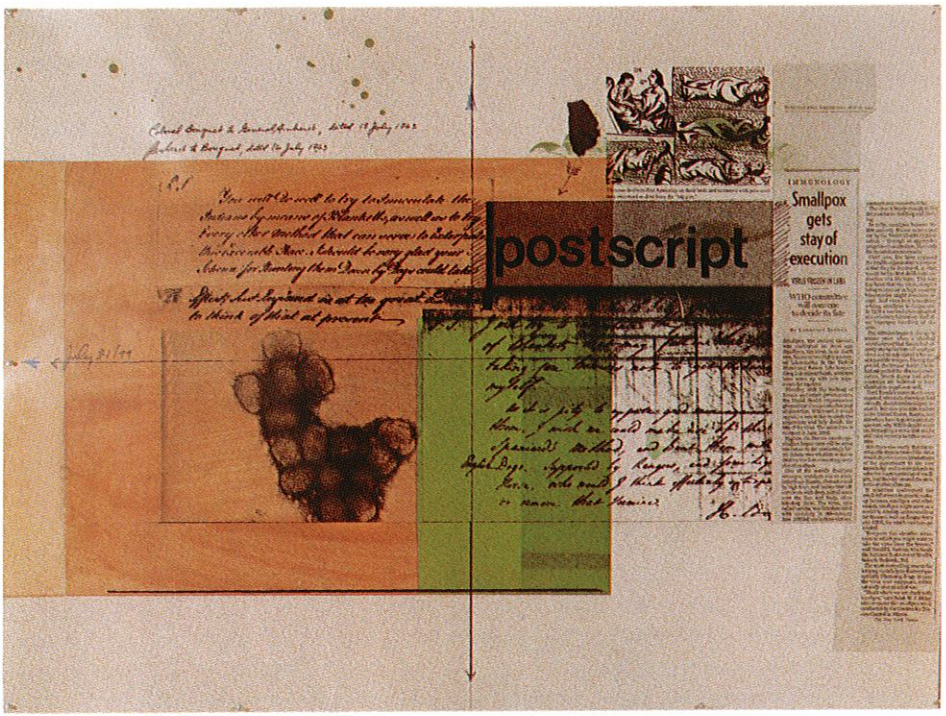


Figure 1: *Postscript* (1999) Cat. 6

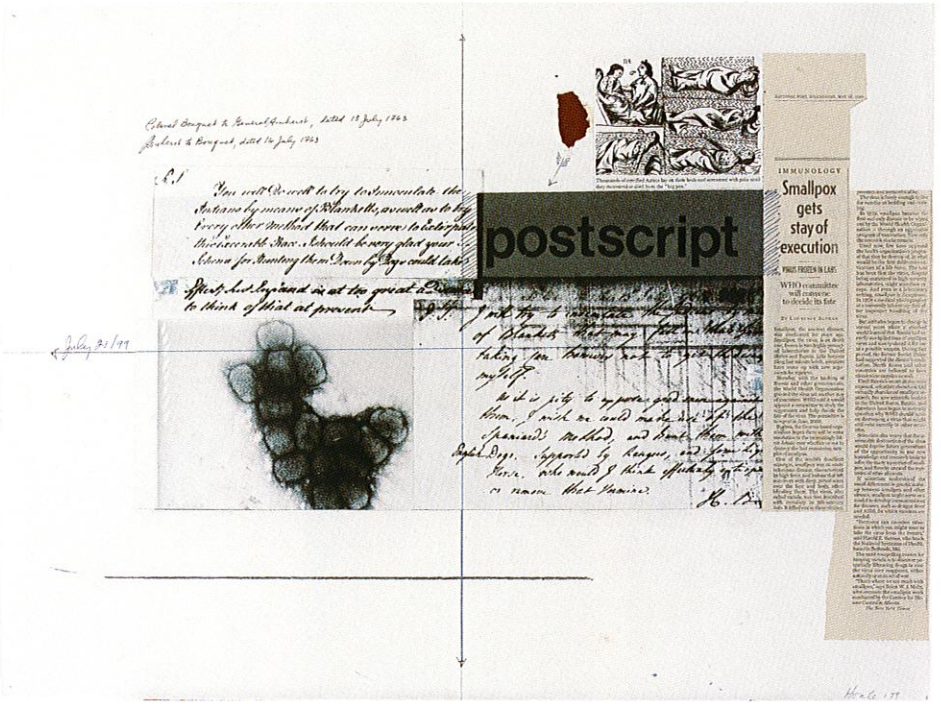


Figure 2: Study for *Postscript* (1999) Cat. 4

