Within and Outside: The Aboriginal Presence at the Venice Biennale Nancy Marie Mithlo, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Art History and the American Indian Studies Program



The year 2007 marked ten years of the contemporary American Indian art community's participation at the Venice Biennale under the auspices of the collective Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3). This international partnership with colleagues in Australia, Canada and Italy developed in response to issues of commercial exploitation, lack of legitimacy and the overall invisibility of contemporary aboriginal and indigenous arts in domestic (United States) contexts.

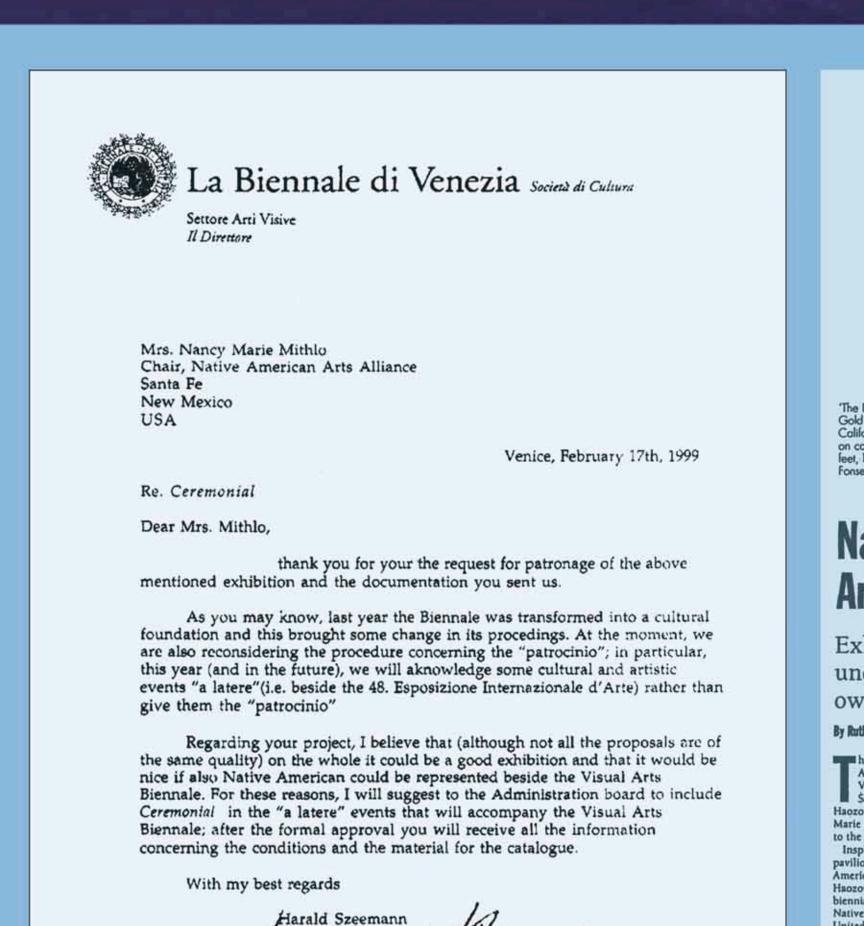
.IA3 exhibits and performances have recently been described as "interventionist" developments (Volke 2007) yet these endeavors over the past decade functioned within an indigenous system of knowledge and protocol known as Indigenous curatorial methodologies. Indigenous curation is characterized by distinct intellectual platforms that are often at odds with standard values of authorship, audience and individuality. Key premises are long-term and meaningful collaborations, mentorship, an emphasis on process, and attention to the mandates of one's source community. The IA3 exhibits (some accepted into the official Biennale roster, others not) are located within the mainstream of the Venice Biennale but outside of broader systems of scholarly analysis.



What are the conceptual variables at play when previously marginalized groups gain admittance into restricted, elitist venues? Does inclusion come at the cost of sacrificing cultural uniqueness, negating the primary impetus of contributing a particular Native voice or vision? These largely unresolved tensions are indicative of culturally- unique artistic and curatorial methodologies in conversation with Euro-American-informed value systems.

