



Making Peace: David A. Neel's *Life on the 18th Hole*

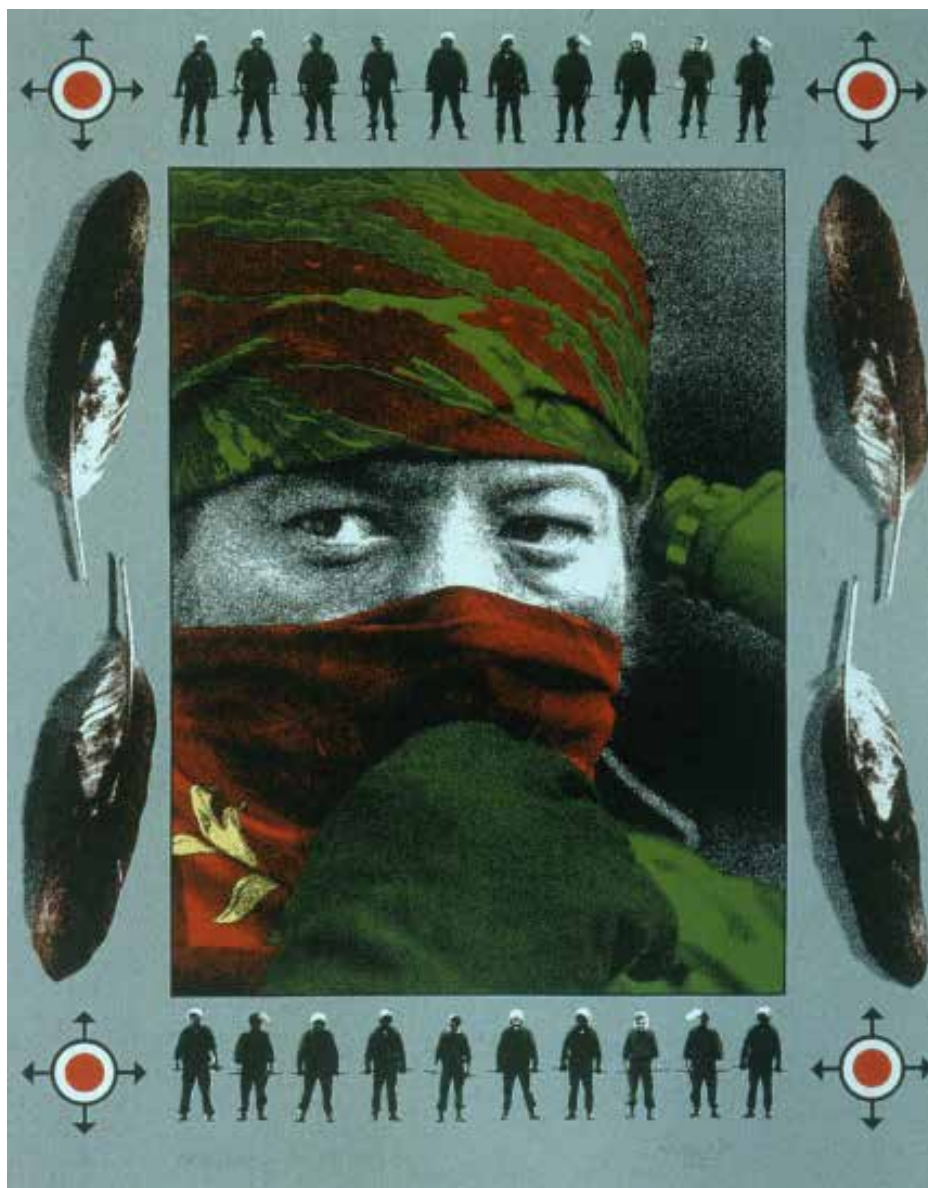
CAROLYN BUTLER-PALMER

The expression “life on the 18th hole” conjures up visions of manicured golf greens, plush country clubs, and an affluent suburban lifestyle. But a 1990 silkscreen by Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwagiutl) artist David A. Neel (b. 1960), entitled *Life on the 18th Hole* (Fig. 1) presents quite another picture.¹ The large central photograph depicts the masked face of a Mohawk warrior, who is surrounded by two ranks of little armed policemen – one above, the other below. Neel clipped the former from what was then Canada's only nationally-circulated newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, and cut the latter out of the Canadian newsmagazine, *Maclean's*. Neel's own photographs of spotted eagle feathers flank either side of the warrior.² In each of the four corners, Neel graphically reminds us of The Four Sacred Directions.