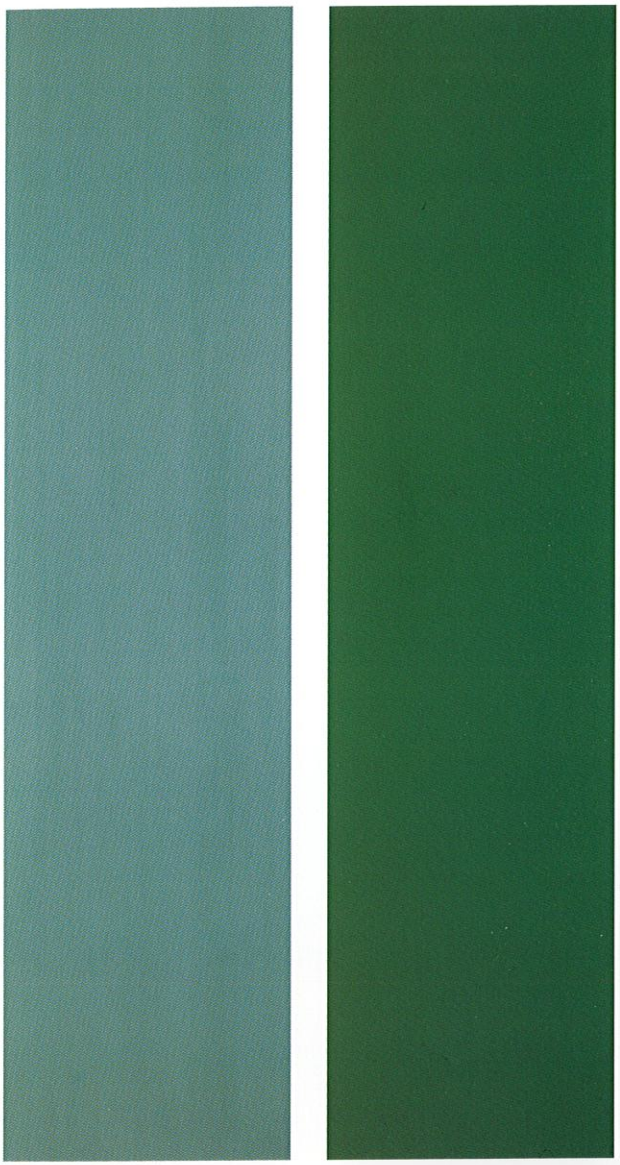


Figure 3: *Palisade* (1999) Cat. 5. Two-panel element.

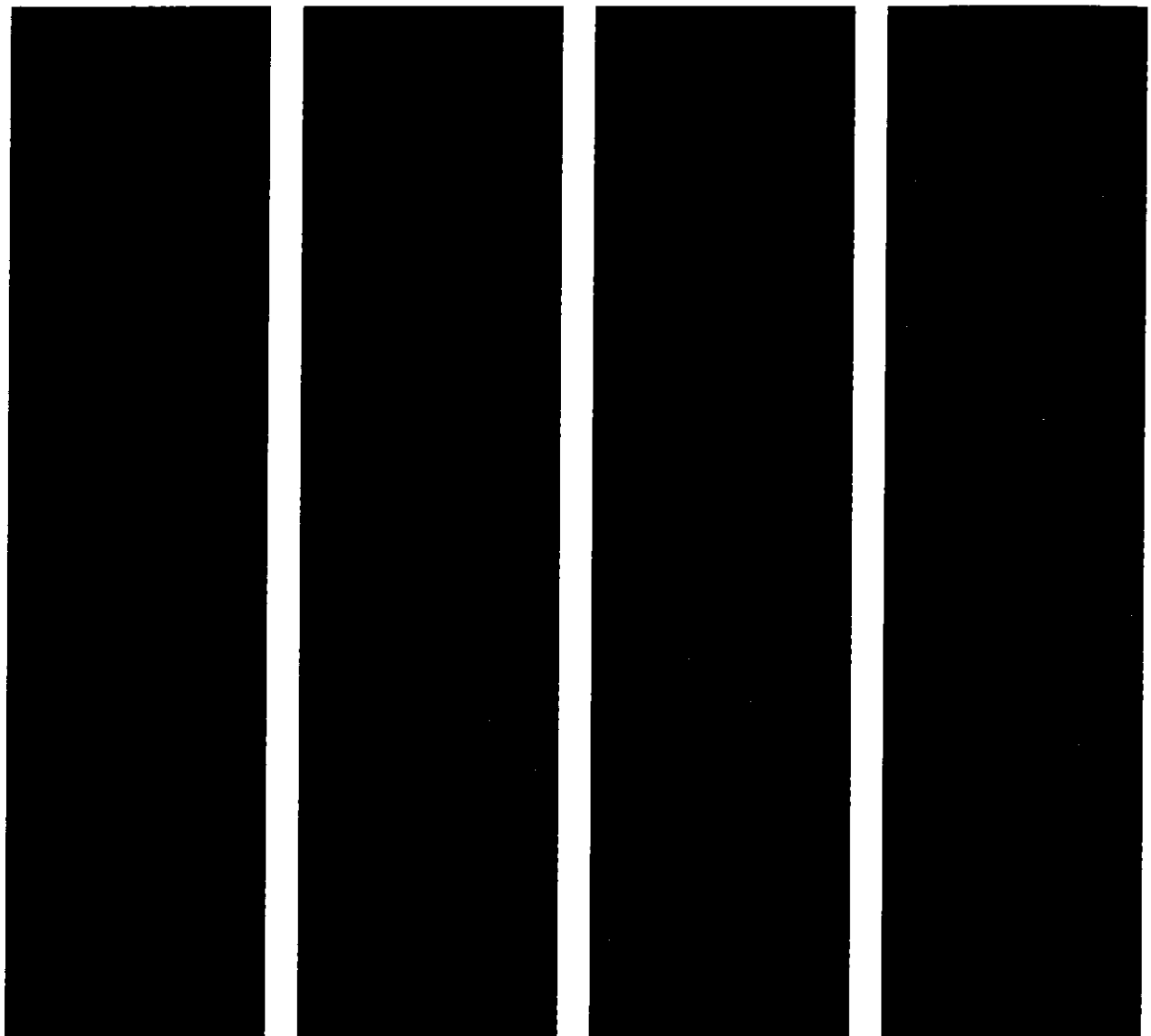
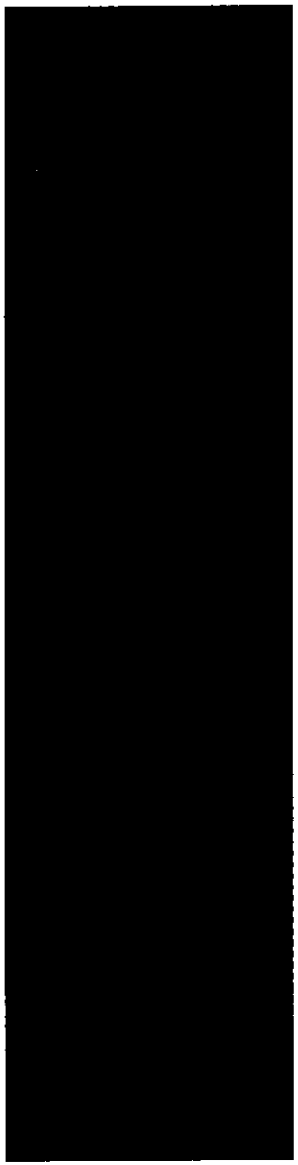


