

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## BROOKLYN RAIL

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: *Surviving Active Shooter Custer*

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Installation view: Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: *Surviving Active Shooter Custer*, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, 2019. Courtesy MoMA PS1. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

At this point it may be obvious to say that history is usually written by the victors, but other histories are also always being composed, and there are innumerable forms this writing can take. During the past forty years, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho) has created work addressing the ignored and suppressed histories of Native people in North America. He first came to wider attention with his series “Native Hosts” (1988–) which documents the original Native names for colonized lands. An early example installed in New York City declares “NEW YORK TODAY YOUR HOST IS TUSCARORA” (1988) on a commercially produced, official-looking metal highway sign with the letters in NEW YORK reversed at the top. Formatting the place name backward defamiliarizes the commonly accepted territorial designation, while the name of one of the Native tribes (itself an Anglicized version) previously

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occupying the region now called “New York” appears more immediately legible. Displacement and extirpation, in other words, can be both geographic and linguistic.

*Surviving Active Shooter Custer*, Heap of Birds’s current exhibition at MoMA PS1—located on what was formerly land of the Lenape people—includes the work (2018) from which the show’s title is taken. Installed in its own gallery, it consists of two identical grids of twenty-four text-based prints at a right angle from each other. Both are arrayed in three horizontal and eight vertical rows, and nearly all of the prints contain six vertically aligned words. The language has been repurposed from a variety of sources ranging from historical documents (“MAKE UTERINE HATS YOUR SPORT”—a reference to the Sand Creek massacre) to song lyrics (“TAKE YOU HOME IN MY ONE EYED FORD”). Handwritten white capital letters float on blood-red and rust-colored paper, with the prints on the right wall facing the viewer produced in a lighter hue. (They are, technically, the ghost prints of the other set’s original monoprints.) The words and phrases moving down, up, and across the grid create a sense of constant disruption, both of the lives and cultures of Native people and in Heap of Birds’s intervention in dominant historical and ideological narratives, ones that continue to explode in violence, as the phrase “surviving active shooter” indicates.

Past history never completely fades, especially its more traumatic versions. Also installed in its own gallery, *Health of the People is the Highest Law* (2019) presents the same arrangement of twenty-four dark-red monoprints mirrored by a more spectral orange set. Here, the violence has partly been internalized: “BLOOD SUGAR BLOOD PRESSURE FULL BLOODED” and “NATIVES HIGHEST SUICIDE RATES IN U.S.” The prints’ position on joining walls makes them speak to each other as much as to the viewer, urging a healing in response to physical and psychic damage: “GIVE OFFERING MEDICINE MAN DOCTOR YOU.” A third gallery displays three smaller grids of text-based works. *Genocide and Democracy* (2016) sprinkles words from “The Star-Spangled Banner” and patriotic anthems amid a general description of the racist brutalities—including slavery—on which the United States is founded. *American Policy II* from 1987 shows the evolution of Heap of Birds’s later monoprints from this work’s use of vibrant pastels on paper. *Blue Tree* (2005 – 17) is more sensual, with its dyed paper spanning dark indigo, turquoise, and gray; and its language is more intimate, speaking to bodies in a domestic space even as violence lurks nearby.

Although Heap of Birds is a prolific artist who also paints and makes public sculpture, the exhibition stays tightly focused on these five language grids. The one exception is four more of his metal signs, collectively entitled *Trail of Tears* (2005) and reproduced in a couple different places at MoMA PS1. Smaller than those made for the *Native Hosts* series, they more mimic signs for pedestrians, and in fact they address the infamous coerced relocation of Native people mentioned in their title. The last sign reads: “WALK TO OKLAHOMA.” In the early seventeenth century, the Lenape were living in a region that included the Hudson and Delaware rivers and what is now New York City. By the middle of the nineteenth-century they had been forcibly pushed through Pennsylvania and Ohio and into Oklahoma and Texas. Heap of Birds might sometimes appear to signal toward a distant past, yet its historical repercussions continue to be lived daily in the bodies and communities of Native people in North America. In their collaged quality, the texts Heap of Birds assembles both in **individual** prints and those gathered into

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larger installations connect past and present, individual and institution, colonized and colonizer.  
They aim for survival, and at moments the possibility to thrive.