

“We Have All Been Colonized”¹: Subordination and Resistance on a Global Arts Stage

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A century of Native American arts commerce in Santa Fe, New Mexico, has resulted in a market in which visual artists report severe restrictions, both in the content of their work and its reception. This case study examines the efforts of a contemporary native arts collective based in Santa Fe that sought to “create culturally-significant art free of the pressures of a commercially-driven society.” The forum the group chose was the global stage of the Venice Biennale. The 1999 and 2001 Biennale exhibitions sponsored by the Native American Arts Alliance demonstrated that the area of greatest tension for organizers, artists and audience concerned ideas of authorship and control. While this international presentation offered an alternative approach to arts production and reception outside a buy-and-sell arena, traditional arts commerce rules continued to inform the exchange of information. New ideas of authorship and control reflective of a collectivist attitude collapsed to established models of economic transactions based on individualism. The author concludes that cultural arts exploitation cannot be altered by erasure of economic constraints alone, but is more poignantly informed by internalized notions of disempowerment and subordination, largely in reaction to corporate appropriation and legal systems of ownership. The identification and application of an indigenous knowledge systems approach is advocated as a research methodology for understanding contemporary native arts productions.

“WHAT IS COMMON TO PEOPLE WHOSE WAY OF LIFE HAS BEEN
OUTLAWED?” [NA3 2001: 208]

An analysis of contemporary Native American arts production demands a critical engagement with indigenous knowledge systems. In advocating an indigenous

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knowledge systems approach, I am not proposing a reconciliation of art and anthropology, nor am I privileging Native American studies as an alternative. I argue that the conceptual frameworks commonly utilized in the analysis of form, style, consumption and display of indigenous arts fail to capture the essence of artistic intent.² It is the subjective experience of the American Indian artist in the context of global and historical concerns that I explore in this article. I conclude that the ability of artists to produce culturally meaningful statements has less to do with economic constraints and is more poignantly informed by internalized notions of disempowerment and subordination. In this sense, a 100-year-old legacy of curatorial colonialism has produced profound disorganizations of unique knowledge systems, the total ramifications of which, at this point in history, we can only guess at.

The subjugation of indigenous peoples under colonialism results in innumerable forms of oppression, from which the arts are not immune. A focus on institutions and patrons of native arts (academics being defined as one type of patron or consumer of native arts) cannot significantly enhance a reading of indigenous aesthetics or worldviews. By shifting the locus of the analysis from the psychology of the oppressor to the experiences of the oppressed, a discursive space is made available in which new paradigms of knowledge may become accessible. It is therefore the internalized passions, desires and insecurities of the artist that serve as the basis for interpretation and, more pointedly to the concerns of this article, politicization. The application of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) to art analysis allows for a consideration of politicization as a form of aesthetic response. Just as IKS considerations of ecology can address development efforts globally, IKS methodologies are capable of altering substantially the manner in which we study indigenous arts developments internationally.

Turning the gaze away from the collectors, the museums, the market, even the relevance of native art to other art movements historically allows an opportunity to engage in self-reflective critique. The terms I use, politicization and knowledge systems, refer to a concern with the motivation, self-perception and historical self-situation of the total arts complex for Native American artists. This approach is neither descriptive nor celebratory (in fact there is much to mourn for) as many contemporary assessments are. The method I am describing is more closely akin to the writings of the film theorist Bill Nichols in resembling a testimonial [Nichols 1992]. Testimonials embrace the personal as political, honor experiential knowledge, and, tellingly, *embody* (Nichols's emphasis) social collectivities rather than represent them in an authoritative manner. This distinction is important because a Western reading of the word *politicization* seemingly signifies an authoritative or bounded social movement often defined in opposition to another. In seeking an alternative reading of this concept, we find the embodiment of collective truths necessitates an absence of control and a blurring of individual authorship. These distinctions involving multiple concepts of authority (including authorship, control, curation) are crucial considerations in constructing a theoretical approach reflective of indigenous realities. They are also the areas that present the greatest challenge to contemporary theorists, including the artists.

Efforts to politicize traditional indigenous arts arenas are typically cast as either confrontational individual statements asserted through the content of the work, or

communal interpretations dependent upon the mediating force of a curator or institutional sponsor. The Biennale projects under the collaborative Native American Arts Alliance, or NA3, assertively sought to avoid both of these strategic maneuvers—individualism because it so often led to vanity and opportunism, and institutionalism because of the extent of artistic compromises that were often made in appeasing an audience. Ultimately, however, our³ efforts were diminished by an internalized colonialism, evident in themes of authorship and control. We were simultaneously both victim and victimizer; our self-censorship seemingly a seamless reflection of our inherited oppression. Thus, "politicization" as an outgrowth of both consumerism and public interpretation in indigenous arts is inhibited by cyclical expressions of subordination and resistance to external-turned-internal oppressions. Self-perceptions of race and ethnicity appear to be inescapably formed in opposition to the flawed interpretations of others.