Figure 4: *Palisade* (1999) Cat. 5. Five-panel element.



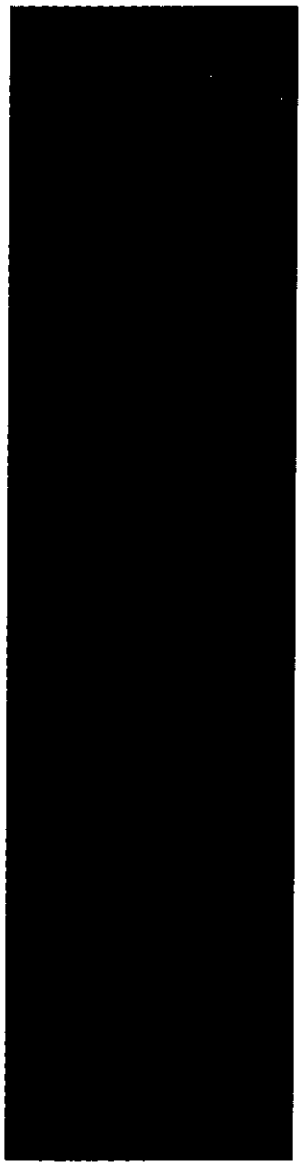


Figure 5: *Palisade* (1999) Cat. 5. Single-panel element.

