

Transformation: The Art of Arthur Shilling

School Education Program



Engaging students visiting the exhibition *Arthur Shilling: The Final Works* through discussions, storytelling and art-making.

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1. ONTARIO MINISTRY OF EDUCATION CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching and learning that places student's questions, ideas and observations at the centre of the learning experience.
—Ontario Ministry of Education Capacity Building Series, Inquiry-Based Learning

Visual Arts:

Grades 1 to 8:

D1 Creating & Presenting

D2 Reflecting Responding & Analysing

Social Studies:

Grades 1 to 6: Heritage and Identity

Grade 7: Conflict and Challenges

Grade 8: Creating Canada, Canada: A Changing Society

High School:

Grades 9 to 12 Arts

Understanding Culture

Consideration of Cultural Context

Making Connections and Critical Analysis

Grades 9 to 12 Social Sciences and Humanities

Critical Thinking and Critical Literacy

2. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

This guide outlines programs aimed at two age groups:

- **Primary** and **Junior**
- **Intermediate** and **Senior**

Each program consists of a gallery tour and studio activity and is designed to take a total of two hours (roughly 55 minutes in each space). The programs are interactive and hands-on.

The gallery tour is designed to be flexible, understanding that each installation will be different. The **In the Exhibition** section includes suggested discussion questions, information on key works and an interactive gallery activity. **In the Studio** describes the studio activity and includes materials lists and discussion questions.

3. EXHIBITION TOUR and ACTIVITY (55 minutes total)

Exhibition Tour (25 - 30 minutes)

*** The tour is not written to specific age ranges. Tailor the discussion as needed ***

This exhibition is of artwork by Arthur Shilling. He was born on April 19, 1941 on the Chippewas of Rama First Nation **Reserve**.

Rama is located in Southern Ontario, near Orillia. It is a vibrant **Anishinaabe** community with around 1,500 members, about half live on the reserve. The people take great pride in their community – it has its own schools, government offices, and businesses.

Reserve

Defined by the Indian Act as a tract of land, the legal title to which is vested in Her Majesty, that has been set apart by Her Majesty for the use and benefit of a band. There are over 600 Reserves in Canada.

Anishinaabe

The first Original Peoples, the names used by the Ojibwe (Ojibway), Odawa, and Algonquin Peoples to refer to themselves. The *Anishnaabe* Nation's territories are in present day Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. There are hundreds of distinct Indigenous Nations across Canada.

Arthur Shilling, artist

- Shilling loved to draw people, animals, and the things around him. Drawing allowed him to work out ideas and warm up before painting
- Shilling studied at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto (now OCAD-U)
- His work was first exhibited in Ottawa in 1967 at age 26.
- In 1976, Shilling had major surgery to repair his heart which was damaged during a childhood illness of rheumatic fever.
- After he recovered his paintings changed – they became bolder and stronger – full of keyed-up colour, strong figures, and bold backgrounds that often contained traditional beings from his **Anishinaabe** background.

The exhibition focuses on Shilling's last ten years (1976 – 86). During this incredibly creative time, his paintings shifted from impressionistic to expressionistic. He drew from the tradition of **expressionism** but always painted his models as beautiful, strong, and vibrant, minimizing the distortion associated with the style.

Point out an early portrait and a later portrait.

Self-Portrait (1976) or *Millie (1976)* and any of the portraits from the *Ojibway Dream* series work well.

