



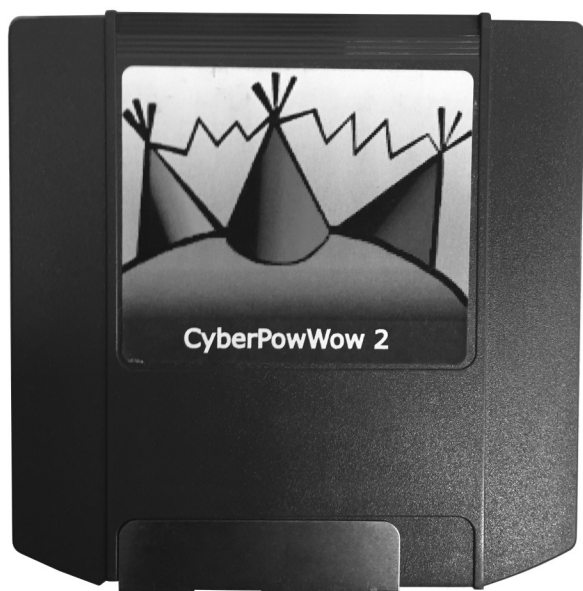
A.



B.



C.



D.

Rhizome Presents: CyberPowWow
Celine Wong Katzman

Rhizome Presents: CyberPowWow is a restaging of one of the first major online exhibitions, a project that was first launched in 1997 by Nation to Nation, a First Nations artist collective co-founded by Skawennati, Ryan Rice, and Eric Robertson. Described as “an Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace,” CyberPowWow presented works by Indigenous artists—sometimes in dialogue with works by settler artists. This presentation takes place at the New Museum in New York City, which sits on unceded Indigenous land, specifically the homeland of the Lenape peoples. CyberPowWow took place from 1997–2004 in a graphical chat software called The Palace, on the web, and in more than twenty cultural centers internationally. At these “Gathering Sites,” community members convened together to eat, talk, and to have some of their first experiences of the internet.

To experience CyberPowWow, a viewer would dress their digital avatar according to their whim to traverse and interact within vibrant and multifaceted, artist-made virtual rooms. These environments, representing an expansive range of artistic styles, collectively express, from a distinctly Indigenous perspective, a familiar excitement for possibilities of connection on the early internet. Recurring themes include self-portraiture, archival photography, geographical maps, and natural landscapes. These leitmotifs transpired through technological, artistic, and semantic possibilities of the software which were not only new, but also enabled expressions of the geopolitical positions and identities of the exhibition curators and participating artists. The uniqueness of the overall aesthetic and collection of innovative, intimate artworks mark CyberPowWow as a landmark exhibition in the history of net art.

Rhizome Presents: CyberPowWow utilizes legacy computer environments to display restored versions of the four roughly biennial exhibitions as well as ephemera from the Indigenous Digital Art Archive, video documentation of the works, and a remake of the CyberPowWow logo illustration. In the spirit of CyberPowWow’s in-person community gatherings of that time, the freshly restored versions are shown alongside potted plants, with food and drink to share as we experience CyberPowWow together again. Today, CyberPowWow is ripe for reconsideration as an early example of Skawennati’s and her collaborators’ vision for an Indigenous future.

CPW 2K: A Chatroom is Worth a Thousand Words
Skawennati

The artists showed up with zip disks, burnt CDs, DAT cassettes, hard drives, laptops, adaptors, manuals and a game of *Quake*—pretty much ready for anything. The ten of us were about to spend the next two weeks crammed together into two mid-sized rooms making a brand new wing for the CyberPowWow Palace.

CyberPowWow started off as a virtual exhibition and chat space that would dispel the myth that Native artists didn’t (or couldn’t!) use technology in their work. In addition to that, we wanted to claim for ourselves a little corner of cyberspace that we could nurture and grow in the way we wanted. After two iterations of CyberPowWow, the question of whether Native artists could be digital artists was answered: of course we can.