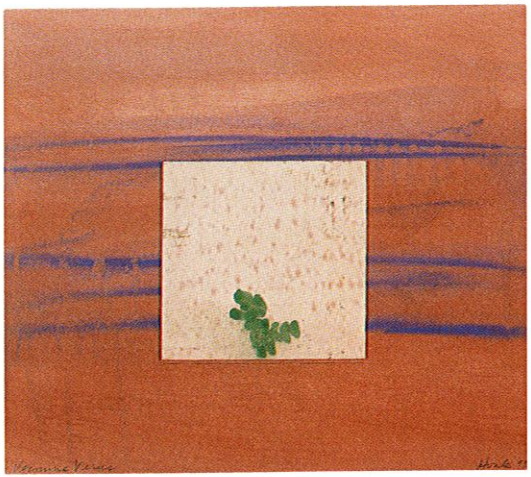


Figure 6: *Vermine Virus* (1999) Cat. 1

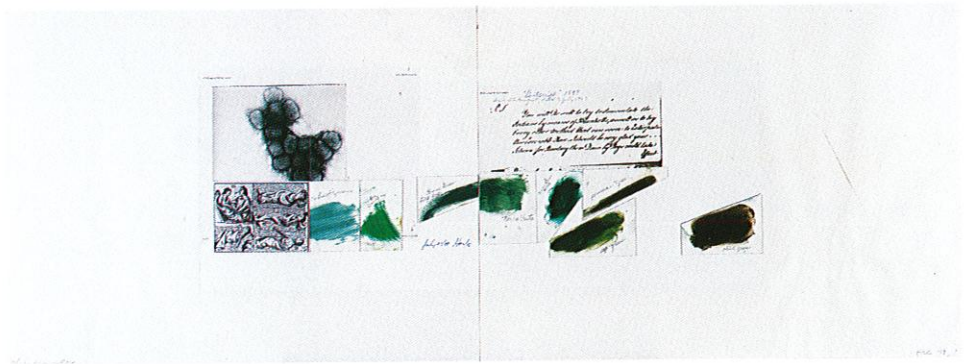


Figure 8: *Postscript* (1999) Cat. 3

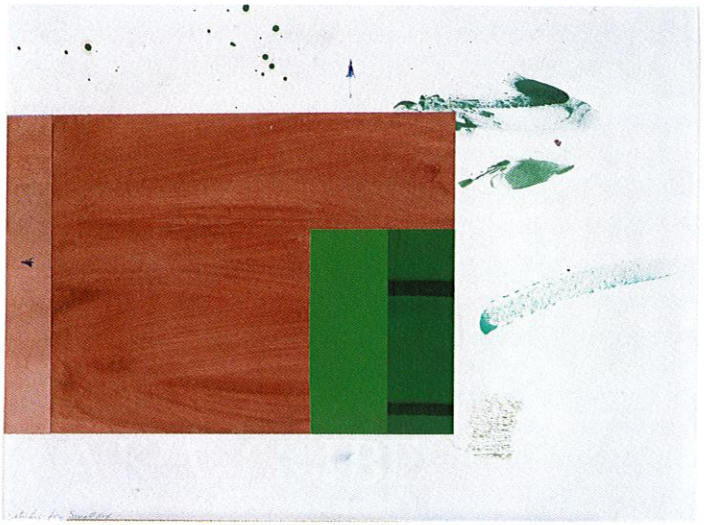


Figure 7: *Study for smallpox* (1999) Cat. 2

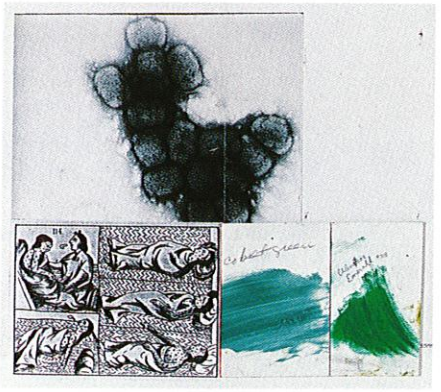


Figure 8: Detail of *Postscript* (1999) opposite

Wacousta

In Canadian fiction, these events are memorialized in Major John Richardson's novel *Wacousta or, The Prophecy; A Tale of the Canadas* (1832), in which at the beginning, he sets the scene for the siege of Detroit:

Painful and harassing as were the precautions it was found necessary to adopt on these occasions, and little desirous as were the garrison to mingle with the natives on such terms, still the plan was pursued by the Governor from the policy already named: nay, it was absolutely essential to the future interests of England that the Indians should be won over by acts of confidence and kindness; and so little disposition had hitherto been manifested by the English to conciliate, that every thing was to be apprehended from the untameable rancour with which these people were but too well disposed to repay a neglect at once galling to their prides and injurious to their interests.

Such, for a term of many months, had been the trying and painful duty that had devolved on the governor of Detroit; when, in the summer of 1763, the whole of the western tribes of Indians, as if actuated by one common impulse, suddenly threw off the mask, and commenced a series of the most savage trespasses upon the English settlers in the vicinity of several garrisons, who were cut off in detail, without mercy, and without reference to age or sex. On the first alarm the weak bodies of troops, as a last measure of security, shut themselves up in their respective forts, where they were as incapable of rendering assistance to others as of receiving it themselves. In this emergency the prudence and forethought of the governor of Detroit were eminently conspicuous; for, having long foreseen the possibility of such a crisis, he had caused a plentiful supply of all that was necessary to the subsistence and defence of the garrison to be provided at an earlier period, so that, if foiled in their attempts at strategem, there was little chance that the Indians would speedily reduce them by famine.[30]

After bringing his forces inside the fort ostensibly to talk peace with Major Gladwin, Pontiac held up "a belt of wampum, white on one side and reputedly green on the other", and displaying the white side, Pontiac spoke at length. But "according to two contemporaries, the turning of this belt from the white to the green was the signal for the massacre...Pontiac gave no sign",[31] faced as he was with an English garrison prepared to defend itself.

Needless to say, Amherst, stationed in New York, was not pleased with the murder and mayhem in the territory that he had believed to be under the control of his sparsely manned forts: in the captured forts, the British presence ranged from 12 to 28 enlisted men and officers, and they were all killed or taken captive.

V. Postcripts

postcript, noun, a paragraph or phrase etc. added to a letter that has already been signed by the writer.

It is in this context that Amherst corresponded with his commanders in the field, specifically with Colonel Henry Bouquet and Captain Ecuyer. In postscripts to the correspondence Amherst exchanged comments about the potential use of smallpox infected blankets to spread the disease among the Indian groups causing so much disturbance.[32] It is this series of letters, particularly the postscripts, that inspired the ***Palisade*** project just at the time when the World Heath Organization (WHO) was entering into the discussion regarding the destruction of the last live stocks of smallpox virus held in Atlanta (the Centers for Disease Control) and in Koltsovo, Novosibirsk Region (Russian State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology). WHO had in mid-century mounted a massive programme of vaccination in many of the world's most poverty stricken and populous countries to eradicate smallpox, and it met with success as mentioned above. It is ironic that the same organization is now trying to determine whether these remaining sources of live virus should be destroyed or preserved. The only

justification that seems to be able to be mounted to follow the latter course of action is to be able to deter bio-terrorist attacks. Houle's linkage of this contemporary dilemma with the historic actions of the British military in the eighteenth century serves to highlight the revulsion and fear we experience at the prospect of the deliberate release of any deadly virus as an act of war:

> The deliberate reintroduction of smallpox into the population would be an international crime of unprecedented proportions. A spreading, highly lethal epidemic in an essentially unprotected population, with limited supplies of vaccine, no therapeutic drugs, and with shortages of hospital beds suitable for patient isolation is an ominous specter.[33]

Houle's interpretation of the historical event documented in the Amherst correspondence is necessarily shaped by his own heritage as a First Nations person, a different 'history,' but one which carries an enormous moral and ethical potential. As almost all historians agree, the intentions of Amherst and his field commanders were unambiguous:

> The records for about this time contain more than one specific incident showing the introduction of smallpox among the Indians by a voluntary act of the whites. Such acts were possibly not all malicious. ... but another incident occurred in the same year (1763) *from which the conclusion of malice aforethought and deadly intent seem unescapable.* During an Indian uprising when attempts were being made to destroy the British garrison and the posts west of the Allegheny Mountains, Sir Jeffrey Amherst, commander-in-chief of the British forces, harassed by the knowledge of his limited resources and by the extent and seriousness of the revolt, wrote in a postscript of a letter to Bouquet the suggestion that smallpox be sent among the disaffected tribes. Bouquet replied, also in a postscript, 'I will try to inoculate the ... with some blankets that may fall into their hands, and take care not to get the disease myself.' This could

> easily have been done since smallpox had broken out in Fort Pitt, where Bouquet was stationed. To Bouquet's postscript Amherst replied, 'You will do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets as well as to try every other method that can serve to extirpate this exorable race.' On June 24, Captain Ecuyer, of the Royal Americans, noted in his journal: 'Out of our regard for them [i.e., two Indian chiefs] we gave them two blankets and a handkerchief out of the smallpox hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect.' A few months later the smallpox raged among the tribes of the Ohio...[34]

Nevertheless, it is all too evident from the account from which the above was taken, that for two centuries, smallpox epidemics had cycled throughout the Americas repeatedly without intentional infection by foes, but still with tragic consequences.