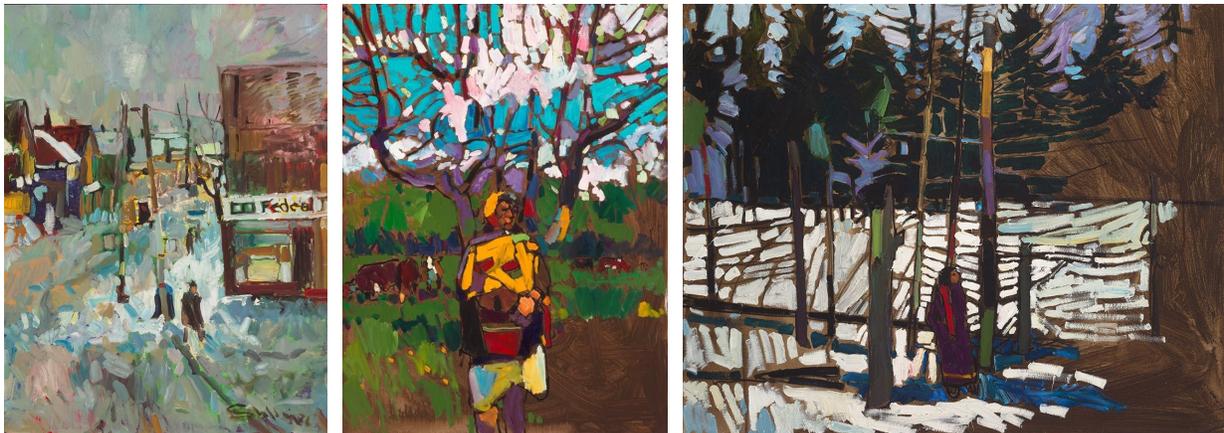


1. How are the paintings different?
2. What is in the background? What does this say about the people in the paintings?
3. Why are these later works called “expressionist”?
4. Look at the paint - have his brushstrokes changed?
5. Why do you think Arthur Shilling changed his style of painting in this way? What does his new style tell us?
6. How does Shilling’s use of colour affect the feeling of the work?

Expressionism reveals the inner world of the artist as opposed to the external world. The artist’s vision and their unique experiences become of prime importance in their artwork. Feelings and ideas are communicated as part of the subject matter.

Impasto is a technique of applying paint thickly so that it builds up texture on the surface.

Stop to look at the landscapes



1. Can anyone think of some famous Canadian landscape painters? (The Group of Seven)
2. What is different about these? (There are people in the landscape)

It is really important that Shilling has included his community members in these paintings. The landscapes that the Group of Seven painted were often populated by First Nations communities

or the site of logging work. Paintings that included First Nations settlements were not as popular. People and galleries did not want to buy them. People liked the idea that the lands of Canada were wild and untouched. So, First Nations people were often excluded from these paintings and unfairly erased from the Canadian imagination, shaping our ideas about wilderness.

As a child, Shilling was placed in a **residential school**. Run by the federal government in partnership with Christian churches, these schools were part of a colonial agenda founded on the assumption that “aboriginal culture was unable to adapt to a rapidly modernizing society.” (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/a-history-of-residential-schools-in-canada-1.702280>). First Nations children were separated from their families, forced to speak only English or French, and traditional cultural practices were forbidden. Many experienced physical and emotional abuse. Communities are still dealing with the trauma of the residential school system today. The last residential school closed in 1996. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established in 2008, and released their Final Report in December, 2015. A National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation has been established in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

“The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has a mandate to learn the truth about what happened in the residential schools and to inform all Canadians about what happened in the schools.”

<http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>

Have the students walk around the exhibition looking at the artworks before gathering in front of *The Beauty of Our People*.



The Beauty of Our People (1985–1986)

Arthur Shilling painted children from his community in this work. It took him about four months to complete. The painting is an interpretation of the past and future of the *Anishinaabe* Nation. The circles represent tradition. In the first panels, the children are happy and alert, the circles are strong. Towards the right, the faces look away from the circle and the children begin to fall asleep. The circles get smaller. Traditions are important; they provide guidance and knowledge about how to live properly and understand our place in the world and with each other. In the last panel some start to awaken, a circle is being drawn.

1. The final panel is deliberately left unfinished. Why?

This is one of the last paintings Shilling worked on. Curator William Kingfisher contends that the last panel was left deliberately unfinished. Others believe that he was not able to finish it.

2. What kind of a story does it tell with the 'unfinished' panel?
3. Do you think the work is complete?

Exhibition Activity (25 - 30 minutes)



Primary and Junior: Masks and Transformation

You may have already noticed that in some of the paintings Arthur Shilling painted a number of “beings” and masks and placed them throughout the painting. Can you see some?

“I like to think of these as Arthur’s helpers. By putting them in the paintings he makes reference to the traditional stories and the different characters that are in them. They provided Shilling with comfort and they are a source of power and knowledge.”

-William Kingfisher, Curator

Some of the figures are masks. In theater, masks help us change into someone or something else.

Change and transformation is an important theme in traditional Anishinaabe stories – humans transform into animals, animals transform into humans, humans transform into plants. The ability to transform in these stories is a hallmark of having power.