He created the photomontage to commemorate the seventy-eight-day armed Mohawk standoff against Canadian Forces and the Sûreté du Québec provincial police, which started in July 1990 near the town of Oka, Quebec – about twenty miles from Montreal. The dispute began over the proposed expansion of a nine-hole golf course into one of the Mohawk's ancestral burial grounds. While the standoff was underway, Neel released the photomontage in two formats: as a limited-edition run of serigraphs and as a series of unnumbered posters.³ *Life on the 18th Hole* was so popular at the time of its release that someone else produced and sold a bootlegged version of the image with the caption *We Are Not Criminals, We Are Political Prisoners* (Fig. 2) printed in the lower border.⁴ The following year, one of Neel's serigraphs was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada,⁵ and the *BC Studies* journal published David A. Neel's seven-page artist statement “Life on the 18th Hole” in its spring edition.⁶

Despite the image's popular appeal and prestigious exhibition history, it has received scant critical attention. In fact, I have found only a couple of published reactions to the image. *Globe and Mail* art critic John Bentley Mays, in his review of the National Gallery exhibition, described the image

Detail, David A. Neel, *Cropped and Coloured Re-photographic Image of Ryan Remoirez's Mohawk Warrior Photograph*, 1990, photograph, collection of David A. Neel. (Photo: David A. Neel)



1 | David A. Neel, *Life on the 18th Hole*, 1990, serigraph, 71 x 56 cm, collection of David A. Neel, Vancouver. (Photo: David A. Neel)

as “an expression of pro-Native anger.”⁷ Eight years later, anthropologist Allan Ryan, in his book *The Trickster Shift*, situated Neel’s photomontage against the backdrop of the Oka standoff, characterizing the title as a display of “acrid wit.”⁸

This essay sets out to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Life on the 18th Hole*’s creation by offering up a more expansive and contrary interpretation to those of either just “anger” or “wit.” I will argue that



2 | David A. Neel, *Photograph of forged copy of Life on the 18th Hole* ("We Are Not Criminals, We Are Political Prisoners"), ca. 1990, photograph, collection of David A. Neel, Vancouver. (Photo: David A. Neel)

Neel created an image of deliberate ambiguity. As an early draft of the photomontage (Fig. 3) reveals, Neel literally pieced together ready-made press images, his own created photographs, and graphic designs. In so doing, he fashioned a pictorial space filled with shifting relationships between the local and global, the sacred and secular, as well as the traditions of news



3 | David A. Neel, *Draft image of Life on the 18th Hole*, 1990, photomontage, collection of David A. Neel, Vancouver. (Photo: David A. Neel)

photography, European Modernism, postmodernism, and Northwest Coast commemorative arts. With this mix, Neel strategically destabilized the seemingly oppositional categories of contemporary and indigenous, and created an ideal space of intercultural balance – an alternative to the very real cultural tensions of the 1990 Oka standoff and to its multivalent ramifications, including the conflicts over Mohawk policing – in the news around the world.

A reframing of *Life on the 18th Hole* within the context of cross-cultural junctures necessitates a brief examination of Neel's biography, beginning with his relationship to one of the most eminent families of Kwakwaka'wakw carvers that include Charlie James, Ellen Neel, and Mungo Martin. Despite this legacy, David A. Neel did not grow up among his father's family of carvers. After his father's death, Neel's Anglo-Canadian mother raised him in suburban Calgary, Alberta, about 1,000 kilometres away from his father's family in Vancouver, British Columbia. Prior to becoming a carver, Neel studied photojournalism at Mount Royal College, in Calgary, and then at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence. Thus, he entered into a profession that aims at picturing stories, as does Kwakwaka'wakw carving. During the late 1980s, Neel began a two-year apprenticeship with master carvers Wayne Alfred and Beau Dick.⁹ By the time he set out to make *Life on the 18th Hole*, Neel had acquired some knowledge about the principles of Northwest Coast design as well as those of photojournalism, both of which he applied to the making of this photomontage. Within months of completing the silkscreen, Neel described *Life on the 18th Hole* as “[drawing] upon my heritage as a hereditary Kwagiutl artist and my training as a professional photographer . . . [it is] a print that is contemporary in execution and traditional in foundation.”¹⁰ At the time of the standoff, Neel – who lived along the coast of British Columbia some 2,500 miles away from the barricades at Oka – relied primarily on the news media for information about the confrontations. The Canadian press picked up the story of the Oka standoff on 10 July 1990, after provincial police invaded Kanehsatake, a sovereign Mohawk territory. The police invasion aimed to dismantle a four-month-old barricade that had been erected to fortify a sacred Mohawk burial ground against construction crews.