VI. Smallpox present

World Health Assembly, noun, representatives of the entire membership of the World Health Organization, who govern this specialized United Nations agency.

The WWW site for the Center for Civilian Biodefense Studies provides access to a memorandum of the meeting of the WHO Variola Research Committee, a committee mandated by the 52nd World Health Assembly through the Director-General to "establish what research, if any, must be carried out to reach global consensus on the timing for the destruction of existing variola virus stocks." The Assembly also "reaffirmed the decision of previous Assemblies that the remaining stocks of variola virus should be destroyed and authorized retention of the virus 'up to not later than 2002 and subject to annual review." The research programme proposed by the committee dealt with obtaining DNA sequence information, the development of novel diagnostic techniques, the need for antiviral drugs, the need for monoclonal antibodies, the need for novel smallpox vaccines, the need for a non-human

primate or other animal model for smallpox infection, and the need for basic research. The committee arrived at consensus on all these points subject to time limitations (complete before 2002): a laudable goal.[35]

On the other hand, there are those who advocate maintaining stocks of the live virus as part of an ethos of deterrence, in the Cold War mode. Articles abound, in 1999 some 200 or more, addressing the notion of smallpox as a biological weapon, either by nation states or by bio-terrorists. Those who engage in this line of argument seem to have learned little from the past, and certainly do not subscribe to the views of D.A. Henderson, who countered their main reasons effectively in January 1999.[36] U.S. President Bill Clinton, however, decided to retain the U.S.-held stocks of smallpox virus.

VII Houle's *History*

'history', noun, the branch of knowledge dealing with past events.

Houle's construction of *history* is ironic. The juxtaposition of the Amherst correspondence with the newspaper accounts recounting some of the discussions surrounding the destruction of the last living stocks of smallpox virus, highlights the powerful ethical and moral potential in Houle's reading of the past. Houle always reads the past in ways that serve the present and open paths to a better future. The irony?[37] European powers were instrumental in the spread of the smallpox virus to the Americas, and the British military, at least in the persons of Amherst and his field commanders Bouquet and Ecuyer, intended to infect the Indians involved in Pontiac's Confederacy.[38] Two centuries later, through the programmes of the WHO, these same European powers, with the assistance the Neo-European powers, carried out a global campaign of vaccination to rid the world of smallpox: the campaign was successful.

Houle's two events, separated by two centuries, relate a *history* in an unconventional way, not in a linear narrative, but in ironic juxtaposition. In *Why Ethics?*, Robert Gibbs' exegesis on Benjamin's critique of 'history' is pertinent here:

> The risk of studying 'history' is that one will not challenge the present, but will interpret it as justified (The world's history as the world's judgment). That challenge to the winners, moreover, is distributable over not only the past, but also the transmission of the past, the winner's stories through time. The task of juxtaposing dialectical images is not merely asymmetric with respect to time, but also bears a unique responsibility for the past...for the past as unjust.[39]

This is the kind of *history* advocated by some critics of conventional 'history'[40] following suggestive insights of authors such as Baudrillard, who advocated alternatives to the familiar conventional linear forms. The notion of a "poetic alternative to the disenchanted confusion, the chaotic profusion of present events"[41] has some definite resonance with Houle's eight green monochrome panels placed deliberately to insist upon their completion as poetic postmodern 'imaginaries.'

Houle's *history* holds much in common with the *petit-narratives* advocated by Lyotard as an antidote to the erasure of particulars in the metanarratives of universal 'history.' The proliferation of local narratives offers the possibility of survival for difference and radical alterity. Conventional 'history', exclusively past-looking, is no longer suitable in our postmodern times. Robert Jenkins extends his polemical argument to the notion of ethics: "its demise coincides with the rise of 'knowledge' of the undecidability of the (moral) decision."[42]

VIII Towards an ethics of responsibility

ethics, noun, a system of moral principles.

If our practice of ethics in the past, one shaped by the hegemony of the individual, is no longer appropriate for the postmodern present, then we need a replacement, perhaps an ethics that gives legitimacy to interdependence as the goal of human development. An attractive alternative is an ethics of responsibility. Robert Gibbs, in *Why Ethics?* offers a semiotic account of an ethics that addresses 'history' and our responsibility for the other, and the other's responsibilities, that is, our social relationship to others: "The question Why? opens up a realm of ethics: an ethics of responsibility, of an ability to respond arising in the exigency to attend to another's questioning."[43] Gibbs characterizes this ethics as asymmetric; that is to say, my responsibility for others differs from the way they are responsible for me. It is this excess that grounds the mutuality of our responsibility for others, because,

> a community, despite its hope or pretension, is never alone. It stands over against other communities, and in judging the others is itself judged. This ethics will place extreme responsibility on each community for its others, discerning ways for the 'we' to be responsible for its 'you.'[44]

The relevance of this idea in a discussion of ***Palisade*** is clear, given the troubling relationship Neo-Europeans have with the indigenous peoples, dispossessed over the past four centuries. We often hear the statement, when it comes to present day reparations for past injustices, that present day Neo-Europeans really have no responsibility for what was perpetrated centuries ago. But an ethics of responsibility,