The Nanabush stories have examples of the ability to change form. One is included in the **Follow Up Activities** section. In it, Nanabush transforms into a dead tree stump to fool some snake serpents who were angry and jealous of his new friendship with a wolf. The snake serpents notice the new tree stump and wrap themselves around it, squeezing Nanabush. Nanabush nearly lets out a yelp but just in time, the snake serpents give up and declare “This is not Nanabush” before moving on to nap in the sun.

***** Teachers will be given the story as a part of the Follow Up Activity *****

Organize the students into small groups. Pass out worksheets and pencils.

They will have 15 minutes to complete the worksheet. If time allows, ask groups to share their findings.

***** Worksheet is included in Appendix A *****

Wrap up discussion:

Throughout this tour we saw lots of examples of change: Shilling’s style changed, the mural shows change and masks are symbols of the ability to change. What is powerful about being able to change?

Invite students to share their thoughts on how they can use ideas of transformation in their own lives.

Intermediate and **Senior**: Portraits, Self-Portraits, and Selfies

Shilling painted many portraits and self-portraits. Remember that Shilling was painting at a time when aboriginal people in Canada were working to gain control of self-representation.

Aboriginal people wanted to have ownership of how they were represented. They were often represented as living in the past and not as part of the contemporary world. Artists, writers, teachers, political leaders, and many others have worked very hard to change that perception.

Art History Connection: Edward S. Curtis

One very influential photographer who created images of aboriginal people that presented them as only living in the past is Edward S. Curtis. He was working in the early 20th century when many people thought of native people as vanishing rather than surviving and changing. He published a 20 volume work called *The North American Indian*. His portrait photographs were staged. Any indications of modernity were removed (eg. watches, clocks, automobiles) and the works were produced in sepia tones. Photographs were believed to show the truth. Curtis' work perpetuated many negative stereotypes that are still prominent today:

- Native people are from the past
- Native culture is static, it doesn't change
- Real native people are vanishing

*It may be a good idea to print an example or two of Curtis' work to show the students.

Consider the words of Gail Tremblay: "When Native children are taught that they are not equal, that their cultures are incapable of surviving in a modern world, they suffer from the pain that has haunted their parent's lives, that haunts their own lives. For an Indigenous person, choosing not to vanish, not to feel inferior, not to hate oneself, becomes an intensely political act. A Native photographer [or painter] coming to image making in this climate must ask, 'What will I take pictures of, who shall I take pictures for, what will my images communicate to the world'"

"Constructing Images, Constructing Reality: American Indian Photography and Representation," from *Views*, 1993.

Discussion:

How do the people in Shilling's work look?

Describe them. It is important that Shilling painted the *Anishinaabe* people as beautiful, strong, and present.

Encourage the students to work in small groups and use their phones as they answer questions on the **Intermediate** or **Senior** worksheet.

***** Worksheets are included in Appendix A *****

Bring the students back together for a wrap up discussion. Have them share their thoughts.

4. **IN THE STUDIO (55 minutes)**

Primary and Junior: Mask Activity
(can also be done with **Intermediate Students**)

This is a two-part activity. The students make artwork in the studio and turn them into masks back in their classroom. These masks can then be used to act out Nanabush stories as described in the follow up activity. Links and citations of the stories are in the **APPENDIX B: Follow Up Activities**, Primary and Junior section.



Preparing for the Studio Activity:

It is necessary to prepare stencils for this activity in advance. **Appendix B** contains patterns for making stencil pieces that also act as guides for assembling each of the characters. It is recommended that you prepare stencil pieces on firm board, colour code and label each to make sure patterns do not get mixed up. We found that one of each pattern was sufficient. Each worktable should have one or two patterns for the students to choose from and share.



Suggested remarks for introducing the activity:

Masks are tools of transformation which was an important concept for Shilling and is an important theme in traditional Anishinaabe stories and culture.

When you look closely at Shilling's paintings, you can see beings and masks. Today, we are going to make masks of some of the characters from the Nanabush stories. Nanabush is a well known Anishinaabe character who is at the centre of many entertaining stories. Nanabush's mother was Anishinaabe-kwe and his father was a spirit. He was careful to learn from animals and was able to

transform and gain amazing abilities. Nanabush had both virtuous and flawed characteristics that got him into many humourous situations.