Outraged by the police action in Kanehsatake, citizens of the sister Mohawk territory, Kahnawake, blockaded the Mercier Bridge, which gives access to the island city of Montreal from the South Shore suburbs.¹¹ During the next seventy-eight days, the press reported on an array of violent events that included: the fatal shooting of a police officer, the wounding of many other people, the deployment of about 2,400 Canadian Forces troops to Mohawk territories, the throwing of Molotov cocktails, and the burning in effigy of First Nations people by angry suburban commuters.

As headline news transported the drama of Oka to Neel, he brought Oka into the international lexicon of war and oppression by referencing the 1937 bombing of Guernica, a Northern Spanish town, by the regime of Francisco Franco and his Nazi allies. In the spring 1991 issue of the *BC Studies* journal, Neel credited the Spanish artist Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* – which was painted in reaction to press accounts of Franco's bombing campaign – as Neel's own inspiration to commemorate the invasion of Kanehsatake.¹² Picasso's palette



4 | W. Eugene Smith, *The Pittsburgh Steelworker*, 1955, photograph, collection of Magnum Photos. (Photo: Magnum Photos)

of black, white, and grey along with the cross-hatchings are often interpreted as his allusion to the colour and text of press reports that informed him, then a Parisian resident, of events that took place miles away in Spain.¹³ In *Life on the 18th Hole*, Neel simultaneously reminds us of Oka as a headline news story and pays homage to Picasso's painting with the surrounding grey border and the stippled appearance of the embedded photographs.

As a student of photojournalism, Neel was not only educated in photography's narrative capacity, but was also introduced to the aesthetic conventions of news photography as exemplified by the work of W. Eugene Smith, one of three photojournalists whom Neel routinely credits with having informed his own praxis.¹⁴ For example, Smith's canonical *Pittsburgh Steelworker* (Fig. 4) published in 1959 evokes the classical compositional strategies of photojournalism, including those of asymmetry, a close-up shot, and a subject that does not look directly at the camera's lens. Smith often amplified the sense of an indirect engagement with a partially obscured



5 | Front Page of The Globe and Mail, 13 July 1990, newsprint, Globe and Mail Archives. (Photo: The Globe and Mail)

or masked face in his photographic subject, for example the steelworker's goggled-covered eyes.

These compositional strategies were taught to – and reiterated by – subsequent generations of news photographers, including Canadian press photographer Ryan Remoirez, who utilized them in his 1990 photograph of a masked Mohawk warrior (Fig. 5). Given Neel's training in photojournalism, I suspect the composition employed by Remoirez was one of the reasons Neel

was attracted to this particular image. At the time, the press was filled with an array of images of masked Mohawk sentinels guarding the barricades, but it was Remoirez's photo that captured Neel's attention.

Neel first saw Remoirez's photograph on the front page of the 13 July 1990 issue of *The Globe and Mail* – then the only nationally circulated newspaper in Canada. There it accompanied journalist André Picard's written report about the negotiations between the nations of Kanehsatake and Canada, and police investigations into the fatal shooting of their own Corporal Lemay just two days prior. The image was also surrounded by printed stories about Boris Yeltsin's resignation from the Communist Party and Margaret Thatcher's critique of German foreign policy. By placing the image within this context, *Globe and Mail* editors positioned Oka as a world news event and presented the Mohawk warrior as an important world leader. Via the mechanisms of the international press, the story of Oka also moved quickly from the site of the lived experience to locations around the globe: *The London Times*, *Le Monde*, and *Time Magazine* were just some of the periodicals that printed stories about Oka.

To create *Life on the 18th Hole*, Neel transported Remoirez's photograph from the realm of the international press into his own work of art, making a number of changes along the way. Neel rephotographed the newspaper image, cropping it along the bottom and sides (Fig. 6). With Neel's modifications, the photograph is more tightly focused on the warrior's masked face. He also transformed the black and white news photo into a black, white, red, green, and yellow image. Neel's five-colour palette is consistent with one that has historically been used by Kwakwaka'wakw artists, and specifically his grandmother Ellen Neel.

