

To: Urbana Public Arts Commission

From: Sarah Ross

Re: Statement on vandalism of public art installation by Edgar Heap of Birds

“Beyond the Chief” is a public art installation by the internationally exhibited Cheyenne-Arapaho artist, HOCK E AYE VI Edgar Heap of Birds. The project was installed along West Nevada Street in Urbana in February 2009. The artwork asks viewers to reflect on political and social histories of central Illinois, especially those related to indigenous peoples. Since their installation, there have been six separate incidents of vandalism followed by the theft of two of the signs, the latter resulting in the June 18 arrest of a recent University of Illinois graduate.

With “Beyond the Chief,” Heap of Birds adapts his text-based artwork, at least in part, to respond directly to the local campus community and the ongoing conflict surrounding the use of the sports mascot “chief Illiniwek” that promoted University of Illinois intercollegiate athletics for 81 years. On each of the twelve “Beyond the Chief” signs, “Fighting Illini” is printed backwards above the words “Today Your Host Is...” followed by the name of an indigenous group such as the Peoria, Kaskaskia, or the Wea, to inspire reflection on those American Indian communities that formerly lived in this region and the complex histories of this landscape.

“Beyond the Chief”, part of an on-going series of public works is provocative, pointing directly to tensions here in Champaign-Urbana. Many contemporary art forms are provocative, inviting viewers to debate, reflect, consider and contest. Challenging art engages audiences and works in ways that other forms don’t. Heap of Birds has installed this series in many other cities, but the UI campus is the only place where any of the artists’ works have been vandalized. Since the attacks on the “Beyond the Chief” project, Chancellor Herman has sent out one email addressing the situation, and this has been the only official response from the University’s administration. The recent arrest of one of the perpetrators has brought to light another issue: the State values this work at the cost of the materials only. This is completely unusual, and seems to add insult to injury. The cost of paper is not how a Lewis Hine photograph is valued; Georgia O’Keefe’s paintings do not reflect the cost of paint and canvas. From what I can tell, no one at the Native American House or other concerned groups want felony charges for the one arrested vandal, but devaluing the artwork of an internationally exhibited artist, and a Native American one at that, sends a very problematic message. This attack, and our responses potentially send many messages: that hostility toward indigenous people and their heritage will be tacitly tolerated, that Urbana is an unfriendly place for provocative works, that artists’ work will be monetarily valued at its materials only, and more.

I am asking the Urbana Public Art Commissioners to consider passing a formal resolution condemning the attacks on the “Beyond the Chief” public art installation. While our body cannot force the vandals to turn themselves in, provoke Chancellor Herman to adequately address the hateful acts or promote understanding instead of legal fees and fines, we can make a statement that all public artworks deserve our time and discussion, not destructive acts and intolerance.

Timeline of Vandalization:

* First Wave: March 16, 2009--The damage from the first instance of vandalism is noticed and reported to University police and University administrators. The Peoria sign is the only sign damaged. This sign is directly outside of 1206 Native American House.

* Second Wave: April 6, 2009--In this wave of vandalism, three signs were damaged: Meskwaki, Potawatomi, and Sac. These are located outside of Asian American Studies and the Native American House(s).

* Third Wave: May 4, 2009--Three more signs are damaged: Myaamia, Odawa, and Piankesaw outside of La Casa and African American Studies. Chancellor Herman sends a mass email regarding these attacks on May 5, 2009.

* Fourth Wave: May 8, 2009--The vandalism could have occurred any time between the evening of Friday, May 8 and 4:00pm on Saturday, May 9. The vandal wrote on the Potawatomi sign in red marker: "UH OH I VANDALISED (sic) THIS!" (Yes, they spelled "vandalized" with an "s" instead of a "z").

* Fifth Wave: May 20, 2009--Three more signs are damaged: Peoria, Meskwaki, and Wea. These signs are located outside of Bruce Nesbitt, Asian American Studies, and 1206 Native American House.

* Sixth Wave: June 10, 2009--One sign is reported damaged: Potawatomi. This sign is located at 1206 West Nevada Street.

* Seventh Wave: June 13, 2009--One sign was bent, and two signs were stolen: Wea (bent), Ho-Chunk and Peoria are stolen. The two stolen signs were directly in front of the Native American House at 1206 West Nevada Street. The Wea sign is located outside of the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center.

* Thursday, June 18 -- University of Illinois police have arrested a recent UI graduate for the theft of two signs.

Statement by Edgar Heap of Birds:

Of course these words ["Beyond the Chief"] speak to extending discussion beyond the campus "chief" and its insensitive history (while still hinting at the problem); yet, the title also is derived from my own Cheyenne tribe where there is a council of 44 chiefs - and from which came four principal chiefs. The first man named Heap of Birds was one of these principal chiefs.

Most non-native people think about the chief position as if he were president or executive. In fact, chiefs often sat as a council representing bands and many families; they also differed from war chiefs or headsmen of warrior societies (one of which I belong to).

In Cheyenne tradition a chief had no personal property. All that he and his family owned was offered to tribal members on request (this is sometimes a demand even today) once the chief took the position. Chiefs were selected because of their generosity. Many men did not wish to become chief because of this point. Chiefs were chosen by chiefs, but could decline. A chief is far beyond one person and should reflect an honor and

allegiance -- as well as truth, tradition, listening, openness, and good way -- to a whole people. As we install these 12 sign panels, we walk forward on the University of Illinois campus to honor these ideals and intertribal brothers and sisters from a circular position of respect.

Biography of the Artist:

The art of Hock E Aye VI Edgar Heap of Birds includes public art messages, drawings, paintings, prints, works in glass, and sculpture. His work was deployed as a collateral public art project by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian for the 2007 Venice Biennale. He received his M.F.A. from Tyler School of Art, his B.F.A. from the University of Kansas, and has undertaken graduate studies at the Royal College of Art in London and awarded an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Heap of Birds teaches Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma and has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Lila Wallace Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, and the Andy Warhol Foundation.