Primary Students

Materials

- Selection of coloured papers (try to find coloured paper that matches Shilling's palette)
- Stiff paper board (18" x 18"), 1 per student

- Strips of light cardboard (1" x 16") to make headband, 2 per student
- Black Tempera paint
- large paint brushes
- scissors
- water bowls
- glue
- staples, or tape to attach the headband

Directions

Begin by choosing a pattern from the table. Trace the stencil pieces onto brightly coloured construction paper. Cut out the shapes and follow the guide to assemble them onto bristol board and secure them with glue. Use black tempera paint to trace around the individual shapes to complete the work.

Junior Students

Materials

- Stiff paper (watercolour paper, bristol board) suitable for painting, about 14" x 14" per student
- Strips of light cardboard 1" x 16", to make headband, 2 per student
- Quality acrylic paints, paintbrushes
- scissors
- water bowls
- masking tape or staples for attaching the bands



Directions

Begin by choosing a pattern from the table. Using the guide, assemble the stencil pieces onto the paper provided and trace each one carefully. Paint bright colours with acrylic paints inspired by Shilling's artwork inside each shape. Complete the work by painting lines around the shapes in black tempera.

Primary and Junior

Make it into a mask!

Back in the classroom all levels will work in pairs to measure, mark and cut eyeholes for their masks. Using the strips of cardboard students will measure and construct the headband. Primary and Junior students may require assistance.

Intermediate and Senior: Portrait Activity

Discussion Questions

- What is Expressionism?
- How is Shilling using colour and brushstroke to evoke emotion?
- How has portraiture changed over the years?

Portrait Materials:

- Paper
- Illustration boards (~18" x 24")
- Charcoal or black conte sticks
- Black permanent markers
- Paint brushes – medium and thick
- Good quality acrylic paints in rich colours inspired by Shilling's work
- Rags, palettes, water bowls

Organize the students into pairs sitting opposite to each other.



Warm up:

Taking turns drawing and modeling, each student will complete two timed portraits.

- 30 second gestural drawing, paper and charcoal
- 1 minute contour drawing, paper and permanent marker



Discuss:

- How did it feel to work this quickly?
- What elements of the portrait do you like? Why?

Paint a Portrait:

Using stiff art board and a thick permanent marker, have the students draw a 1 minute contour drawing of each other.

Choose a neutral colour and begin by covering the surface with a thin wash of paint.

Use thick confident brushstrokes and colour choices to complete the portrait. Use Shilling as inspiration. Work quickly and deliberately. Remind the students that realism is not the goal – we are trying to create expressionistic portraits that evoke a feeling. Have fun!

APPENDIX A: Worksheets

- **Primary** and **Junior**
- **Intermediate**
- **Senior**

Print these out in preparation for each tour. Students will be broken into small groups to complete the worksheets. One worksheet per three students should be enough.



IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION and the SELFIE

Work in small groups to complete the worksheet. Begin by thinking about the following questions:

- Do you take selfies?
- Do you post them on social media?
- What makes a good selfie and how much work does it take?
- How important is self-representation to you?
- How would you feel if one of your selfies went viral?
- What if one of your selfies became a meme?

1) Define:

Self-portrait: _____

Selfie: _____

2) Approximately how many selfies have you taken this past year. _____

3) Do you take selfies? Why or why not?

4) Using your phone, take a selfie in the exhibition. *If you don't have a phone, partner with someone who does

Thinking about your selfie, answer the following questions:

How did you decide where to take your picture? Did you pose? How did you hold the camera (what angle?) Did you prepare for the picture, how? How many pictures did you take before you found one you liked? Who would you share this with and why?

IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION and the SELFIE

Work in small groups to complete the worksheet.

Begin with a brief discussion about the following questions:

- Do you take selfies?
- Do you post them on social media?
- What makes a good selfie and how much work does it take?
- How important is self-representation to you?
- How would you feel if one of your selfies went viral?
- What if one of your selfies became a meme?

1) Define:

Self-portrait: _____

Selfie: _____

2) Using your phone take a look at the last selfie you took. Think about: where you were, what you were doing, if you prepared to take your picture and how, how many pictures you took before you found one you liked, who you shared it with and why etc. Write down a few thoughts about it for discussion.