Anthropology has long been based on the premise that we seek to learn about others so that we can better understand ourselves. Examination of the exotic was a seemingly self-evident way in which to compare and contrast learned or "natural" behavior. Ironically, the status of "the other" at the turn of the millennium appears to rely on the same interpretative framework, for in order to understand ourselves we too must understand those whose worldviews depart from our own. The challenge of articulating indigenous knowledge is the ability to articulate paradigms of thought that are buried and often obscured with forced assimilation—loss of land, language, and religion. An easier response and outwardly more urgent need is to criticize the flawed interpretations of others—in film, advertisements, research findings, social programs and economic development initiatives. Yet, is the reexamination of stereotypes, ideologies and philosophies of the oppressors a useful tactic in the light of pressing internal social concerns such as health, education, and self-determination? I argue that in the realm of aesthetic theory as it applies to native arts, this reactive stance is actually harmful.

Art as a tool of liberation for marginalized peoples has been based historically on the economic returns of the market, often bartered hand in hand with tourism or revitalization efforts. I conclude that rationalizing arts commerce as a means of self-esteem or cultural centers as a tool of social empowerment is no longer justifiable as an effective means of self-expression. In essence, tribal endeavors that seek to gain acceptance through the traditional arts channels, the market or the museum, are reacting to the ignorance of others, not engaging in a proactive stance of self-determination or legitimacy.

The double benefits of cash from tourism and the opportunity to "tell our story" have long been the big justifiers of both American tribal cultural centers and majority museums that retain large amounts of indigenous material culture in their collections from the days of "salvage anthropology." Whether it is tourists supporting the local economy with arts consumption or the interest of the mainstream in learning more about multicultural issues through the museum, the focus is on serving the nonnatives with arts or information capital. I contend that this self-serving agenda is no longer valid in a world where subject populations exercise their right to deny research that does not directly benefit their own people.

The Yuchi artist Richard Ray Whitman laments, "so much is put upon us to give, give, give. We respond by give, give, giving" [Whitman 2001: 208]. This reactive accommodation to the emotional and educational needs of others diverts communities from the important work of defining their own interpretations of indigenous cultural politics. Self-expression should start with wisdom, not the ignorance of others. It is this proactive stance that fueled recent collaborative Native American art statements at the Venice Biennale 1999 and 2001. The obvious impact, however, was subtle, even obscure.

"WHAT IS THE CENTER OF OUR REALITY?" [NA3 2001: 208]—UMBILICUS

The Native American Arts Alliance (NA3) was formed in 1997 by a group of artists, intellectuals and educators based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Influenced by indigenous colleagues from Australia and Canada who had exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1995 and 1997, the NA3 chose Venice as the location to make an international arts statement. Our purpose was to give Native people the opportunity to make art that would be meaningful to Native communities, free of the commercial pressures to produce politically neutral work for consumers. The resulting projects were the exhibitions "Ceremonial," sponsored in 1999, and "Umbilicus" in 2001. Our goals were theoretically rich and complex. We debated, agonized and struggled to articulate a contemporary statement reflective of a self-chosen identity. In the end, it was not an easy equation for those other than the organizers to comprehend, given the complexities of our lived realities at the turn of the millennium. Why would Native Americans go abroad to speak to their own communities? Is a pantribal statement possible, given the vast disparities between unique tribal values? What can an elitist international venue give to us that we could not ourselves accomplish in the States? The project was equally burdened by mixed reviews concerning our legitimacy. Stereotypes of disempowered, impoverished, and amateur Native American artists failed to capture the reality of urban, professional, and mobilized Native participants. Often we were asked, "Who let you go?" as if permission were required. Once in Venice several viewers asked, "Where are the Indians?"

