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Nancy Marie Mithlo

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Guest Editor's Introduction

Curatorial Practice and Native North American Art

Nancy Marie Mithlo

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hat is American Indian Curatorial Practice and why is it important now? Since the 2004 opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian on the national mall in Washington, D.C., it may appear that issues of accurate and sensitive self-representations had largely been resolved. Native peoples were no longer routinely being showcased in diorama settings alongside stuffed elephants, as they were in the natural history museum setting. But American Indian scholars and activists discovered that we are now only beginning the process of reclamation of self via the museum enterprise. The enduring tensions surrounding American Indian history, arts, and culture are still with us: traditional or modern, tribally specific or pan-tribal, members of U.S. society or separatist nations.

Self-definition in the institutionalized era of Native representations requires an engagement with existing systems of reception and circulation, including the language, institutions, and concepts that were mobilized in the past to oppress. The museum as a context is simply a building, the exterior manifestation of prevalent ways of thinking and acting. While we can create newer models of exhibition, programming, and even architecture, the real infrastructure lies in the thoughts and actions of the senders and receivers—the theorists and the public who consume messages. As contributing author and curator Michelle McGeough reminds us, this is an act of storytelling, an enduring process

at which Indigenous people are known to excel. Her contribution to this volume exposes the complexities of Native participation in the museum enterprise, including the tensions inherent in pan-tribal consultations. In her words, "As a person from the northern prairie who was not privy to the Southwest's indigenous peoples protocol, I was cautious. For me, there is also concern that communities vary in terms of the degree of disclosure that is permissible regarding their spiritual practices. And to an indigenous person there is also the recognition that even in those seemingly benign depictions of everyday life are elements of ceremony and sacredness."

Similarly, artist and curator Miles Miller charts his professional course serving as a curator while negotiating the complexities of relying on inaccurate historical documents that inform the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act regulations. His negotiations appear to involve less a tension between tribes and more a matter of intertribal recognition and acceptance of his traditional training as a Yakama person. He states, "Traditional culture thrives today due to the nurturance of stories that are carried by individuals responsible for their continuance. These community experts serve as curators not only in an object-centered sense, but also in a broader philosophical sense within their tribal contexts. They thus curate not only objects, but also deep spiritual knowledge. This spiritual knowledge highlights notions of ownership and use." These applied, yet deeply theoretical insights by Native arts practitioners, are vital to our understanding of emergent themes and directions in curatorial processes.

Now that we are telling the rich stories of our lives, what stories do we choose and how do we go about the telling? Will established languages—those belonging to the disciplines of art history or curatorial studies—be of use, or are new terms and concepts needed? The researcher John Paul Rangel suggests linkages with TribalCrit theory, citing Walter Benjamin to argue that reduction and simulation in Native arts silence and erase the originating cultures. He suggests adopting the conceptual framework "contemporary" in a strategic manner, in order to assert a Native presence utilizing Indigenous perspectives and aesthetics defined by the case study example of the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Rangel's contribution highlights the "Indigenization of space" that occurs when Native people "reclaim a location through cultural signifiers, performance, ceremony, song, dance, or installation that convey the existence and presence of Native peoples and cultures." Importantly, MoCNA accomplishes this Indigenization of space by the staff's role as "ambassadors for Native America." His poetic description cites MoCNA as "a contemporary Native arts museum . . . in a U.S. government building that is near the center of a town that was built over a Pueblo Indian village. Over a few

hundred years, Native Americans have symbolically reclaimed a small island of the lands they once occupied freely."

The contributing author and artist Dyani Reynolds-White Hawk similarly mines the existing literature to find new paths for emerging theory. Her contribution takes on intersecting parallels with outsider arts and Native arts, locating applications of "otherness," exoticism, and biography that uniquely inform a critical reception in commerce and the academy. She insightfully pinpoints "the ways in which mainstream art institutions and their constituents tend to treat groups that have not historically been equal participants in the makeup of Western art history," concluding that they are "fleeting interests": "Each are brought into mainstream institutions in a manner similar to what we would expect of an invited guest, at times even an honored guest. While we may exalt and care for a guest, when the visit is over, we expect them to leave, at which point our lives return to the comfort of what we know."

A key theme to emerge from these essays is the Indigenous values of mentorship and honoring those who have served in leadership positions. The Museum of Contemporary Native Arts curator Patsy Phillips's original essay on her friend and mentor, the artist Harry Fonseca, extends the work he pursued in series like the *Coyote* by explicitly linking a harsh political history to the restricted circulation and reception of contemporary Native arts today. "Land appropriation, substandard housing and education, limited economic opportunities, and cultural bias are consistent factors in Indian communities," writes Phillips. "These obstacles have negatively affected the self-perception of Indian peoples for generations. This oppressive climate is apparent in the selective venues in which Native arts circulate—galleries, museums, and seasonal arts fairs with restricted categories of reception. Through *Coyote*, Fonseca suggests, 'Freedom is the Native Americans' choice.'"

