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"Give, Give, Giving": Cultural Translations

This essay is dedicated to my friend and mentor Harry Fonseca.
His enthusiasm for the beauty of life continues to inspire us.

When asked to evaluate my curatorial work recently, an academic colleague exclaimed, "Three exhibits at the Venice Biennale is a big deal!" I thought it was a big deal, too, not necessarily for myself alone, but for the talented artists and educators who have joined me there over the past decade. Making one's way into the Biennale requires commitment to one's craft, phenomenal networking skills, and the ever-elusive combination of talent and capital. An artist, an organization, or a curator does not come by chance to participate in this grand manifestation of all things current in the arts. To develop an understanding of the complexities of the Venice Biennale as a phenomenon takes years, perhaps a lifetime; to become an actor within this living, breathing, endlessly changing global conversation takes effort. Sometimes it takes a lot of effort.

The 1999 Venice Biennale exhibition *Ceremonial,* sponsored by the Native American Arts Alliance (NA3), a Santa Fe, New Mexico-based organization that I helped found, was designed to commemorate the incorporation of Native American voices into the artistic dialogues of the Biennale. By invoking the concept of ceremony, this group of educators, artists, and activists referenced the concept of public witnessing for central life events.

Just as one cannot be properly named, married, or buried without the participation of a larger community, NA3 sought recognition as a participant within the structure of the international arts community. Against enormous organizational and financial constraints, this collective—later renamed the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3)—exhibited Native art at the Venice Biennale three times (in 1999, 2001, and 2003) before bequeathing the project to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian for their 2005 exhibit at the Biennale.[1] Our collective work over the years naturally led to the expectation that something significant might come out of this participation; that the beauty and wisdom of a Native aesthetic might finally be recognized if Native Americans themselves were the ones speaking.

This hope for an immediate recognition by established arts journals and critics was largely unfulfilled. The resounding silence from magazines, fine arts museums, and our professional peers (Native and non-Native) following *Ceremonial* was characterized by NA3 board member and artist Harry Fonseca in terms of ripples. Instead of a growing, influential reaction—like a pebble tossed into a lake with concentric circles radiating outward—he observed that the public response was more akin to a rock dropped into a vat of frybread oil—no "blip" with expanding ripples, but a solid "bloop" to the bottom of the kettle (sound effects help with this particular telling).[2] James Luna's comment that "my phone isn't exactly ringing off the hook" after the 2005 Biennale exhibit *Emendatio* reflects a similar realization.[3] We have witnessed a decade of Native arts exhibitions at the Biennale, yet Native arts have yet to be treated seriously. By seriously, I mean more than a token mention of the exotic Native in mainstream contemporary arts curricula, publications, or exhibitions. The apparent indifference to Native arts suggests exhibition alone is insufficient. Meaningful appraisals that incorporate alternative artistic worlds—what Robert Storr, curator of the 2007 Venice Biennale, takes pains to reference as multiple "sites of art"—are needed."[4]

Other Desires, Other Agendas

Yet this articulation of sovereign intellectual standing is often obscured by other desires, other agendas. The curatorial philosophy of arts scholar and

fellow Biennale curator Salah Hassan is illustrative of the twin tensions that seem inseparable in a platform that seeks inclusion: a perceived assimilation to standard art canons, countered by the claim to cultural specificity. In other words, how can we achieve what one NA3 board member termed "the get in" while also retaining a sense of our genuineness, without bending so far as to lose a sense of self. Is it possible that the "get in" philosophy is ultimately a disservice to cultural integrity? Hassan's declaration, "If you do not exhibit, you do not exist!" has become something of a rallying cry for artists newly entering from the fringes.[5] The well-received 2001 Biennale show curated by Hassan, *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa in and out of Africa* was, in his words, "an effort to remedy the virtual absence of Africa in the Venice Biennale."[6] Hassan's call for visibility, however, is complicated by the simultaneous desire for acknowledgment; in this case, acknowledgment of African artists as important contributors to Western artistic movements such as conceptualism, the theme of the show. Hassan argues that the legitimization of African conceptual artists hinges on the practice of exhibitions. As Hassan explains, "Exhibitions remain exemplar of how art history is produced."[7] Conversely, I have come to conclude that exhibitions alone are insufficient. The "get in" is a hollow goal in the absence of a grounded cultural understanding. Visibility alone is really only another form of voyeurism. Indian people have been subjected to the incessant gaze of the West since Contact. It is not enough to be looked upon, serving as the exotic other in an exchange that has profound negative implications for self-representation. Scholars Lutz and Collins refer to this imbalanced power dynamic as a "culturally tutored experience" that presents as natural that which is really ahistorical, patriarchal, and constructed.[8] To see fully is to be able to translate aesthetic conventions cross-culturally. The mimicking of Western terminology is a form of colonialism, an assimilation to Western constructs and norms.

I believe Hassan's position is ultimately more complex and nuanced than the inclusive battle cry suggests. For example, his essay in the exhibition catalogue for *Authentic/Ex-Centric* calls for "reciprocal traffic of influences between Africa and the rest of the world" as well as recognition of an "African standpoint."[9] Yet these more subtle sentiments are masked by the dictation

that exhibitions serve as the essential component of minority arts activism. This aphorism is especially problematic when transferred to the realm of Native American arts. "If you do not exhibit, you do not exist"—how can this possibly be so in Native American contexts? After surviving centuries of genocidal oppression, could we really be rendered nonexistent merely by being left out of critical arts dialogues? Clearly, this mandate cannot reflect Native sensibilities. This is the soul-searching moment, the necessary departure—the point at which we might abandon the hope of inclusion for inclusion's sake alone.