In drawing this example of indigenous arts actions at the turn of a century of Native American arts exploitation, I do not intend to engage here in self-congratulating or celebratory assessments. In fact, I wish to expose explicitly the areas where the project failed to meet its goals—specifically the areas of tension and disagreement concerning authorship and control. What follows then is an analysis of where any indigenous colonized peoples might find themselves one hundred years from now, given the same general parameters. If Santa Fe is a useful metaphor for where generations of arts commerce in a tourist destination spot can lead, then what is to be learned from the actions of urban, politically-engaged, self-aware, Western-educated, intertribal native elites asserting identity on a world stage? In a globalized and increasingly interconnected arts cultural arena, these findings may articulate what may be expected in communities that are postcommerce and mobile in an era defined as "late imperial" [Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997: 7].

"OUR EXISTENCE IS SELF-EVIDENT" [Shaw 2001: 208]—SYMBOLIC
POLITICIZATION

The primary agenda of exhibiting in Venice was self-interpretation. It was an attempt to show "That our art came from our culture and that we were going to try desperately to get it back to our culture" [Haozous 2000]. Additionally, the process of organizing was to be communal; no curatorial control or institutional sponsorship fueled the statement. Both content and process privileged group control, avidly avoiding individual statements. By engaging in a concerted communal arts production were we trying to recreate an authentic sense of self? Were we longing for a time that has passed under the sweep of global capitalist norms?

In standard academic discourse, ideas of authenticity are commonly interpreted in the "imperialist nostalgia" mode as a vestige of the corrupt legacy of colonialism [Rosaldo 1989: 68–87]. A desire for all things authentic automatically identifies one as lacking in concepts of dynamism and change. It also exposes the covert implications of power that are exercised in one group challenging the self-definition of another. This is not the sense in which I interpreted the collective's actions. Explicitly, organizers aimed for "right thinking" and "proper behavior" as the impetus for a return to communal sensibilities [Mithlo 2000]. The Maori theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests that a longing for authenticity can signal alternate meanings for those of the colonized world. She argues that belief in an idealized self may be appropriated as a means of "reorganizing 'national consciousness' in the struggles for decolonization." Smith refers to the ways these "symbolic appeals" are strategically important in political struggles [Smith 1999: 73].

The act of applying to and being accepted by the institution of the Venice Biennale as an "*a latere*" exhibition was a political coup, symbolic of our empowerment. A native arts organization sought and gained political acceptance as a sovereign nation by an international organization. For this group, it was something like gaining entry into the United Nations. Likewise, the curators of *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* explained their determination to exhibit African diaspora art at the Biennale by stating, "If you do not exhibit, you do not exist!" [Vetrocq 2001: 113]. This identification and enactment of symbolic acts is indicative of indigenous attempts to exercise control over predetermined social situations.

Floyd Solomon, a Laguna educator and artist, states, "The task which lies ahead is to begin to seek and develop an artistic language which communicates the experiences of Native Americans within contemporary society without having the language be confused with the expressions of mainstream America or the traditionalism of past Native American images" [quoted in Mitchell 1992]. Similarly, the artist Mateo Romero asserts the possibility of "a portrait of the artist in current vernacular" [Romero 2001: 208]. These challenges suggest the crucial role of language in transforming the inaccurate representations of the past. The metaphor of language seems particularly appropriate as indigenous artists seek symbolic control of their statements. Words as symbols embody power and control over abstract thoughts and actions. As symbols only, however, they also ultimately fail to address the enactment of empowerment that organizers sought in the participation in worlds previously unavailable to even our parents of a generation before.

"WHAT IS THE CENTER OF OUR REALITY?" [NA3 2001: 208] CAPITALIST DETERMINATION REJECTED

The late Lloyd New, President Emeritus of the Institute of American Indian Arts, wrote the definitive statement on the use of cultural difference as a basis for creative expression. At the heart of his ideology was the belief that Native Americans no longer had to be poor to be authentic. As a person who knew poverty from his childhood, New would often declare, "I'm not going to apologize for driving a nice car or living in a nice home" [New, personal communication, May 24, 1999]. Clearly, for the early decades of contemporary native arts production (1960–1980s), economics played a solid role in how native artistry was evaluated. A poignant testimony to the privileging of wealth in native communities can be drawn from the newspaper accounts of the deaths of two native artists in Santa Fe. The headline following the discovery of Grey Cohoe, a Navajo printmaker who, at the time of his death was destitute, stated, "Friends say man found dead in alley was artist with alcohol problems" [Terrell 1991]. In contrast, the news account of Earl Biss, a Crow painter who successfully sold his work, read "Master oil painter, Earl Biss, 51, dies" [Soto 1998]. No mention is made in the article that Biss died of a brain hemorrhage allegedly brought on by cocaine intoxication. Both men died of substance abuse, yet one was praised, the other barely received the dignity of his profession—"friends say he was artist."