Now that we have marked out our territory, built a Palace and furnished it, it is time to invite in our neighbors: digital artists in the non-Native world. These friends, collaborators, and kindred spirits can talk about the very topic that we are engendering: Aboriginal meets non-Aboriginal.

“The Palace” is the name of the chat software used by CyberPowWow since its inception in 1997. With its allusions to royalty, colonialism and hierarchy, it can sometimes be a problematic name to a bunch of Indians who are trying to stake a claim in the territory of cyberspace. Notwithstanding the fact that the software was named by a corporate entity with objectives very different from ours, the word is an apt metaphor for a multifunctional site that can continually expand (or abruptly contract) according to the artist’s desire. Chatrooms (also just called “rooms”) can be added or deleted easily, can be connected to one another or remain separate entities. But the Palace was not chosen because of its name; it was chosen for two much better reasons: its user-friendliness and its customizability. Most CyberPowWow newbies can figure out how to communicate with other users in mere minutes. The irresistibly unglamorous cartoon speech balloons and happy-face default avatars seem to set people at ease. Yet, without building our own software, we could greatly affect the look and feel of this Palace by putting our own artwork in the rooms and then inviting people to talk about it, or to talk *in* it.

What resulted is a range of intense and intimate stories, told in rooms and pages and movies. Many similar elements recurred in the artwork: maps, flags, text, archival photos, personal snapshots, found images. Bits of the artist’s own self show up in almost all the work, too. There is Sheila Urbanoski’s ultra close-up forehead, Jason Lewis’s eye, Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw’s tattoo, Trevor van Weeren’s silhouette, Michelle Nahanee’s bodiless face, Rea’s faceless body, and Travis Neel’s complete unabashed self. These reoccurrences are a function of the theme, and make for a wonderfully cohesive exhibition.

(Published on the occasion of CPW 2K, 2001 and reprinted with the permission of the author.)

Continuing the Preservation of CyberPowWow
Dragan Espenschied

This staging of CyberPowWow is based on the “canned version” created in 2011 by Jason Edward Lewis, one of the participating artists. Rhizome’s digital preservation department created an index of all the components of CyberPowWow, making the canned version available in a more robust and portable software environment using the “Emulation as a Service” framework, and re-enabling links to preserved web resources.

CyberPowWow took place in two online environments: the web, and a proprietary, multi-user, graphical chat environment called The Palace, first released in 1996, now obsolete. Both environments were interlinked. The canned version contains installable executable files from a 2000 version of The Palace server and client, and files originally found on several servers for artworks located on the web. Today, The Palace software package can be installed on legacy versions of Windows in an emulator, but it contains links pointing to live web URLs that cannot be accessed by software from the early 2000’s, as most web traffic has become encrypted with algorithms that were introduced much later. This breaks the connection between artworks presented in The Palace and on the web.

Using the framework “Emulation as a Service,” which manages online access to legacy software environments, Rhizome’s preservation team expanded the canned version of CyberPowWow to include a fully working instance of Windows XP with The Palace, Internet Explorer 6, and the required browser plugins. This package is easily portable and can be presented on local computers in a gallery space as well as on the web, allowing users to bypass the requirement to install a local emulator in order to access CyberPowWow. Websites linked from The Palace were reconstructed from files contained in the canned version and data found in public web archives, and included in the emulation setup.

It is important to note that CyberPowWow was originally created with the multi-user capabilities of The Palace in mind, which allowed users to explore the different “rooms” together and chat. However, the version presented in this exhibition does not support multi-user functionality due to technical challenges. Rhizome is currently evaluating possible strategies that would allow a multi-user version to be made available in the future.

Exploring the treasure of digital art history that is CyberPowWow in depth and contributing to its continued longevity has been incredibly rewarding. We hope this presentation is merely the first step in a long rediscovery of CyberPowWow and the possibility it represents for expressive online communities.