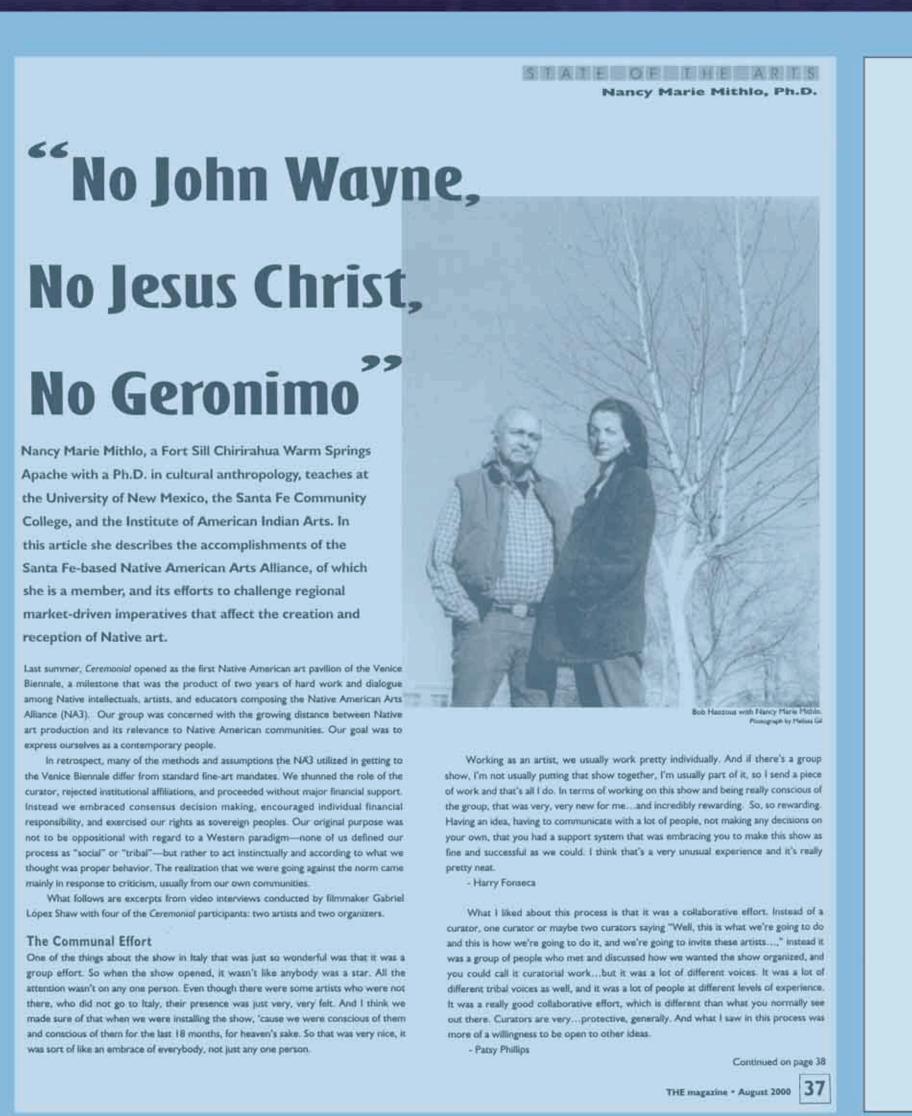
The institutional format of the Venice Biennale has equally accommodated the self-declared "sovereign nation" status of the IA3 arts collective (a grassroots non-profit) and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (a United States federal entity) as legitimate indigenous representatives to the global arts table. The Canada Council for the Arts similarly supported indigenous arts exchanges at the Venice Biennale in 2007. This apparent fluidity has not been equaled in the context of American systems of art reception where critical arts appraisals have largely been absent and the American public has remained skeptical or even (as in the case of the Washington Post's attacks on former NMAI Director W. Richard West in January of 2008) openly hostile to the inclusion of contemporary American Indian fine arts in established international venues.