Class distinctions have become the major indicators of integrity and worth in native arts, a value system that has become incorporated into native ideology as well. As a professor of museum studies at the Institute of American Indian Arts (a tribal college in Santa Fe), I would often encounter prospective students brought in by well-meaning high school counselors who declared, something like "He's a great student: why, he just sold a painting in Gallup for \$600.00!" These scenarios suggest that an unchecked market economy might naturally lead to "capitalist determination"—the idea that economic worth overrides all other considerations, including communal or social values.

In order to understand the path of contemporary native arts development from a low-wage tourist production to a highly valued object of art, a short historical synopsis is in order. A tremendous outpouring of what was considered to be "breaking news" in both academic and popular publications in the 1970s to 1980s concerned the incorporation of modernism into traditional mediums. The common premise was that finally Indians were "free" to express themselves as they so chose and were no longer inhibited by quaint but outmoded social customs or ignorant tourists who wanted only pots and two-dimensional paintings [Brody 1971]. The problematic nature of this approach is exposed when one considers the ramifications of simultaneously claiming that modernism saved Indian art and that Indian art was inherently modern. Each of these assumptions is troubling, for in one we wonder why the native requires saving from his or her own cultural norms (especially by fine arts), and in the other for its functional, biological and racist assumptions about Indians being naturally good artists [Mithlo 2001].

Following an almost gluttonous spate of reckless arts commerce in the late 1980s, the Texas oil money gave out and the flush populations migrated to the Pacific Northwest on computer capital, leaving the Southwest market dry. In this

time of art famine, many artists simply dropped out of the market, and those that stayed tended to be the mature, savvy lot that had moved work in the region for decades. It was largely this group that we drew from in conceptualizing the next great step for Native Arts—politicization. Rather than drop names that are singularly important in the world of contemporary Native American arts and that may be meaningless outside our rather regionalized sphere, I will condense the description of original participants—over 50, at the prime of their career, vocal, either economically successful or well known as personalities in the arts, and disenfranchised. By disenfranchised I mean unsatisfied with current modes of reception and interpretation of their work, despite a few decades of their "making it" in the mainstream. Their participation in the Biennale did not stem from economic need, for all artists were responsible for funding their own travel and shipping. A clear symbolic appeal fueled participation in "Ceremonial," the first Native American art exhibition in the Biennale's history. Success in this instance was clearly defined as simply "being there." Our second endeavor, "Umbilicus," proved much more complex theoretically and more difficult to read in terms of our impact.

"IN THIS WAY, WE TRACE THE ACTIONS OF OUR RESISTANCE" [NA3 2001: 208]—PROBLEMS WITH POLITICIZATION

In an era of self-determination in tribal governance, the ability to exercise sovereignty on a world stage appeared to offer assurance of unmediated artistic expression. As one of the "Umbilicus" exhibiting artists summarized, "An earth relationship is still here for us. We have to redefine ourselves in terms of the earth, not economic terms" [Haozous 2001: 208; see Figure 1]. This earth relationship was demonstrated in both of the main components of the "Umbilicus" exhibition that opened on June 8, 2001, at the Scuola Grande di San Teodoro [Figure 2], Campo San Salvador, near the Rialto Bridge [Figures 1–5].⁴

The "Umbilicus" curatorial theme of creation and emergence originated with the collaborative vision of the artists Richard Ray Whitman, Mateo Romero, Darren Vigil Gray, and Gabriel Lopez Shaw (also known as gwils boha). NA3's concern with globalism and the environment was further developed on site by the artists Beat Kriemler and Bob Haozous, as they constructed an immense belly structure⁵ from aluminum and plastic rods, which was covered in barbed wire, laurel branches and torn red cloth [Figures 4–7]. The poet Sherwin Bitsui's work was featured inside the belly as he narrated the poem *Chrysalis* on film with visuals produced by Shaw.⁶ The belly occupied a grand exhibition hallway complete with frescos, stone and marble, creating an indigenous sense of place within the historic architecture. In an attached cloistered room, Shaw's video *The Story of Maize* addressed the uses of propaganda and the importance of self-knowledge. The strongly evocative video was completely scripted by Shaw on site. It is this video component of the exhibition that I will explore as emblematic of the tensions concerning authority. Tellingly, and applicable to my reference of indigenous knowledge systems methodology, none of these negotiations was visible to anyone save the organizers.