CyberPowWow
Mikhel Proulx

Between 1997 and 2004 the Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) artist Skawennati curated CyberPowWow. It was among the earliest exhibitions of internet-based art, and remains the most expansive platform for digital art made by Indigenous artists. Over its four biennial iterations, CyberPowWow hosted original artworks and essays from twenty-four contributors. Twenty-five years after this experiment began, CyberPowWow is now being restored and presented in collaboration with Rhizome and the New Museum. This event marks a stage in the preservation project that allows CyberPowWow to run in a legacy software environment to be experienced by a new audience. (Figure A.)

CyberPowWow developed fully independent of mainstream net art to offer novel artworks and critical ideas at a historical moment that saw a surge of both networked media and Indigenous self-determination movements. CyberPowWow’s artists occupied cyberspace to express future imaginaries rooted in cultural histories and traditional knowledge. Among the many artworks the platform supported was a participatory performance that took place as a virtual round dance, by the Cree/Saulteaux/Métis artist Lori Blondeau. In another artwork, the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) artist Michelle Nahanee animated cigar store Indians and stereotypical tourist gift shop plastic dolls. And in another, Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw (Cree/Métis) made reference to the 1990 Oka Crisis, where Mohawk warriors resisted settler police forces in Quebec. (Figure B.)

For Skawennati—along with her many collaborators on the project—the internet fostered not just a new mode of communication and interactivity, but a site for new forms of discourse, exchange, and community. This was an early accomplishment that gave form to a uniquely Indigenous presence online. While CyberPowWow represented these concerns in networked media, it was also linked to the offline political climate of Indigenous sovereignty that surged simultaneously. Indigenous Peoples turned to the internet as a domain of cultural action and political solidarity. As Skawennati noted at the time, “A new community has been forming, one whose membership criteria is self-determined, not imposed by colonialist guidelines. This community doesn’t have a territory, because it doesn’t need one: it has the infinite expanses of cyberspace.”¹

In four exhibitions over eight years, CyberPowWow invited artists, curators and writers to contribute to this evolving platform, which utilized a piece of chat software called The Palace. In place of the arbour used by dancers at powwow gatherings, CyberPowWow congregated its participants around the structure of this software. The Palace offered a multi-user environment in which users could join together within a graphical chat space in a series of “rooms” designed by CyberPowWow artists. Users could choose from both the default set of Palace avatars, or custom avatars created from popular imagery of Indigenous Peoples. As Skawennati noted, “The irresistibly unglamorous cartoon speech balloons and happy-face default avatars seem to set people at ease. Yet, without building our own software, we could greatly affect the look and feel of this Palace by putting our own artwork in the rooms and then inviting people to talk about it, or to talk *in* it.”² The project housed new online artworks, written stories and critical texts, as well as a real-time, graphical chat service that was live 24/7, year-round. Importantly, this was a virtual complement to in-person events that coincided with the launches of each new iteration of the biennial project. Over twenty international artist-run centers acted as “Gathering Sites,” and each site supported simultaneous events over the course of two-days, during which visitors were invited to eat, drink, and access the artwork online, together. While CyberPowWow remained accessible online, the great majority of its social interactions took place during these events. For many participants, this was an early encounter with the internet, as personal ownership of computers was not yet prevalent in the mid-1990s, especially among Indigenous populations.³ Neglected in histories of better-documented net art, this exhibition model remains remarkable today. (Figure C.)

Far before the saturated, media-rich, social-network-driven digital cultures of today, CyberPowWow represented an extraordinary experiment in creating an online community. It fostered hybrid gatherings that bridged local concerns with networked publics. This intercultural meeting place is depicted in CyberPowWow’s logo: tipis networked through wireless signals, suggesting new modes for nation-to-nation relationships. As the Tuscarora art historian Jolene Rickard noted at the time, “Inside the flat pulsing electronic magenta tipis the artists are doing what people in our communities have always done. They are transforming our cultures into the language of the future.”⁴ (Figure D.)