With these overt acts of intervention, Neel personalized the image and challenged the objective ideals espoused by the news media's seemingly unstaged photographs. By removing the photograph from the predominantly verbal realm of the newspaper and by placing it within his work of art, Neel visualized a quieter image of Oka. Like his silent reminder of The Four Sacred Directions, within the context of *Life on the 18th Hole*, the warrior's muffled mouth signals the unspoken: the silent and the sacred. Thus, Neel re-presents Mohawk efforts to preserve the burial ground as hallowed acts.

Neel moved Remoirez's image from the grid of the newspaper, where discrete stories isolate events and impose a sense of order over the chaos of the world, into a composition that Neel described as “[in the] style of traditional [Northwest Coast] graphics.”¹⁵ Neel modelled the layout of his photomontage on other sorts of Northwest Coast flat design. I suggest for comparison the figures painted on the sides of the bentwood storage boxes, which were routinely traded up and down the coast throughout

6 | David A. Neel,
Cropped and Coloured
Re-photographic Image of
Ryan Remoirez's Mohawk
Warrior Photograph, 1990,
 photograph, collection
 of David A. Neel. (Photo:
 David A. Neel)



the nineteenth century (Fig. 7). In their book *The Transforming Image*, anthropologist Karen Duffek and designer Bill McLennan summarized the canonical features of bentwood box figures, using a reproduction of a Heilsut container by artist Ben Houstie (b. 1960) to illustrate their points. McLennan and Duffek wrote,

painters adapted the image to make full use of the rectangular field available on the . . . front and back panels of the chest. Dominating the front of the chest is a wide head of the represented creature usually featuring . . . double eye motifs, a beak-like nose, and a broad mouth. Situated below the head is a rectangular body with either, hands, claws, or feathers generally on either side.¹⁶



7 | Ben Houstie, *Painted Rendition of Front Panel of Nineteenth Century Heiltsuk Box*, 1992, cedar and paint. (Photo: Museum of Anthropology)

But Duffek and McLennan also note that the creature on the box is not produced by a fixed formula; there are variations in the layout of individual box designs. In contrast with the canonical representation of a box creature, they identified an upper and lower creature in artist Lyle Wilson's delineation of what they described as the front panel of an archaic-style Tlingit box. In this example the upper creature has single – not double – eye motifs and a beak; the lower creature has a pair of eyes and a row of vertical elements – teeth – signifying an animal of prey (Fig. 8). *Life on the 18th Hole* has a similar layout, though Neel used photographs, not form lines, in his construction. At the centre of *Life on the 18th Hole* is a rectangular form filled with a human face, flanked by two pairs of feathers. In place of eye motifs – or ovoids – Neel symbolized The Four Sacred Directions. And instead of teeth, Neel's animal of prey is a row of armored policemen, a modification to a photograph published in *Maclean's* (Fig. 9).

Life on the 18th Hole also manifests an ambiguity that is characteristic of bentwood box design. Anthropologist Wilson Duff first pointed out that unlike family crests, which bear specific attributes of identification, the creature-on-the box sends multiple signals that lead Duff to postulate the creature's iconology as one of deliberate ambiguity.¹⁷ Like the creature of the box, Remoirez's photograph prompts multiple readings. Most period readers of *The Globe and Mail* would probably have recognized the photograph as that of a Mohawk warrior, because photographs of Mohawk warriors saturated the press at that time. When I interviewed Neel about the image, he said that he liked the shot because “it could be a photograph of anyone. It could be of you or of me. It could be of anyone standing their ground.”¹⁸

Within the context of the press, the warrior's camouflaged face is connected to the iconography of political dissent around the globe, as



8 | Lyle Wilson (b. 1955), *Reconstruction Drawing of Original Colour Composition of 18th Century Tlingit Bentwood Box*, 2014, pencil crayon on paper, size unknown. (Photo: Museum of Anthropology)

9 | Raffi Kirki, *Oka Crisis*, 1990. (Photo: PonoPresse)

exemplified by news images of the bandana-covered faces of Nicaraguan street fighters (Fig. 10) and the black ski masks worn during political action in Northern Ireland. The connection between masks and ground held additional meaning for Neel, who was by then a carver – a mask maker. During the Oka crisis, Neel also carved *The Mask of the Mohawk Warrior* danced by Richard George in the Squamish Nation Bighouse (Fig. 11).¹⁹