> Verde, Rokan. "Subverting the Dominant Paradigm at the Venice Biennale." Native American Indigenous Cinema and Arts 8 (2007) http://thenaica.org. Grimaldi, James V. and Jacqueline Trescott. "Indian Museum Director Spent Lavishly on Travel." Washington Post, December 28 (2007): A01.



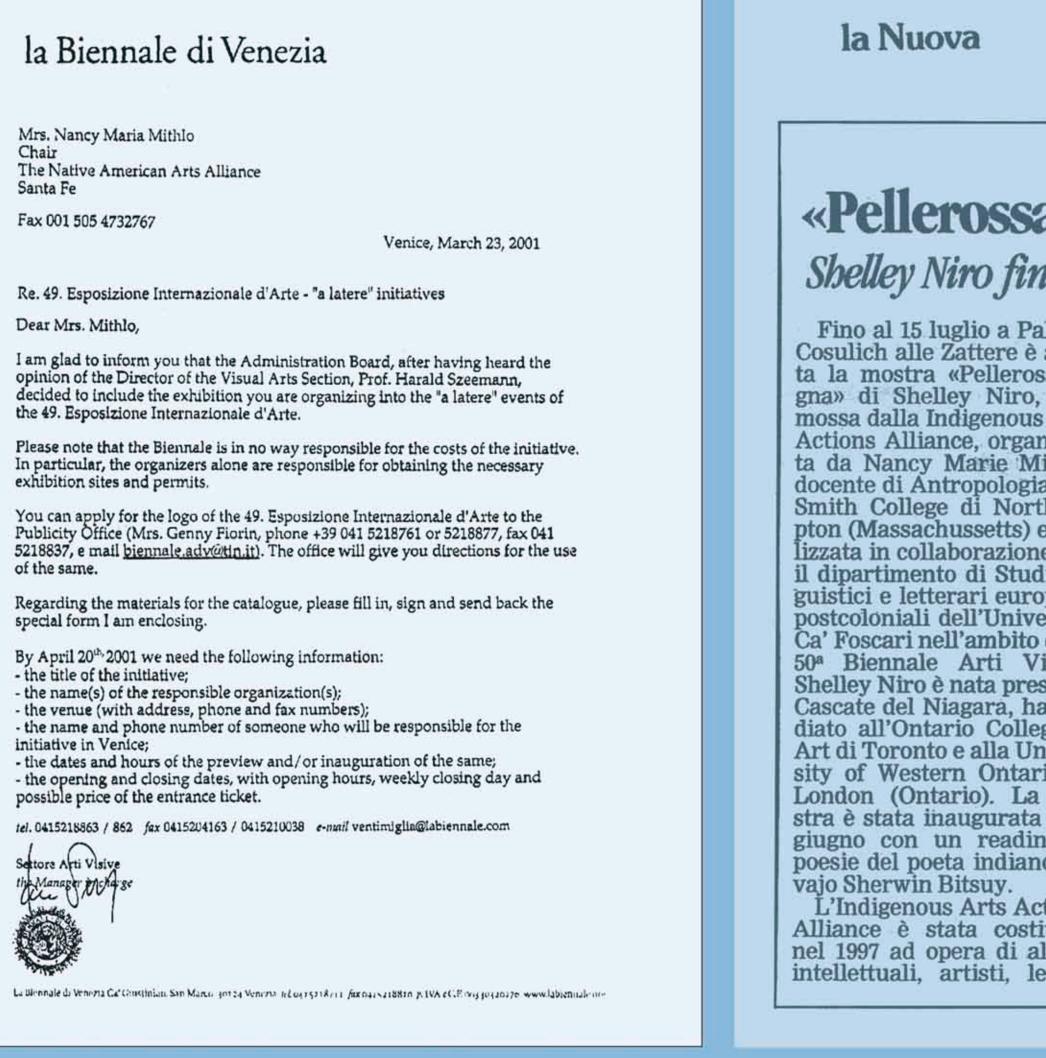