Figures	
A.	Michelle Nahanee, <i>Ililgirls</i> , 2001. Screenshot, 2022, The Palace 3.5.0 on Windows XP SP2.
B.	Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, <i>Oka_Rocks</i> , 2001. Screenshot, 2022, The Palace 3.5.0 on Windows XP SP2.
C.	CyberPowWow Gathering Site, Galerie OBORO, 1997. Left: Brenda Dearhouse Fragnito, Kathleen Dearhouse, Jasmine Dearhouse (Three Generations of Dearhouse Women); Top: Skawennati; Bottom: Audra Simpson, Skawennati, Rodney Thomas, unknown, and Marcelle Durrum. Courtesy of Skawennati and the Indigenous Digital Art Archive.
D.	CyberPowWow 2 Superfloppy Zip Disk, label showing the CyberPowWow logo design by Skawennati, 1999. Courtesy of Skawennati and the Indigenous Digital Art Archive.
Footnotes	
1	Skawennati, “Why I Love WWriting: Moccasin Telegraph,” CyberPowWow, 1997.
2	Skawennati, “CPW 2K: A Chatroom is Worth a Thousand Words,” CyberPowWow 2K, 2001.
3	The digital divide between Indigenous and settler populations is shown by, among others, Christian Sandvig, “Connection at Ewiiapaayp Mountain: Indigenous Internet Infrastructure,” in <i>Race after the Internet</i> , ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 168–200.
4	Jolene Rickard, “First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed,” CyberPowWow, 1999.

CyberPowWow
Exhibition Credits and Gathering Sites

CyberPowWow
April 5–6, 1997
Artists: Bradlee LaRocque, Ryan Rice, Melanie Printup Hope
Writers: Audra Simpson, Paul Chaat Smith and Skawennati
Gathering Sites: Galerie OBORO, Montreal, Canada; Circle Vision Arts Corporation, Saskatoon, Canada

CyberPowWow 2
April 17–18, 1999
Artists: Edward Poitras, Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Sheryl Kootenahayoo, Archer Pechawis, Lori Blondeau
Writers: Lee Crowchild, Skawennati, Jolene Rickard
Gathering Sites: Galerie OBORO, Montreal, Canada; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada; SOIL Digital Media Production Suite, Regina, Canada; Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre, Vancouver, Canada; TRIBE and Video Vêrité, Saskatoon, Canada

CPW 2K
April 21, 2001
Artists: Jason Edward Lewis, Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Michelle Nahanee, Travis Neel, r e a, Sheila Urbanoski, Trevor Van Weeren
Writers: Marilyn Burgess, Skawennati, Archer Pechawis
Curators: Archer Pechawis and Skawennati
Gathering Sites: Galerie OBORO, Montreal, Canada; Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, Canada; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada; Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon, Canada; Gallery 101 & Artengine, Ottawa, Canada; Arts Alliance Lab, San Francisco, United States

CPW04
May 1–2 2004
Artists: Rosalie Favell, Greg A. Hill, Joseph Tekaroniacke Lazare, Ryan Johnston, Archer Pechawis
Curators: Jason Edward Lewis, Skawennati
Gathering Sites: Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre, Banff, Canada; EMMEDIA Gallery & Production Society (in partnership with MayWorks Festival), Calgary, Canada; Tribe, A Centre for the Evolving Aboriginal Media, Visual and Performing Arts Inc. & PAVED Art + New Media, Saskatoon, Canada; Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg, Canada; InterAccess, Toronto, Canada; Artengine & G-101, Ottawa, Canada; Galerie OBORO, Montreal, Canada; Eyelevel Gallery, Halifax, Canada; Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, Canada

Rhizome Presents: CyberPowWow
December 10, 2022

Rhizome Presents: CyberPowWow is co-organized by Mikhel Proulx and Celine Wong Katzman, Curator at Rhizome.