3) Why is controlling how you want to be represented important?

4) Do you think selfies will make their way into art galleries in the same way that painted self-portraits have in the past?

Why or why not? Do you consider selfies to have the same artistic merit as self-portraits? Explain.

APPENDIX B: Follow Up Activities

- **Primary** and **Junior**
- **Intermediate**
- **Senior**

These follow up activities are optional in class activities. Print these off to send with the teacher.

The Nanabush Stories

Primary and Junior
Follow Up Activity

The masks made in this program are perfect for costumes! Have the students work in groups to develop and perform short plays based on the Nanabush stories. Hold a tableau and take a photo. The story of transformation referenced in the tour is included here. Others are listed below. *Nish Tales* is a fun website that hosts many stories, two of which are short animated videos.

“Nanabush or Nanabozho is a prominent being in the Nishnaabeg worldview--teaching us lessons by never learning and representing the ordinary human struggle to live a good life. ... Nanabozho is also a powerful teacher, our first teacher, the first researcher, the offspring of powerful spirits, who was raised and influenced by his Nokomis (Grandma)”

Dancing on our Turtle's Back, Leanne Simpson, Arbeiter Ring Publishing, Winnipeg, 2011, p. 73

Discussion Questions:

1. Does making mistakes help us learn? How?
2. When is learning done?

Additional Sources :

Nish Tales: Walking and Talking with Nanabush

<http://www.nanabush.ca/>

This site includes two animated Nanabush stories, a number of non-animated stories, information on Nanabush and activities for introductory learning of Anishinaabemowin.

Legends and Stories: Part of an Oral History

https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/ach_lr_ks_rrds_sto_1302785935348_eng.pdf

A printable .pdf about oral storytelling from the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs.

Nanabush loses his Eyeballs, and ***Nanabush and the Wild Rosebushes***, retold by Dr. Daphne Odjig, Odjig Arts, Kelowna, BC, 2009

Tales the Elders Told-Ojibway Legends, Basil H. Johnston, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, ON, 1981

Ojibway Heritage, Basil H. Johnston, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, ON, 1977

Nanabush and Transformation

This story is adapted from *Ojibwa Texts*, Volume VII, Part 1, Collected by William Jones, Edited by Truman Michelson, E.J. Brill, Limited, Leyton, 1917, pp: 95 - 101

There is this story about the time when Nanabush had to transform himself into a dead tree stump as a plan to save his best friend, the wolf, from the snake serpents. Nanabush was very fond of his friend, the wolf. The snake serpents became jealous of Nanabush and his friendship, they wished they could have such a great friendship, so they took wolf so he would be their friend, rather than Nanabush's. Of course, when they did this, Nanabush became very sad. He missed his friend so much.

Nanabush decided to go search for him. In his search he found out that the snake serpents had taken him. He also found out that the snake serpents liked to sleep in the afternoon on a particular island.

Nanabush decided to go to the island. When he got there he sat and tried to think up a plan. He could see the water serpents coming in the distance. He had to think fast. He looked around and saw other dead tree stumps and thought that by transforming into one of them the snake serpents would not see him.

When the snake serpents come ashore they are tired and want to sleep in the sun on this beautiful afternoon. Then one of them notices the dead tree stump that Nanabush has transformed into. One says, "Was this dead tree stump here before?" They all stand there and wonder about this. Then another says, "Maybe it's Nanabush and he has transformed himself." "No," one says, "Nanabush, does not have that much power to do that." The leader then says, "One of you wrap yourself around the dead tree stump and squeeze. If it is Nanabush, he will surely scream out."

One of the snakes wrapped himself around the dead tree stump and squeezed hard. Nanabush can barely stand it, and is just about ready to let out a noise, when the snake stops and says, "No, this is not Nanabush. He would have let out a cry. It is just an old dead tree stump we did not notice before."

Satisfied, they all decided to lay in the sun and have their afternoon nap.

When they fell asleep, Nanabush brought out his bow and arrow and snuck up to them. He was told that he should aim at the leader's shadow. He got closer, took aim, shot, but missed! The leader woke up and started yelling, "It's Nanabush!" In the confusion, wolf got away, and he and Nanabush ran as fast as they could. The snake serpents, being closely connected to water, sent a torrent of water to stop them. But they ran fast and climbed the highest tree on the highest mountain. And just as the water reached their mouths, and they thought it was the end, it stopped.