Figure 1 Bob Haozous (left), Gabriel Lopez Shaw (right)—“Umbilicus” Artists, 49 La Biennale di Venezia, June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

A problem arose when Shaw previewed his Biennale contribution to a few of the organizers days before we were to leave for Venice. It is important to note that unlike with standard curation methods, the NA3 organizers did not become involved in what objects or projects the artists would present. Participating artists were free to sponsor whatever statement they chose. A component of this open-ended process was the fact that there was no money for shipping available; hence artists were totally responsible for getting work (and themselves if possible) over to Venice. Certainly this mandate inhibited some invited artists from participating at all, not only because of lack of personal funding but from an unwillingness to participate in seeking or learning how to seek financial support. The gallery system of Santa Fe does not ask this of artists, and some degree of resentment certainly arose from the collective's expectation that artists participate in all aspects of the exhibition process, including fund-raising. Two of the artists initially invited to exhibit ultimately chose not to participate.

Thus, it was close to the date for which we were to leave for Venice that members of the collective viewed Shaw's intended video submission. His piece featured a powerful reworking of the Disney film *Pocahontas*, originally released in 1995. Shaw's careful editing and overlay of appropriated music to the visuals enabled a completely different reading of this historically based narrative. Shaw's artistic intervention was important on several counts. His critique attacked the manner in which contemporary society unquestioningly accepts whatever version of reality corporate America produces for our consumption. In his words we are “chumps” [Shaw 2001]. The ethnic and racial overlay implicates native communities as both fodder for the stereotypes implicit in the Disney version and, simultaneously, for uncritical consumers too. The reworked product scathingly



Figure 2 Scuola Grande di San Teodoro, Campo San Salvador, exhibition site of "Umbilicus," June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

portrays native sexism and violence against native women as well as native male rage against white appropriation of native women. Violence, the destruction of the earth, unchecked technology and religion are open game for Shaw's skilled manipulation of the Disney original. In all, it was a very effective piece.

The quandary arose in relation to our legal liability. One of the board members who had previously been sued by Disney commented, "They are swift and unrelenting. They will shut us down." Shaw, the youngest of the group and without material investments such as a home to lose in a court battle, was intent on using the piece. Other organizers, some of whom had recently lost a court case over artistic freedom, were unwilling to take the chance. Quite simply we were both tired and afraid of another legal entanglement. As a proposed solution, we sought to convey the nonprofit to Shaw before we left the country, leaving him as the sole responsible party, but there was no time. Ultimately, organizers were



Figure 3 Elisabetta Frasca (left), Beat Kriemler (right)—NA3 European team members, June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

forced to ask him to use another piece. To his credit, Shaw agreed, scripting a final video presentation on site in the five days available to us when we mounted the exhibition.

This self-censorship tellingly was characteristic of market negotiations. A patron (the Biennale) creates the illusion that the creative intent of the artist is primary—sales components are invisible. Yet when the exchange is to take place in which money (information) is to be transferred from the producer to the consumer (Biennale audience), suddenly rules apply. What is your price range? Do you have others in another color? May I get a discount if I buy two? These market conversations paralleled our self-imposed restrictions. Could he make the video with a shorter Disney clip? Was it possible to use other animation? What if he shortened the piece to under a minute?

Although other developments paralleled this example, I chose the *Pocahontas* controversy and ultimately censure, to illustrate as emblematic how even our reworking of politicization resulted in an exercise of all we sought to avoid, particularly individual control. In its desire for a rehabilitating authenticity, NA3 sought a communal response to the artistic censorship inherent in Southwest market mandates to produce decorative arts. We optimistically thought that by exhibiting on a global stage, this type of control could be avoided. Tragically, the buy-and-sell of the market arena held fast even within the theoretical goal of politicization. Here in the ultimate free-for-all, an international stage where even sounds coming from the earth, rooms of smoke, or a choir that does nothing but scream count as art, even serious art, here too, we were subordinated. Our fears of censorship were confirmed upon our arrival in Venice where we found a Disney store outlet only a few hundred yards from our venue. Indigenous artists did not