Neel's remarks about the undetermined and perhaps unknowable identity of the warrior's masked face forges a conceptual connection to the artistic



10 | Susan Meiselas, *Street Fighter, Nicaragua*, photograph, collection of Magnum Photos, New York. (Photo: Magnum Photography)

discourse of ambiguity – an outgrowth of identity politics – that punctuated Euro-American art of the post-war era. For example the art of Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine is infused with ambiguities that challenge the ideals of a pure medium, fixed identity, and artistic authority. During the 1980s, before Neel apprenticed as a carver, he took university classes in the fine arts and photography, then lived in a community of contemporary artists in Dallas, Texas. In these venues, Neel was introduced to the postmodern discourses of ambiguity. This trait of ambiguity might be seen as postmodern in Neel’s early art and as an act of self-protection in the covered faces of news images; it also has historically distinct roots in Northwest Coast aesthetic practices.

In the context of *Life on the 18th Hole*, Neel slipped Remoirez’s photograph into a complex web of narrative and image conventions. In the accompanying artist’s statement, Neel noted his redeployment of the intrepid Mohawk warrior to expose the racist underpinnings of the children’s counting song “Ten Little Indians,” also known as “One Little, Two Little.”²⁰ In comparison with the surrounding elements, specifically the size of the ten little police officers, the photograph of the warrior appears relatively grand: a heroic figure. Neel reaffirmed the sense of heroism by the close proximity of the spotted eagle feathers, which within many Indigenous communities are associated with the most difficult and soul-seeking acts. In this photomontage,



11 | David A. Neel, *Mask of the Mohawk Warrior Being Danced*, 1990, size unknown, collection of David A. Neel, Vancouver. (Photo: David A. Neel)



12 | David A. Neel
Press Release, the
Vancouver Sun's
What's On Magazine,
20 September 1990,
p. F-18. (Photo: David A.
Neel and Postmedia)

the ten little police officers are diminished, like the lives of “One Little, Two Little” in a different cultural context. At the same time, with the reference to Northwest Coast flat design, Neel also implied that his little policemen, like animals of prey, are stalking the Mohawk warrior.

In conclusion, in *Life on the 18th Hole* Neel not only characterized the Oka standoff with references to aesthetic practices with discrete cultural origins – for example European Modernism and postmodernism, photojournalism, Northwest Coast masks, and flat design – but he also mobilized the image along several distinct trajectories. The serigraphs were exhibited and sold at an upscale Vancouver sales gallery, the Inuit Art Gallery, while the posters were commissioned and sold by the British Columbia Union of Indian Chiefs to raise monies for the Mohawk Defense Fund.²¹ In addition, Vancouver-based video artist Paul Wong transported some of the posters to Mohawk country and Neel himself mailed copies to photojournalist Ryan Remoirez.²² In conjunction with exhibition announcements, *Life on the 18th Hole* was reproduced in newspapers, and as a consequence the Mohawk warrior slipped back into the press (Fig. 12).²³ Thus, Neel's *Life on the 18th Hole* maps a specific moment of dense and highly contested representations of identity, and does so in a way that brilliantly indexes both the subtle complexities of such exchanges and what is at stake politically within them.