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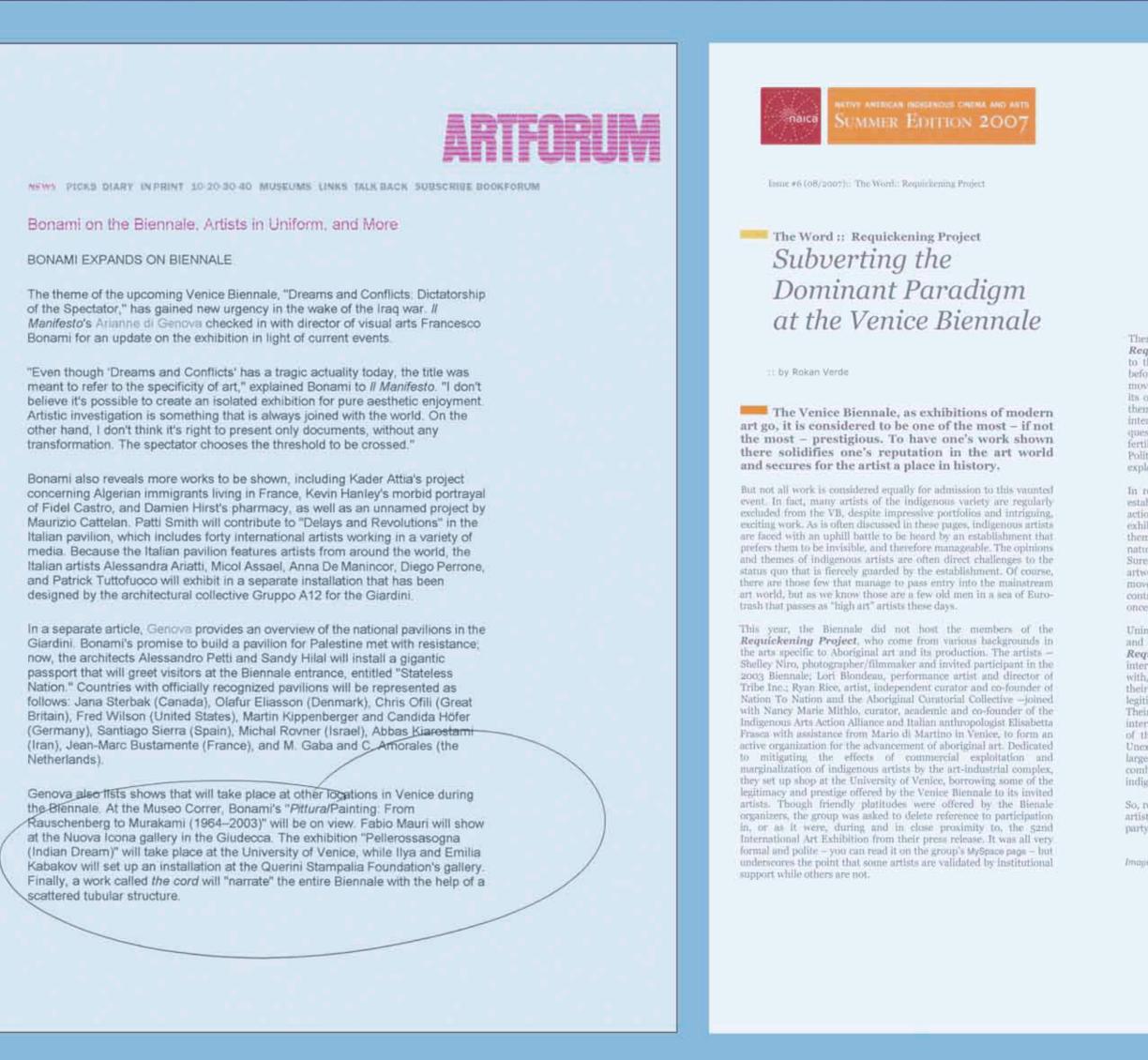




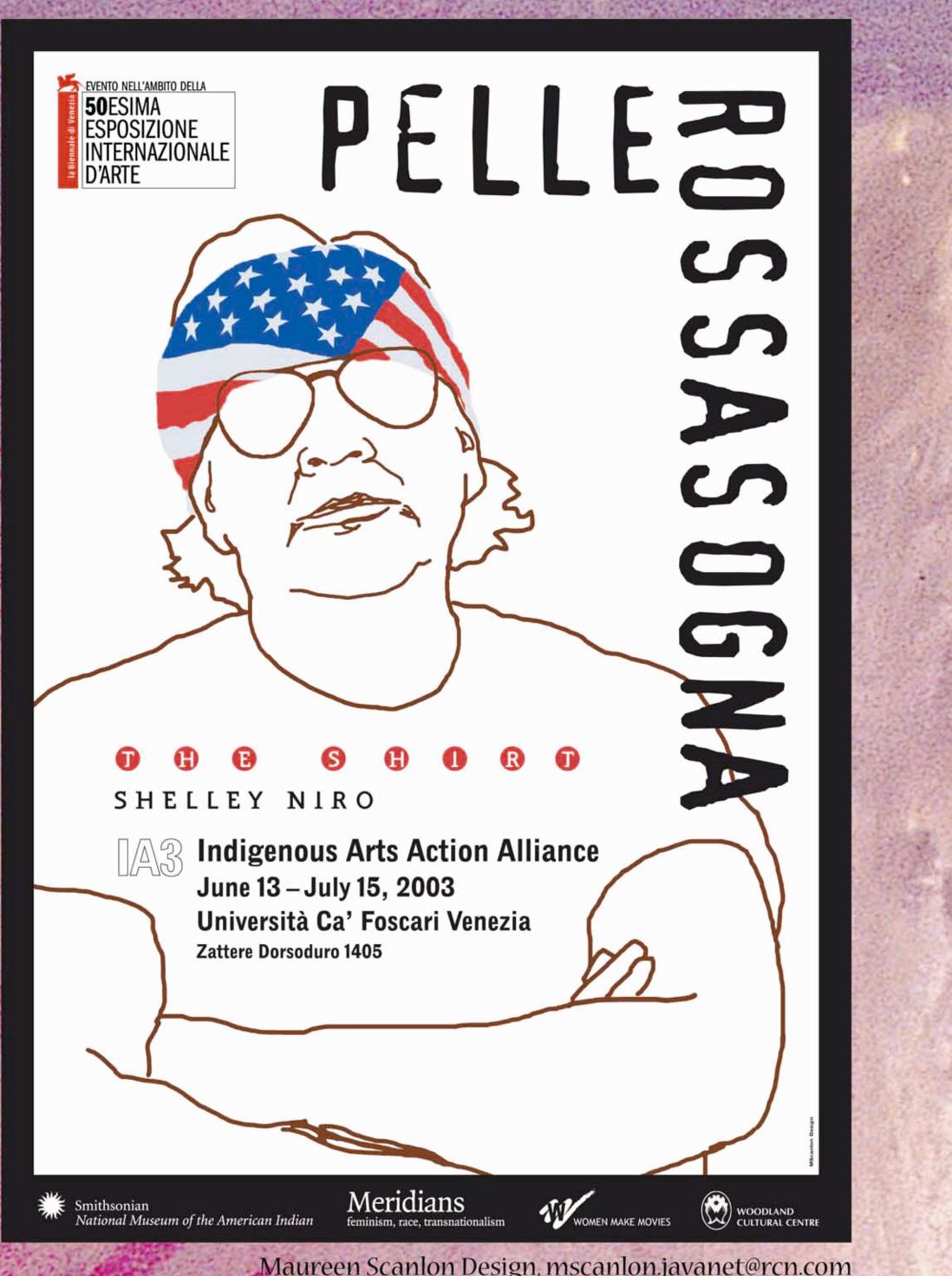












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