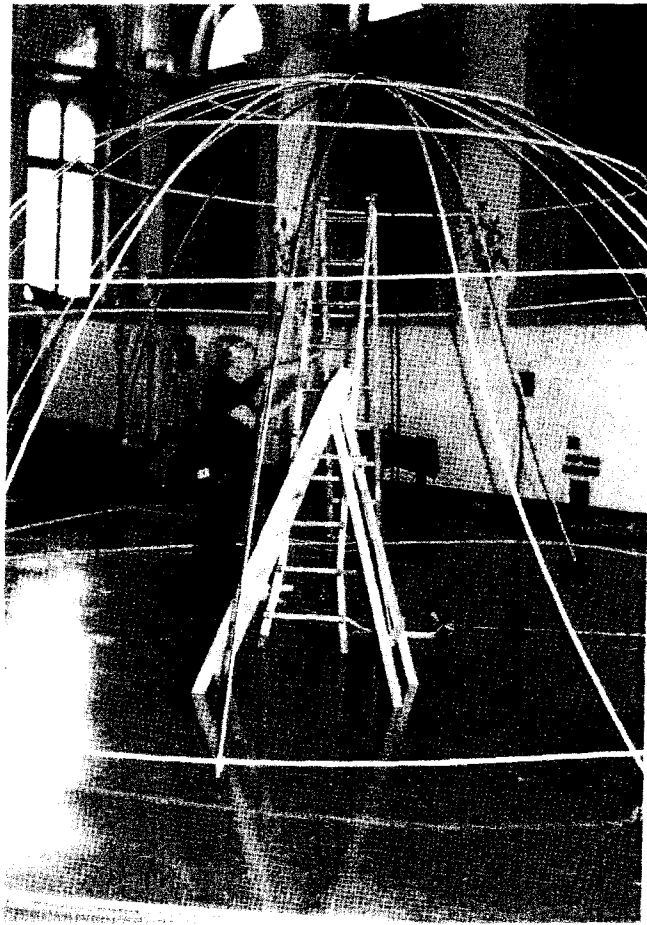


Figure 4 Bob Haozous installing "belly" of "Umbilicus" in Scuola Grande di San Teodoro, June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

have the right to criticize an appropriation of our own history because a global corporation now owns it [Figure 8].

"THEY JUST ARE" [Vigil 2002]—CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Appropriation is not a new story for Native Americans. As outlined by Laurie Ann Whitt, the formula consists of (a) defining the resources of indigenous peoples as common property (land, songs, medicine, and stories, for example) followed by (b) transforming these resources into commodities that may be privately owned, and finally (c) obtaining political and social control as well as economic profit from indigenous resources both cultural, physical and now genetic. Whitt summarizes, "This is not only 'legal theft' of indigenous resources; it is legally sanctioned and

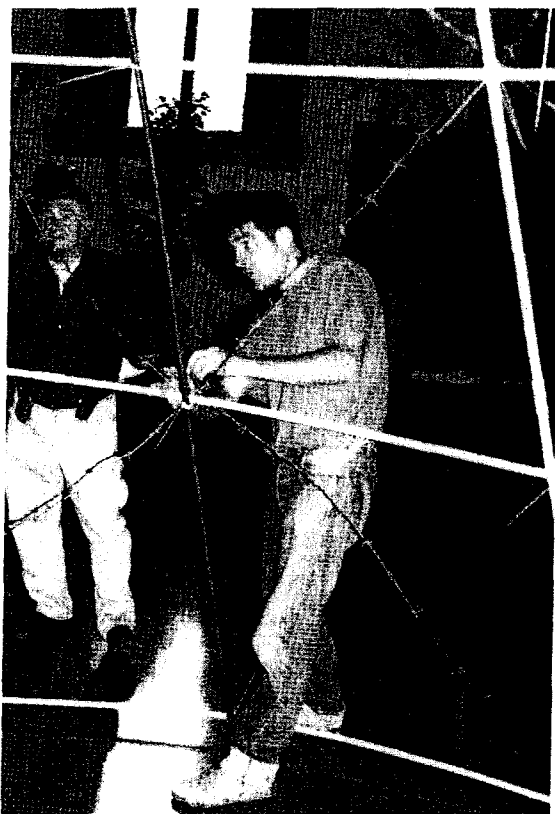


Figure 5 Marcello Berto (left), and Beat Kriemler (right) installing "Umbilicus" in Scuola Grande di San Teodoro, June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

facilitated theft" [Whitt 1999: 183]. Similarly, Deborah Harry asserts that Euro-American values conflict in basic ways with indigenous notions of group rights. Her example cites the manner in which individuals may not be free to sell their knowledge because "either the knowledge cannot be sold according to the group's ethical principles or because permission of a larger group is required first." She concludes, "In areas where we believe we have group rights, these rights are ignored by the mainstream ethical protocols" [Harry *et al.* 2000]. In the contemporary Southwest Native American arts market, subjective appraisals of ownership are reflected in a recent statement by the Nambe ceramicist Lonnie Vigil. In a *New York Times* essay chronicling the most recent Indian Market in Santa Fe, he states, "I'm the person who creates it, but it's Nambe Pueblo pottery. It belongs to my ancestors, my ancestry, to my family and to our community. Unlike Western art, we don't claim the work as our own" [Brockman 2002].