- 1 Throughout this paper the more general term “Kwakwaka’wakw” is used to describe the people and practices of Kwak’waka-speaking nation, including the Kwakiutl (Kwagiutl) nation at Tsaxis (Fort Rupert). In an effort to preserve Neel’s voice and mode of identification, the less-common spelling “Kwagiutl” is used throughout this paper, as that is what appears in period publications about *Life on the 18th Hole* written by David A. Neel.
Life on the 18th Hole also marks the start of a four-image series of silkscreens focused on contemporary, politically, charged moments in Canadian-Indigenous relations. Other images in the series include: *The Trial of Tears* (1991), *Just Say No* (1991), and *Out of Sight/Out of Mind* (1994).
- 2 Artist File, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 *We Are Not Criminals, We Are Political Prisoners*, poster, Artist File, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC.
- 5 For some details about the exhibition see John Bentley MAYS, “Making Visual Sense of a Mixed Heritage,” *Globe and Mail*, 29 Nov. 1991, A-12, photocopy in David Neel Clip File, Vancouver Art Gallery Library.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., and “Life on the 18th Hole Preparation File,” David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC.
- 8 Allan J. RYAN, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver and Seattle: UBC Press and University of Washington Press, 1999), 232–33.
- 9 Carolyn BUTLER-PALMER, “Renegotiating Identity: ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art as Family Narrative,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 29 (Fall 2008): 186–223.
- 10 NEEL, “Life on the 18th Hole,” *BC Studies* 89 (1991): 131.
- 11 Alanis OBOMSAWIN, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 1995), video recording.
- 12 NEEL, “Life on the 18th Hole,” 131.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 David NEEL, “David Neel Artist/Photographer,” 1991. Trial of Tears pamphlet, David Neel Studio Files, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC.
- 15 NEEL, “Life on the 18th Hole,” 131.
- 16 Bill MCLENNAN and Karen DUFFEK, *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations* (Vancouver, Toronto, and Seattle: UBC Press and University of Washington Press, 2000), 151.
- 17 As cited in Bill HOLM, “Structure and Design,” in *Boxes and Bowls* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1974), 20–32.
- 18 David Neel interview with the author, 29 June 2002.
- 19 David NEEL, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” in *David Neel: Living Traditions*, ed. Andrew Hunter (Kamloops: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1998), 16.
- 20 David NEEL, “Artist Statement accompanying *Life on the 18th Hole*,” 1990. David Neel Archive, Vancouver.
- 21 British Columbia Union of Indian Chiefs, pamphlet, Artist File, David Neel Studio, North Vancouver, BC; NEEL, “Modernism in Northwest Coast Art,” 6.
- 22 David Neel interview with the author, 29 June 2002.
- 23 David NEEL, Press Release, *The Vancouver Sun*, 20 Sept. 1990.

Rétablir la paix : *Life on the 18th Hole* de David A. Neel

CAROLYN BUTLER-PALMER

La sérigraphie de David A. Neel (n. 1960) *Life on the 18th Hole* (1990) rappelle le conflit armé entre les guerriers mohawks, la Sûreté du Québec et l'armée canadienne. Le catalyseur de la crise a été un projet d'agrandissement du terrain du Club de golf d'Oka de neuf à dix-huit trous. Cet agrandissement aurait empiété sur le cimetière autochtone de Kanehsatake. La crise de Kanehsatake (ou crise d'Oka) a commencé le 11 juillet 1990 et a duré soixante-dix-huit jours. La crise armée a rapidement dégénéré en émeutes, fusillades et au moins une mort violente avant que l'harmonie ne soit rétablie grâce à des interventions pacifistes. La crise d'Oka est largement connue grâce à l'attention internationale qu'elle a reçue dans les médias.

Neel, photographe, peintre et sculpteur kwakiutl demeurant à Vancouver, à 4 500 kilomètres du lieu du conflit, a d'abord eu connaissance de la lutte armée par les articles provenant de sources canadiennes, telles le quotidien torontois *The Globe and Mail* et le magazine *MacLean's*. Inspiré par l'injustice dont il avait été témoin par l'entremise des rapports de presse, Neel a créé le photomontage *Life on the 18th Hole* à partir de photos d'actualité et de ses propres dessins pendant les premiers jours de l'affrontement.

Le présent article étudie la manière dont Neel a puisé dans sa formation de sculpteur pour adapter les photos de presse à la culture kwakiutl et situer le récit chez les communautés maritimes du nord-ouest du Pacifique, un processus de localisation qui comprenait la disposition, la couleur et le masque du guerrier mohawk qu'il avait sculpté. La formation de photojournaliste de Neel lui a aussi servi à situer l'histoire de Kanehsatake à l'intérieur d'un cadre politique plus large d'images de guerre, dont le tableau de Pablo Picasso *Guernica*, également inspiré par des comptes rendus de presse du bombardement de Guernica, Espagne. Comme le *Guernica* de Picasso, *Life on the 18th Hole* a été mobilisée et popularisée à travers de multiples expositions et reproductions dans la presse et sur des affiches. Elle est maintenant considérée par plusieurs comme une œuvre significative dans l'histoire de l'art autochtone de la fin du xx^e siècle.

Cet essai est fondé sur une section de la thèse de doctorat de Carolyn Butler-Palmer *I Won't Play Primitive to Your Modern, The Art of David Neel*

(*Kwagiutl*), 1985–2000, Université de Pittsburgh, 2006. Carolyn Butler-Palmer travaille à la rédaction d'un livre sur David A. Neel, son père, David Lyle Neel, sa grand-mère, Ellen Neel, et ses enfants, Edwin et Ellena Neel.