Selfie: the Exhibition

Intermediate
Follow Up Activity

During the exhibition tour of *Arthur Shilling: The Final Works*, you discussed selfies and self-portraits.

In 2011, the AGP put on an exhibition called: *Excerpts from the Lurking Drawings* by Sholem Kristalka. The artist had painted photographs he found on Facebook. Kristalka says: "The wide usage of Facebook has borne a new vernacular meaning for the verb 'to lurk.' In this new coinage, 'to lurk someone' is to troll through their Facebook photos, to investigate their visual history, in some sense to stalk them." Lurking has become a new way of relationship and community building. Lurking is often a private act, sometimes shameful. By documenting his lurking and sharing these publicly, the artist is actually saying more about himself than the people in his paintings.



Kristalka converted the rather quick medium of digital cell phone captures into hand painted works of ink and watercolour. He doesn't ask for permission to use the images he finds. His paintings are exhibited and sold.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think about *Excerpts from the Lurking Drawings*?
2. Do you think selfies will make their way into art galleries in the same way that painted self-portraits have in the past?
3. Why or why not? Do you consider selfies to have the same artistic merit as self-portraits? Explain.

Create an exhibition of selfies that uses the power of self-representation to combat negative stereotypes. Work in small groups to create artwork, select the most interesting ones and create an installation. Give a tour of your exhibition and talk about why you made the choices you did.

Identity and Self-representation

Senior
Follow Up Activity

During the exhibition tour of *Arthur Shilling: The Final Works*, you discussed identity and the importance of self-representation. This follow-up activity continues this discussion by looking at the performance *The Couple in the Cage* by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

The Couple in the Cage, 1993

Directed by: Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia

Performers: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco

“The Couple in the Cage documents the travelling performance of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, in which they exhibited themselves as caged Amerindians from an imaginary island. While the artists’ intent was to create a satirical commentary on the notion of discovery, they soon realized that many of their viewers believed the fiction, and thought the artists were real “savages”. The record of their interactions with audiences in four countries dramatizes the dilemma of cross-cultural misunderstanding we continue to live with today. Their experiences are interwoven with archival footage of ethnographic displays from the past, giving an historical dimension to the artists’ social experiment. *The Couple in the Cage* is a powerful blend of comic fiction and poignant reflection on the morality of treating human beings as exotic curiosities.”

The artists performed the piece 500 years after Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. They travelled for 2 years and performed at museums and cultural institutions in big cities including the Smithsonian in Washington.

Watch the video: <https://vimeo.com/79363320>



Discussion questions:

1. What was your first reaction to seeing people displayed in a cage?
2. Did you think it was a performance? Would you have been fooled?

Coco Fusco: “When we created this piece, our original intent was not to convince people that the fiction of our being Amerindians was a reality. We understood it to be a satirical commentary both on the Quincentenary celebrations and on the history of this practice of exhibiting human beings from Africa, Asia, and Latin America in Europe and the United States in zoos, theaters, and museums. When we got to Spain, more than half the people thought we really were Amerindians. Then there were others who came to watch those who were taking us seriously. There were people who were not sure whether to believe that we were real.

...

The responses we had from Native Americans and Latinos were more interesting. ... They tend to find fault with the hybridity of the contents of the cage, while Anglos take this as a sign of our lack of authenticity. In Washington, for example, there was a Native American elder from the Pueblo tribe of Arizona who was interviewed by a Smithsonian representative. He said that our performance was the most real thing about the Native Americans displayed in the whole museum. He said the installation and performance ought to be permanent to give people a very clear idea of the Native American experience.”

<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1599/coco-fusco-and-guillermo-g-mez-pe-a>



Wrap up discussion:

1. What would be a good reaction to this performance?
2. Is it most interesting to watch the audience or the performers?
3. Does *The Couple in the Cage* act against negative stereotypes and the work of someone like Curtis?

APPENDIX C: Guides and Patterns for Masks

Primary and **Junior** (**Intermediate** option)

- Nanabush
- Beaver
- Bear
- Fish
- Frog
- Loon
- Turtle
- Wolf