These examples of indigenous systems of knowledge which privilege community rights are unlikely to be incorporated into standard arts discourses outside legal mandates such as repatriation that bring collective ownership and nonalienation concepts to a public level. In the example of recently produced art and in the realm



Figure 6 Elisabetta Frasca installing "Umbilicus" in the Scuola Grande di San Teodoro, June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

of fine arts reception, a consideration of communal ownership or even group censorship is largely unavailable.⁷ Solomon's earlier call for a new language and Romero's reference to a current vernacular are apt not only metaphorically but also literally, as the words that we utilize to describe these developments have predetermined and weighted meanings. Authorship is intimately tied to legal sanction, power, control, and ownership. The implicit meanings of these words have their impact on native arts productions on several levels, legal, social, and ethical. During the preview of the "Umbilicus" exhibition, several hectic arts writers would hurriedly assess the exhibit and then summarily ask for an object list. When NA3 organizers explained that the works were largely communally produced, writers typically expressed either dismay or dismissal. The process of communally produced and sanctioned (even if censored) art was seen by them to be an immature or amateur response compared to the seriousness of the other Biennale art on display elsewhere.⁸

This assessment of a flawed attempt to politicize native arts actively on a global stage may not appear relevant to those responsible for interpreting ethnographic or historical collections. I suggest however that the continuing crisis of representation be reevaluated. What is a crisis for some is the inheritance of centuries

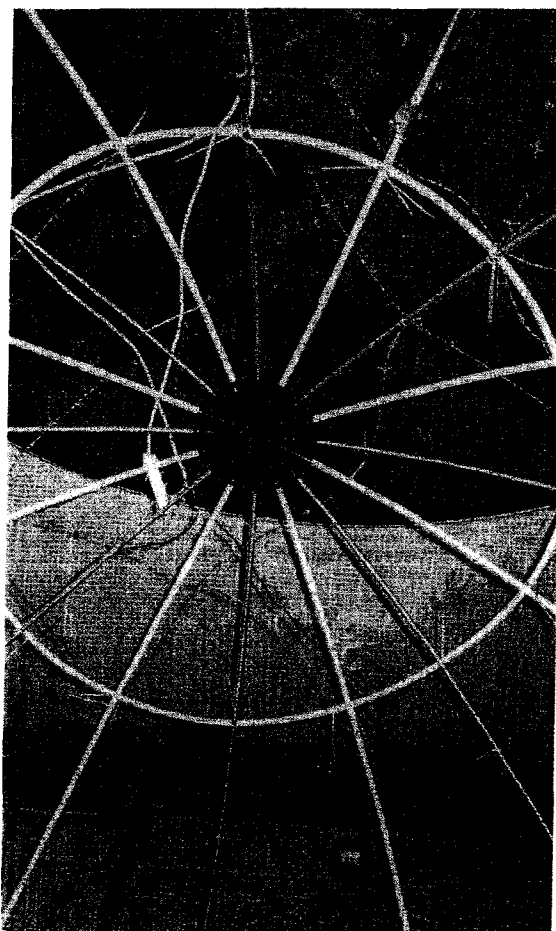


Figure 7 The belly structure looking up into frescos during installation "Umbilicus" in Scuola Grande di San Teodoro, June 2001. (Photo by Elisabetta Frasca.)

of genocide for others. The utilization of indigenous knowledge systems as a methodology and a theoretical construct for arts assessment may result in unforeseen paradigm shifts. It is crucial that core conceptual frameworks in arts discourse such as authorship, ownership, and control are exposed as inextricably bound in individualistic, competitive and legalistic frameworks that inhibit accurate cultural understandings.

My call for a subjective testimonial approach ensures that these new findings will have relevance for the indigenous artists/theorists who are most intimately affected by the academic consumption of their work. Current ethical mandates call for no less. Systems of production, consumption, and reception of native arts as seen within the context of inhibited or censored knowledge systems have the ability to outline the contours of this theoretical perspective in practice. Even failed efforts inform the determination of symbolically authentic political acts. The exhibiting artist Richard Ray Whitman's featured statement in the Biennale cata-



Figure 8 Bob Haozous (left) and Gabriel Lopez Shaw (right) inspecting Biennale posters in Venice, June 2001. (Photo by Nancy Marie Mithlo.)

log captured this sense of empowerment in the search for self-knowledge, thus: "I begun to see when I was not yet born, when I was not in my mother's arm, but inside my mothers' belly. It was there that I begun to learn about my people" [Whitman 2001: 208].