Our arts are significant because they offer a platform to creatively express the rage, passion, and strength of our human condition. The physicality of arts offers a tangible way into our psyche and a way out for our survival and prosperity. Given the often brutal and restrictive manifestations of Native peoples as solely living in the past or as inauthentic shadows of their ancestors, the act of creating, reproducing, and circulating one's own stories becomes a form of cultural survival. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Article 11 identifies the visual and performing arts as important manifestations of Native peoples' "right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures."¹

Research conducted over the past two generations has resulted in an emerging practice where our students are now instructing other students in a field that is largely unrecognized—the curation of Native arts

using Indigenous epistemologies. The signifiers of this field—work that is long-term, reciprocal, mutually meaningful, and with mentorship—are evident in the careful practices that characterize an in-depth analysis, not merely a physical description of an object or a personal, subjective reflection of meaning. Heather Ahtone's essay in this volume epitomizes this approach, which she terms "Indigenous epistemologies." Her essay explains, "While every effort of political and religious assault has been made historically to subdue these same cultures, their survival can be partially attributed to the continued production of the visual and performance arts. As long as Indigenous people continue to use the arts to reflect unique experiences within a contemporary society, they are fundamentally breathing life into these cultures. Because the vitality of these cultures is so closely tied to the creative process, it is important that work by Indigenous artists be considered within a framework that incorporates Indigenous epistemology."

Like Phillips, Ahtone credits the arts with the transformative power of continued existence in cultural contexts that are both physical and mental. Artists create spaces of survival, as in Joe Feddersen's 2003 *Urban Indian* glass series, which incorporates the traditional symbols found in his tribe's Plateau-based cultural materials.² Working directly with the artist, Ahtone incorporates into her analysis specific community referents for signs and symbols, such as the chevron (an indicator for woman). She concludes, "The idiosyncratic nature of Indigenous designs and symbols puts a responsibility on the artist and art historian to consider these as semiotic references in context with their meanings," describing this type of analysis as a form of "reciprocity."

These field-defining referents—context, reciprocity, cultural specificity—are reflected vividly when we conduct critiques of existing scholarly resources. While significant work has been done in the past two generations, the utility of standard paradigms of interpretation, such as regional or chronological referents alone, are now being questioned. Melanie Herzog and Sarah Stolte's essay chronicling the scholarship of recent publications is essential to gaining a perspective of the many theoretical approaches at play. Their careful and insightful analysis charts strategies and resources for teaching American Indian art survey courses as an intellectual exercise, advocating "a reconceptualization of art history's discursive frameworks, canonical narratives, and assumptions about art, artists, and representation." Thus, Herzog and Stolte argue, "critical engagement with indigenous methods and knowledge is crucial to this reframing, and must be foregrounded as key course content." Their essay productively expands the analysis from one of Native or non-Native practitioners to a consideration of Native methodologies and perspectives incorporated into the core teaching approaches. "Whether Native or non-Native," they write,

"as educators we all need to center Native perspectives in our teaching as we design and instruct courses that look at the interconnections in Native art among aesthetics, materials, function, meaning, social relations, and social practices, and the historical circumstances within which these works of art are produced."

In a parallel fashion, my own essay in this volume formalizes a critique that I typically find employed in conversations on Native arts—the refrains "I'm an artist first and an Indian second," and "There's no word for art in my language." These complaints that originate from within our communities tend to be deeply divisive and unproductive in terms of intellectual discourse and political transformation. My analysis of "post-Indian" curatorial themes seeks to highlight the utility of American Indian Curatorial Practice as a means of reclaiming cultural traditions, asserting sovereignty, and embracing land-based philosophies.

All art is deeply embedded in cultural references and meanings, and not merely apolitical or decorative. While an exposure of the limitations of classic art historical approaches may yield useful insights, I advocate the identification of unique pedagogical practices already at play in institutions and classrooms that actively seek to employ Indigenous perspectives, methodologies, and insights into their interpretation and analysis of contemporary Native arts. Current symposiums and conferences, such as the 2009 School for Advanced Research seminar "Essential Aesthetics: An Exploration of Contemporary Indigenous Art and Identity" and the resulting 2011 conference "Essentially Indigenous? Contemporary Native Arts Symposium," held at the George Gustav Heye Center National Museum of the American Indian, indicate new directions for theorization.