> extends asymmetrically into the past, too. Here the gap between responsibility and blame accentuates the lack of control in responding. For some things we are to blame, but for much more we are responsible...called to respond for the sake of the future. For if we are responsible for the actions of others in the past, it means primarily that ours are the tasks of remembering and mending the damage wrought in the past.[45]

These are mutual tasks, and that is the message that Robert Houle is sending in ***Palisade***. It is also an admonition to care for the future, to ensure that it is emancipatory—that our mutual responsibilities always be asymmetric and excessive, for the necessary healing, as the authors of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) recognized, rests in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together to achieve balance and harmony.[46]

Michael Bell, December 2000

Endnotes

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, (New York: The New Press, 1997), 24
[2] Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilties*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 365
[3] First installed in Saskatoon under the auspices of TRIBE, and subsequently purchased by the Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Carleton University Art Gallery undertook to exhibit the installation in the interim.
[4] See Curtis J. Collins, *Hochelaga: A Multi-media Installation by Robert Houle*, (Montreal: Articule, 1992).
[5] Michael Bell, *Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories*, (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 1993). The mixed media work central to this installation, the multi-panelled painting/drawing containing a grisaille replica of Benjamin West's *The Death of Wolfe*, is in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, where the most important version of the West painting is located.
[6] Originally installed in the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition, *Beyond History*, (1989), this multi-media installation was re-installed, for a second time, in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, in 1992. It has been re-installed yet again (21 October 2000 -18 March 2001), subsequent to its purchase by the Kingston gallery in 1998 with a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program.
[7] Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto, 1996.
[8] Included in the exhibition *Sovereignty Over Subjectivity*, (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1999), and now in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, North York, Ontario.
[9] The dictionary definitions throughout are derived from *The Random House Dictionary of English Usage*, (unabridged edition), 1974—with one exception: the World Health Assembly.
[10] The artist conceived the work in Imperial measure. With a modest reduction in size, the panels echo the proportions of the body. The repetitive application of

colour, contributing to intense depth, also gives each canvas a strong presence of the body.

[11] See below and note 29.

[12] *National Post*, 26 May, 1999, (reprint of a column from the *New York Times*).

[13] The relevant sections are excerpted in *Jeffrey Amherst and Smallpox Blankets*, a site on the World Wide Web, (http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/amherst/lord_jeff.html: 2000.10.11. Houle obtained his images of the manuscripts from this site.

[14] See Section VIII, 128 Smallpox *The Cambridge History of World Diseases* ed. Kenneth F. Kiple, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), for a clear and succinct overview by Alfred W. Crosby.

[15] William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, (Toronto: Doubleday Anchor Books [1976] 1998), 69.

[16] Ibid, 24.

[17] Robert Boyde, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline Among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 293. On the efficacy of 'fomites' there is dispute. Alfred W. Crosby comments: "This is as good a place as any to deal with the old legend of intentional European bacteriological warfare. The colonists certainly would have liked to wage such a war and did talk about giving infected blankets and such to the indigenes, and they may even have done so a few times, but by and large the legend is just that, a legend. Before the development of modern bacteriology at the end of the nineteenth century, diseases did not come in ampules, and there were no refrigerators in which to store the ampules. Disease was, in practical terms, people who were sick—an awkward weapon to aim at anyone. As for infected blankets, they might or might not work. Furthermore, and most important, the intentionally transmitted disease might swing back on the white population. As whites lived longer and longer in the colonies, more and more of them were born there and did *not* go through the full gauntlet of Old World childhood diseases. These people were dedicated to quarantining smallpox, not to spreading it." Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900 - 1900*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 345, note 38. His position is not unchallenged. See Ann F. Ramenofsky, *Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 148.

[18] F. Fenner, ed., *Smallpox and its Eradication*, (WHO: Geneva, 1988), which relies on John J. Heagerty, *Four Centuries of Medical History in Canada*, (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1928 and E. Wagner Stearn and Allen E. Stearn, *The Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of the American Indian*, (Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc. Publishers, 1945).

[19] Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 201. Stearn and Stearn give a moving example: "Among the tribes particularly hard hit at this time was the Gros Ventres. In 1781 a war party of Kenistenos, Assiniboin and Ojibways proceeded from the great Kenisteno village on the 'Dead' River near its outlet into the Red River of the north, and moved westward to the Missouri River until they came to the village of

Gros Ventres, which they attacked. Resistance made to their attack was very feeble, so that they soon rushed forward to secure their scalps. They found the lodges of the villages filled with dead, and the stench so terrible that they quickly retreated, carrying the scalps of those they had killed. One exceptionally large scalp they fixed to a stick, and, on their journey homeward, this stick was planted erect in the ground at night while they camped. On five successive mornings they found the scalp leaning toward the west, and this phenomenon aroused their superstitious fear, so that, after one of their party became sick and died, they fled precipitately homeward. However, every day some sickened and died, so that, out of the considerable number of warriors who had started on the journey, only four survived to return to their village on the Dead River. Smallpox soon depopulated the village. Because of the great mortality, several thousand having died there, the river was named Ne-bo, or Dead River. The Ojibways, in their attempt to flee from the stricken village, spread the scourge to Rainy Lake. This village in turn lost most of its inhabitants. From here the epidemic spread by way of Pigeon River to Lake Superior at Grand Portage, and proceeded up the lake to Fond du Lac, and, after ravaging it, attacked the 'Pillager' band of the Ojibways, who carried it to Sandy Lake. At this point, after causing some deaths, the epidemic stopped. Between fifteen hundred and two thousand Ojibways died from smallpox during this epidemic." E. Wagner Stearn and Allen E. Stearn, *The Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of the American Indian*, 48.