In sharing a draft of this work with Lonnie Vigil, the Nambe ceramicist cited earlier, I lamented the lack of a paradigm to legitimize and codify Native American arts. Vigil serenely replied that native arts do not need to be legitimized by anyone, "They just are." This self-legitimizing stance, so prevalent in native political efforts generally, indicates why there appears to be no meaningful common ground to discuss areas of import between native arts practioners and the academy. Critical thinking about indigenous approaches to education incorporates this self-legitimizing status. Champagne and Strauss's recent analysis of Indian Studies programs concludes, "Native American studies does not have to and should not reflect the intellectual specializations and categories of U.S. or Western scholarship" [Champagne and Strauss 2002: 8]. Instead the authors advocate an emphasis on nation building, conceived of as an active engagement with Indian nations. Similarly, the native political analyst Steven Newcomb maintains that the trust relationship of tribes to the United States, so often utilized as *the* reference point for tribal political gains, is in reality a relationship of colonial domination, "a perpetual system . . . designed to hold indigenous peoples and their homelands in bondage and subjection to the American people, for the political and economic benefit of the United States" [Newcomb 2003].

This suspect and reticent stance towards the use of established theoretical paradigms is the result of centuries of exploitation of every resource imaginable—land, water, religion, and the arts. The development of a critical, subjective arts discourse should therefore be situated within the debates of appropriation of other cultural resources, with the awareness that even subject communities may exercise internalized oppression against their own members in attempting to define

sovereignty. The conclusion that an indigenous arts discourse must by definition occur outside established intellectual disciplines and political structures thus moves the weight of responsibility to indigenous nations themselves to articulate these distinct analyses, a burden that will likely only be undertaken as the need for this type of codification is deemed necessary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was written for the 2002 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association's Society for Visual Anthropology invited session, "World Art Worlds: Sighting Future Horizons in Visual Anthropology." Thanks to Pamela C. Rosi and Eric Venbrux for organizing both the session and this publication in *Visual Anthropology*. I would like to thank the collective members of NA3, now named the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3) for their thoughts and efforts, including the 2003 IA3-sponsored Venice Biennale exhibition "Pellerossasogna — The Shirt", featuring the work of the Bay of Quinte Mohawk artist Shelley Niro.

NOTES

1. Shaw, Gabriel, (gwils boha) 2001. — "We have all been colonized. Our strength is in our diverse approach to addressing our colonization." La Biennale di Venezia 49 Esposizione Internazionale D'Arte — 'Platea Dell'Umanita', 8.
2. My elevation of subjective interpretations as the key locus of inquiry is reflective of broader conceptual developments that seek to share power with subject populations.
3. For the past decade, I have been engaged in an inquiry about the nature of Native American arts production and consumption in a location some would characterize as the birthplace of indigenous arts commerce — Santa Fe, New Mexico. My identity as a Chiricahua Apache informs my research in multiple ways: I am invested in a web of intricate relationships, all requiring a sense of mutual responsibility and commitment to service, including an awareness of my actions in reference to past and future generations. Thus, the formation and sponsorship of a native art collective to address arts commercialization was not a neutral act, but one full of political and personal significance.
4. The installation would not have been possible without the diligent work of our Italian colleagues: Elisabetta Frasca, Tullia Giacomelli, Mario Di Martino, Giancarlo Adorno, Marcello Berto, Piero Menegozzi, Celia Pedrini, Lorenzo Marangoni, Patricia Michaels, and Lisel Odenweller.
5. This structure also resembled and was meant to symbolize a traditional Apache *wickiup*.
6. At a monthly NA3 planning meeting, a feminist artist commented negatively on the all-male roster of artists. The majority female board responded that we had chosen the men to "work for us." This disparity in notions of power is documented in my 2000 essay "Two Hours," featured in the catalog for the exhibition "Anticipating the Dawn" at the Gardiner Gallery, Oklahoma State University, curated by Anita L. Fields.
7. It can be argued that withdrawal of U.S. government support such as that of the NEA could be considered a form of group control; however my distinction here is the perspective of the artistic producers, not consumers.
8. The noted exception to this assessment was the support of our exhibition colleagues in Venice who uncritically and loyally championed our group's efforts as a sovereign statement. Their interest stemmed largely from the associations they made aligning the situation of Native Americans politically with the sovereign concept of Venice as unique from the nation state of Italy.

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