Digital conservation was led by Dragan Espenschied, Preservation Director at Rhizome, with the support of Lyndsey Jane Moulds and Yuhsien Chen. The “canned version” of CyberPowWow was made by Skawennati and Jason Edward Lewis.

Published by Rhizome, New York, New York.
Copyright © 2022.
Broadsheet design by Laura Coombs.
Printed by Linco.

Remake of the CyberPowWow logo illustration by Camelia Layachi and Skawennati.

Special thanks to Jolene Rickard and Marcella Zimmerman/Cultural Counsel.

Thanks to the New Museum for its support of this project, and especially Lisa Phillips, Massimiliano Gioni, Regan Grusy, Brian Dore, Sarah Bailey Hogarty, Brittney Feinzig, and Derek Wright.

Rhizome

Co-Directors: Makayla Bailey and Michael Connor
Preservation Director: Dragan Espenschied
Curator: Celine Wong Katzman
Program Assistant: Kayla Drzewicki
Community Designer: Briana Griffin
Lead Developer: Mark Beasley

Rhizome champions born-digital art and culture through commissions, exhibitions, scholarship, and digital preservation. Since 2003, Rhizome has been an affiliate in residence at the New Museum in New York City.

Support

This presentation of CyberPowWow is made possible by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. Rhizome’s public programs are supported by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York legislature. Rhizome’s 2022–2023 program is made possible by a grant from the Mellon Foundation and gifts from Rafäel Rozendaal.

RHIZOME
NEW MUSEUM



Cover Images

- 1 Skawennati, CyberPowWow2 Entrance, 1999
- 2 Skawennati, Gallery, 1997
- 3 Skawennati, Library, 2004
- 4 Skawennati, Arbor, 1999
- 5 Lori Blondeau, Hollywood Room, 1999
- 6 Archer Pechawis, <welcome/warning>, 1999
- 7 Archer Pechawis, <containsnooriginalart/>, 1999
- 8 Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Balmoral, 1999
- 9 Edward Poitras, WASCANA, 1999
- 10 CPW2K Entrance, 2001
- 11 CPW2K Artists, 2001
- 12 Skawennati, Avatar Room, 2001
- 13 CyberPowWow 04 Props Room, 2004
- 14 Marilyn Burgess, Git yer cowgirl avatar here!, 2001
- 15 Jason Edward Lewis, intro, 2001
- 16 Jason Edward Lewis, john, 2001
- 17 Jason Edward Lewis, eye, 2001
- 18 Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Blood_Widow, 2001
- 19 Áhasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw, Oka_Rocks, 2001
- 20 Michelle Nahanee, onguard, 2001
- 21 Travis Neel, Oh Canada, 2001
- 22 Archer Pechawis, Archer, 2001
- 23 r e a, room1, 2001
- 24 Trevor Van Weeren, shadybeach, 2001
- 25 Trevor Van Weeren, blak_whit, 2001
- 26 Sheila Urbanoski, show me yours and i will show you mine, 2001
- 27 Sheila Urbanoski, big_white_girl, 2001
- 28 CyberPowWow 04 Entrance, 2004
- 29 CyberPowWow 04 Gallery, 2004
- 30 Archer Pechawis, <!--unnatural-->, 2004
- 31 Rosalie Favell, how the heart works, 2004
- 32 Greg Hill, Kanata Boutique, 2004
- 33 Ryan Johnston, SweetGrass, 2004
- 34 Joseph Tekaroniacke Lazare, dega1, 2004

All screenshots created in 2022 by Yuhsien Chen, with The Palace 3.5.0 on Windows XP SP2.

Inside the flat pulsing electronic magenta tipis the artists are doing what people in our communities have always done. They are transforming our cultures into the language of the future.⁴ —Jolene Rickard

A new community has been forming, one whose membership criteria is self-determined, not imposed by colonialist guidelines. This community doesn’t have a territory, because it doesn’t need one: it has the infinite expanses of cyberspace.¹ —Skawennati