[20] See George E. Sioui, *For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 3.

[21] Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*, 207. See the discussions regarding demography of Aboriginal populations in *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol.1 'Looking Back, Looking Forward*, (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1996), 13 ff.

[22] George E. Sioui, *For an Amerindian Autohistory*, 4.

[23] Ibid, 4.

[24] The *infected blanket* is echoed in Eric Robinson and Henry Bird Quinney, *The Infested Blanket*, (Winnipeg: Queenston House Publishing Co. Ltd, 1985), xx-xxi: "When Canada brought its Constitution 'home' from London in 1982, it knowingly backed out of the Treaty agreements which were solemnly signed between the First Nations and the British Crown...The first colonialists were sometimes not aware that the blankets they distributed to the Indians were festering with disease, and so too now, many Canadians think that they are doing Indians a big favour by weaving Indians into the fabric of Canada's Constitution and Confederation. Yet to do so and the way it is set-out and determined by Non-Indians, is to kill off the Sovereignty of Indian Nationhood....Unfortunately, too many Indian People and leaders are craving so desperately for political recognition of any type from Canada, that they are willing to accept the deluding warmth of the Constitutional blanket. Just as Indians before did not know that the blankets needed for warmth were disease ridden, so, also today many do not realize the killing power of the Constitution. Yet the result is the same as before—genocide."

[25] "After the surrender of Canada in 1760, fighting ceased in North America, although the war continued elsewhere in the world and French forces in the west remained ready to resume hostilities if given the opportunity. In military calculatons the western garrisons of the French represented a threat to security that Amherst with habitual thoroughness determined to eliminate by systematically replacing French troops with British." Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune*, 439.
[26] Sir William Johnson was the consummate negotiator with the Indians, although Amherst would ignore his recommendations. The denial of presents—especially ammunition so that they could hunt to feed themselves—condemned them to starvation. See Olive P. Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 181.
[27] Howard H. Peckham, *Pontiac and the Indian Uprising*, 119-20. See also Olive P. Dickason, *Canada's First Nations*, 179 ff.
[28] See Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 117.
[29] The clearest and most succinct presentation of this Indian Defensive War, (1763-1764), occurs in R. Cole Harris, ed., and Geoffrey J. Matthews, cartographer, *Historical Atlas of Canada*, volume 1, *From the Beginning to 1800*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), plate 44, (W. J. Eccles, M. N. McConnell, and Susan L. Laskin).
[30] John Richardson, *Wacousta or, The Prophecy; A Tale of the Canadas*, ed. Douglas Cronk, (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987), 18-19.
[31] Howard H. Peckham, *Pontiac and the Indian Uprising*, 131-32.
[32] The Director of the Center for Civilian Biodefense Studies, D.A. Henderson, wrote in January 1999: "Smallpox was probably first used as a biological weapon during the French and Indian Wars, (1754-67), by British forces in North America...the potential threat of smallpox as a bioweapon greatly diminished after Jenner's discovery of vaccination in 1796...in fact, the possible use of smallpox as a biological weapon received almost no attention until the last few years." *Risk of a Deliberate Release of Smallpox Virus; Its Impact on Virus Destruction*: http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org/pages/news/meeting.html, (2000.10.11). Henderson led the WHO programme to eradicate the smallpox virus.
[33] D.A. Henderson, *Risk of a Deliberate Release on Smallpox Virus*, n.p.
[34] E. Wagner Stearn and Allen E. Stearn, *The Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of the American Indian*, 45, (my emphasis). There is still discussion about this event and the British intention. See the newsgroup archive posted at http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~west/threads/disc-smallpox.html.
[35] D.A. Henderson, Unofficial memo for the record, Meeting of the WHO Variola Research Committee, 6-9 December 1999: http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org/pages/news/ meeting.html, (2000.10.11).
[36] D.A. Henderson, *Risk of a Deliberate Release of Smallpox Virus*, n.p.

[37] For an engaging and wide-ranging discussion of irony in contemporary culture, see Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (Routledge: London, 1994). Chapters 1, 4, and 7 are particularly relevant.
[38] Wars were notorious for spreading disease, since there was often rapid movement of potentially infected individuals over large distances.
[39] Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?*, 365.
[40] See Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 2000).
[41] Jean Baudrillard quoted in Jenkins, *Why History?*, 69.
[42] Keith Jenkins, *Why History?*, 89.
[43] Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?*, 3.
[44] Ibid, 4.
[45] Ibid, 4.
[45] *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol. 3, Gathering Strength*, (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1996), 109.

Figure 10: Installation view of **Palisade**.

The Works

This installation was purchased in 1999 by the Mackenzie Art Gallery (Regina) with the assistance of the Canada Council Art Acquisition Programme.

All measurements are in centimetres, height preceding width.

l.l. lower left; l.r. lower right; u.l. upper left; u.r. upper right; u.c. upper centre; l.c. lower centre.