This maturation of the field would be impossible without the institutions that have typically been cast in the role of the cultural inhibitors—museums, research centers, granting agencies, and colleges. Researchers would do well to closely examine the emergence and intersection of these institutions and their long-range impact on American Indian studies more broadly. For example, the Ford Foundation, led by the Cherokee researcher Elizabeth Theobald Richards (program officer for media, arts, and culture), funded nine innovative arts projects across Native North America under the rubric *Advancing the Dialogue on Native American Arts in Society (ATD)* in the first decade of the twenty-first century. I was fortunate to lead one of those projects at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, which I titled "American Indian Curatorial Practice: State of the Field."³ This issue of *Wicazo Sa Review* is one of the projects that emerged from that initiative.⁴

The final Ford Foundation report released in 2008 identified the long-term aim of the ATD initiative to "advance an exchange of ideas by

and about the Native American arts field and to engage the larger field in a dialogue around the pluralistic role of arts in society." Critical goals included increasing critical writing by and about the Native American arts community; increasing artistic and scholarly exchanges between Native artists and organizations and other communities in the larger arts field; and expanding participation of Native American arts leaders in key conversations and initiatives on the changing role of arts in the United States. Importantly, the Ford initiative identified the central challenge in achieving these goals as "the current lack of representation and mere inclusion of Native American artists in contemporary art museums, galleries, theaters, dance, and musical venues as well as among regional funders, and diversity commissions." The cumulative finding was that "the cost of accommodating/assimilating their [Native artists'] work to fit the dominant worldview of what counts as 'art' is at best limiting and at worst exploitive. Therefore, this initiative is not about the inclusion of another ethnic group into the broader arts and cultural landscape. It is, rather, about carving a space where contemporary and traditional Native American artists and arts scholars can be a creative and intellectual force for the nation as a whole to examine and further understand its cultural meaning."⁵

This volume offers evidence of the impulse to redefine the parameters of Native intellectual traditions in arts criticism and practice. Scholars have only recently pursued the articulation, codification, and legitimization of American Indian arts drawing from Indigenous epistemologies. Formal and descriptive considerations alone are no longer acceptable in the wake of the intellectual and legal mandates of the past two decades (including the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) dealing with the contextual and political ramifications of American Indian arts production, circulation, and interpretation. Resources and infrastructure such as reference collections, instructional image banks, and textbooks are markedly missing from the study of contemporary American Indian arts. The emerging scholarship profiled in this volume is thus positioned within a transitional period that is establishing new pedagogies, practices, and interpretative frameworks. The formal manifestation of our stories and achievements will prove critical in the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in arts scholarship.

The curator Lowry Stokes Sims has incisively described the power inherent in "self-definition and self-image" as a revolution for black artists "as they assumed the role of proactive rather than reactive agents in contemporary society."⁶ This shift in perception, meaning and action has decisively taken place in Indian country. We need only to recognize, celebrate, and codify the shift for the next generation of intellectuals and activists. This volume does exactly that. My heartfelt



Leatrice Jay (*seated, in glasses, holding girl*) at Mithlo family feast, 2010, Apache, Oklahoma. Photograph by Nancy Marie Mithlo.

thanks go out to the generosity of the authors, artists, and institutions that have made this collection of essays possible.

P O S T S C R I P T

I dedicate this volume to my aunt Leatrice Pewewardy Jay, who passed away during the final edits of the manuscript. "Miss Jay" was a gifted, lifelong educator who tirelessly gave herself to the needs of others. Her spirit infuses the work described within these pages. Her strength and passion will not be forgotten.

Nancy Marie Mithlo is a Chiricahua Apache, a PhD, and associate professor of art history and American Indian studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is the author of *“Our Indian Princess”: Subverting the Stereotype* (2009). Mithlo’s extensive relationship with the Institute of American Indian Arts includes serving as senior editor for the Ford Foundation–funded volume *Manifestations: New Native Art Criticism*, produced and published by the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts. She received the 2011–2012 School for Advanced Research Anne Ray Fellowship and a Georgia O’Keeffe Research Center Fellowship in support of her publication and exhibit on the legacy of Kiowa photographer Horace Poolaw. Mithlo’s curatorial work has resulted in six exhibits at the Venice Biennale.

N O T E S

- 1 See <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html>.
- 2 Feddersen is from the Okanagan people, who are part of the Colville Confederated Tribes.
- 3 See the Ford Foundation’s 2010 “Native Arts and Cultures: Research, Growth, and Opportunities for Philanthropic Support” report, <http://www.fordfoundation.org/pdfs/library/Native-Arts-and-Cultures.pdf>. The original portfolio “Advancing the Dialogue on Native American Arts in Society” included the following recipients: Cornell University, the Denver Art Museum, the Institute of American Indian Arts, New York University’s Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Public Theater, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, the University of California, Davis,
- the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison.
- 4 For other outcomes, see http://www.nancymariemithlo.com/aicp_menu.htm.
- 5 The Ford Foundation’s unpublished “Indigenous Knowledge and Expressive Culture Portfolio Final Report: Advancing the Dialogue on Native American Arts in Society Initiative Convening Held at the Ford Foundation on April 29, 2008”; Elizabeth Theobald Richards, Program Officer, Media, Arts, and Culture, Ford Foundation; JoAnn K. Chase, Consultant, The Chase Group; Sandy Grande, Research Consultant, Ford Foundation.
- 6 Lowery Stokes Sims, “The Post-modern Modernism of Wilfred Lam,” in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 87.