

Nancy Marie Mithlo, Ph.D.

La Biennale di Venezia

2003

2001

1999



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Research Aims
Venice Biennale Exhibits 1999–2003

My work concerns the intersection of visual anthropology and museum studies, particularly in relationship to indigenous arts and media productions. My exploration of these conceptual worlds involves curation of exhibits, community-based research, qualitative interviews and photo archival work. I am interested in the ways that Native American communities structure cultural values within the pan-tribal settings of Indian arts commerce, education, and interpretation via cultural institutions such as museums and international exhibitions. Unlike previous research methodologies that situate native arts in comparison to mainstream practices, my inquiry privileges and seeks to articulate an indigenous knowledge system at play. My understanding of indigenous knowledge as a site of identity formation is informed by the internal contradictory and complex understandings of contemporary Native identity. Variables such as gender, arts training and ideas of “proper behavior” figure largely in my work.

The opening of the exhibit “Pellerossasogna—The Shirt” at the 50th Venice Biennale on June 12th, 2003 represented the culmination of six years of collaborative work in developing new curatorial approaches to Native American representation in the arts. My participation with indigenous arts at the historic Venice Biennale began when I was invited to accompany Aboriginal curator Brenda Croft to the opening of the Australian pavilion exhibition “Fluent” in 1997. In that year, the United States selected its first person of color to represent the American pavilion, African American painter Robert Colescott. Seeing the impossibility of Native American arts being recognized by the America’s national pavilion, I worked with a group of artists, intellectuals and educators to form the non-profit organization Native American Arts Alliance (NA3) based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. NA3 met monthly to discuss the dilemma of Native American artists in the Southwest who were constrained by economic pressures to produce commercially driven artwork. The possibility of exhibiting on a global arts stage seemed to present a new avenue of reception, one that would not involve the same type of constraints as a presentation in the United States. We subsequently sponsored the first exhibition of Native American art in the 100-year history of the Biennale titled “Ceremonial” in 1999. “Ceremonial” featured the works of eight mature, well-established artists in the field. This project was expanded upon with the 2001 exhibition “Umbilicus” which presented native artists from four different generations. In each exhibition effort, the intellectual work to develop the curatorial theme was primary and the organizational method unique.

Titled the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3) in 2003 to reflect broader global concerns, the organization continued to pursue its mission of allowing a group of native artists the opportunity to create culturally significant art free of commercial pressures. This idea was sought by exercising the following methodological approaches: no curatorial control, no institutional ownership, low tech exhibition techniques, mentorship, strategic art actions, intercultural and intracultural relationships cultivated and a lack of individual or group posturing. While idealistic and not always realized, these methods worked well in achieving an international collaboration with artists and intellectuals concerned with common issues of cultural representation.

The 2003 exhibit “Pellerossasogna—The Shirt” was unique in that many organizations agreed to participate as co-sponsors. The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) hosted the exhibit’s opening with comments on contemporary native art provided by Director

Rick West. Mr. West expressed his interest in accessioning the archives of the IA3 to the Smithsonian collection, signaling its historic importance. Additional sponsors of the 2003 exhibit included: The Woodland Cultural Centre, *Meridians* Journal, Women Make Movies, Smith College, The University of Arizona, Nizhoni Bridges, Inc., The Canada Council for the Arts and the University of Venice's Department of Postcolonial Literature.

The inclusion of the University of Venice in the exhibition ensured the beginnings of an international dialogue between Italian and Native American intellectuals that has not before been achieved within the scope of the IA3 projects. At the University of Venice, our group partnered with Professor Armando Pajalich, discussing the place of Native American topics within the paradigm of post-colonial thought. Professor Pietro Clemente of the University of Florence expressed interest in addressing how the fields of visual anthropology and museum anthropology merge within the scope of contemporary Native American art. Importantly, Italian Anthropologist Elisabetta Frasca, a graduate of La Sapienza in Rome served as an American Studies Diploma student at Smith College in 2003–2004, documenting the Biennale projects in a formal thesis.

The 2003 Venice Biennale's press materials state the following curatorial objectives:

The 50th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale di Venezia... aims to offer a broad, complex survey of research to the public for world-wide contemporary art which reveals the diversity of points of view in the increasingly complex mosaic of today's artistic languages. The very nature of the Biennale di Venezia, comprising the major International Exhibition and the numerous national participations in the various pavilions, reflects a development in the world in which global and local identities seek a continuous dialogue.

The occasion of Native Arts as a component of this international discourse is certainly an important historic development, however additional considerations exist. The Native American presence at this global forum presented several compelling issues that I hope to address in my upcoming publications. Is the call for the inclusion of diverse experiences and perspectives in cultural and educational institutions an opportunity for substantive shifts in the method, content and process of artistic representation? Will a consistent voice in this international venue lead to more assertive articulations of indigenous aesthetics in relation to Western norms? Or are channels of reception so ingrained that native artists will exercise self-censorship in the arts, despite new prospects for display and interpretation? I am confident that questions like these will serve to articulate new understandings of Native American identity and sovereignty, informed by artistic developments globally.