1. ***Vermine Virus*** (1999)
   acrylic, graphite, collaged mat board
   signed and dated in pencil l.r., *Houle '99*
   titled in pencil l.l. *Vermine Virus*
   27.6 x 31.1

2. ***Study for smallpox*** (1999)
   acrylic, collage, white vinyl letters, graphite, ballpoint ink
   inscribed l.l. in pencil *study for Smallpox*
   45.7 x 61

3. ***Postscript*** (1999)
   acrylic, graphite, ballpoint ink, computer printout from WWW site, photocopy, mat board
   titled u.c. in ballpoint "*Postscript*" *1999*
   inscribed u.c. in ink *Amherst to Bouquet, dated 16 July 1763*
   Each piece of collaged matte board carries a colour sample and is inscribed with the names of the respective colours used in the panels: *cobalt green, Winsor Emerald #708, Chrome Green Deep Hue, Terre Verte, Winsor green #720, prussian green, sap green, olive green.*
   signed and dated in blue ink l.c. *July 21/99 Houle*
   45.7 x 121.9

4. ***Postscript*** (study)
   acrylic and ballpoint ink, computer print out from WWW site, *National Post* article (26 May, 1999), black vinyl letters
   titled u.l. in ink *Colonel Bouquet to General Amherst, dated 13 July 1763/Amherst to Bouquet, dated 16 July 1763*
   dated in ink, left c., July 21/99
   signed in graphite, l.r. *Houle '99*
   45.7 x 61

5. ***Palisade*** (1999)
   eight units
   acrylic on canvas (Cobalt green, Winsor Emerald #708, Chrome Green Deep Hue, Terre Verte, Winsor Green #720, Prussian Green, Sap Green, Olive Green)
   61 x 244

6. ***Postscript*** (1999)
   digital photographic print (originally used for outdoor billboards in Saskatoon)
   121.9 x 163.2

Robert Houle

Education

1975 McGill University, Montreal, Quebec
Bachelor of Education (Art Education)
1972 University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba
Bachelor of Arts (Art History)

Solo Exhibitions

2000 Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon
2000 Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto
1999 Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto
1999 AKA Gallery, Saskatoon
1999 Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
1998 360, The CN Tower, Toronto
1996 Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto
1994 Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto
1993 The Kennedy Gallery, North Bay
1993 Carleton University Art Gallery, Carleton University, Ottawa
1993 Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
1992 YYZ, Toronto
1992 Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa
1992 Articule, Montreal
1992 Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston
1991 Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff
1991 Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa
1991 Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay
1991 Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina
1991 Hood College, Frederick, Maryland
1991 Glenbow - Alberta Institute, Calgary
1991 Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull
1990 Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
1990 Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa
1990 Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay

Selected Group Exhibitions

1999 *Still Life*, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto
1999 *Art in 2 Worlds: The Native American Fine Art Invitational 1983-1997*, Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
1997 *Ghostwriter III*, Mercer Union, Toronto
1997 *Transitions: Contemporary Indian and Inuit Art*, Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris, France
1996 *Prairietheism: Internalizing the Prairie Landscape*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
1996 *Real Fictions: Four Canadian Artists*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
1996 *Re/Grouping: A Living Legacy*, McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg
1995 *Gallery Artists/Invitational*, Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto
1995 *Notions of Conflict*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands
1995 *Displaced Histories*, Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa
1994 *Hidden Treasures*, McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, touring nationally through 1996
1994 *On Classicism*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
1994 *Future Traditions*, North York Performing Arts Centre Art Gallery, North York
1993 *Trajectories of Meaning*, Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto
1992 *Rethinking History*, Mercer Union, Toronto
1992 *Travelling Theory*, Jordan National Gallery, Amman, Jordan
1991 *An(Other) Voice*, Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, Ohio

1991 *Submuloc Show*, Evergreen State College, Olympia, Washington (circulating exhibition)
1990 *Numbers*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton
1990 *Contemporary Rituals*, White Water Gallery, North Bay, (circulating)
1990 *Why do you call us Indians?*, Gettysburg College Art Gallery, Gettsyburg, Pennsylvania (circulating).

Visiting Artist
1991 Hood College, Frederick, Maryland, *Between two Worlds*
1990 Gettysburg College Art Gallery, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, *Why do you call us Indians?*
1987 The Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona, *Recent Generations: A Forum on the Birth of Contemporary Native Art*
1985 De Meervaart, Amsterdam, Netherlands, *Challenges in Contemporary Native Art in Canada*
1983 The Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona, *Innovations in Native American Painting*
1983 Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, *Symposium on Contemporary Native American Art*

Artist in Residence
1997 The Tamarind Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico
1989 The McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg
1989 The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg

Awards
1993 Janet Braide Memorial Award, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston

Public Collections
Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston
Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton
Art Gallery of Kelowna, Kelowna
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby
Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa
Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull
Carleton University, Ottawa
External Affairs Canada, Ottawa
Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Ottawa and Toronto
Kelowna Art Gallery, Kelowna
Laurentian University Museum and Arts Centre, Sudbury
McGill University, Montreal
McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg
Mendel Gallery, Saskatoon
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Nickle Art Gallery, Calgary
North York Performing Arts Centre Art Gallery, North York
Owens Art Gallery, Sackville
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto
Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California
Tom Thomson Gallery, Owen Sound
Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay
Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
University of New Mexico Art Gallery, Albuquerque, New Mexico
Whitby Station Art Gallery, Whitby
Windsor Art Gallery, Windsor
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford

Private Collections
Davies, Ward, Beck, Toronto
Deutsche Bank, Toronto
Ernst and Young Inc., Toronto
Genest Murray DesBrisay Lamek, Toronto
Gray Developments Ltd., Toronto
Guardian Capital Group, Toronto
Imperial Oil Limited, Toronto
McCarthy, Tétreault, Toronto
Northern Telecom, Toronto
Ontario Municipal Employee Retirement Savings, Toronto
Osler Hoskins & Harcourt, Ottawa and Toronto
Royal Bank, Toronto
Tridel Corporation, Toronto

Figure 11: Artist's talk, 14 November, 2000, Carleton University.