A Proactive Frame of Reference

The purpose of contemporary Native arts criticism in a more proactive frame of reference is less about what others think (getting in and being witnessed by others as in a ceremony) and more about what we think of ourselves in relationship with others. Contemporary Native arts criticism then offers a parallel conception of aesthetic discourse. This worldview serves as a meaningful alternative to the assimilationist desire to be recognized by mainstream art conventions. This alternative conceptual approach is a more challenging, circuitous method; it calls for a double vision of the type that intellectual and civil rights activist W. E. B. DuBois termed the third eye or double consciousness.[10] In DuBois's words, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.[11] DuBois offers potent application for Native arts criticism, for while the world may yield no favors for the recognition of a Native aesthetic, this aesthetic is available nonetheless. Despite a lack of mainstream institutional recognition, a multiplicity of artistic dialects and worldviews exist. In this frame of reference—one not dependent on art historical canons—cultural translations are necessary for a global arts conversation to ensue. A sovereign, culturally specific platform that is simultaneously engaged with larger art currents can emerge if space is made available outside of the standardized inclusion/legitimization agenda.

The established platform of the international art exhibition enables the multiple translations I am seeking. In a world where Native people continue

to be colonized economically, culturally, and politically, we do not have the luxury of ignoring the mainstream. But acceptance in global venues is only one step; acceptance of one's own artistic orientation is the more central goal. For Native people, these unique aesthetic traditions include cultural imperatives that reward service, sharing, and community responsibility as well as an active embrace of contemporaneous influences. What I am calling for is not a separate playing field, not a replication of the ethnic arts segmentation that often results in stagnation, but rather recognition of the cultural translations necessary for true parity in the global arts arena. Remarkably, the Venice Biennale accommodates these interventions without restrictive control.

Repositioning the conversation away from the perception of inclusion or exclusion in mainstream dialogues toward recognition of alternative knowledge systems at play demands that convergences and chasms among various art systems be directly addressed. Indigenous communities can creatively deconstruct the notion of curatorial authority that has come to define what serious players in the arts arena do, especially in the global arena. Multiple conceptions of leadership and shared leadership, rather than self-defined curatorial power, constitute the major defining characteristic of this curatorial direction. The NA3 organization's planning process utilized diffuse and, at times, consensual decision-making processes. When the 1999 team, for example, was forced to hang Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's fiber installation piece *Shot Heard Round the World* in a space a fraction of the size for which it was intended, five individuals debated the most appropriate action. It ultimately fell to the two professional artists, Harry Fonseca and Bob Haozous, to make the final call, given their training and experience. When dealing with this and other quandaries, no sole curatorial authority prevailed.

It appears that the Venice Biennale may be developing along similar decentralized lines of inquiry. Davide Croff, president of La Biennale di Venezia, stated at the 2005 Storr symposium *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon* that the Biennale "cannot ask that the curator be the sole and exclusive interpreter of the Institution's entire project."[12] Yet other opinions on the topic exist simultaneously. Speaking at the same sympo-

sium, Carlos Basualdo, an Argentinean poet, critic, and curator living in the United States, argued that large-scale exhibits demand an element of interpretation for a growing public. He further suggested that it falls to the role of the curator to include this discursive component as a structural necessity.[13] Native artists and curators have relevant contributions to make to this debate, contributions that can enrich the narrow theoretical options currently available. Parity, consensual decision-making, and complementarity are all potent and useful organizational strategies that can be mobilized within the existing structure of the international art exhibition.

What makes Native-run international exhibits unique? Native efforts have the added dimension of a concerted non-individualistic orientation. Each of NA3/IA3's Biennale exhibits had a component of mentorship enacted as a central premise of the exhibit process. The 2003 exhibit *Pellerossasogna* featured the work of Mohawk filmmaker Shelley Niro and Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui. While Niro was a seasoned artist with an international reputation, Bitsui was an emerging artist just entering the global arena. Organizers of the exhibit saw it as a unique opportunity to have these artists exhibit together, complementing each other's work. Small things counted, such as Shelley's immense calm when the film projector malfunctioned or how Sherwin captivated visitors at the opening with an impassioned reading of his work. Among my favorite memories of that hot, hot summer were the times when Shelley would turn and ask offhandedly, "Are you hungry, Sherwin?" We would duck into a cool cafe for tiny, soft Italian sandwiches and cappuccino, oblivious of the time. I do not think we have the language to adequately describe the importance of these tender nuances. I can only say that there was no star, and we looked after one another. Experience counted, yes, but just as important was the respect accorded to each person's contributions to the whole, as well as one's limitations.

A Twofold Task

The task of interpreting this alternative Native curatorial methodology is twofold: existing interpretative tools must be mentally dismantled and more satisfactory concepts identified and articulated. Collective curatorial author-

ity is actually more difficult and demanding than the sole authority definition of the role. This is not a matter of novice work, flawed vision, or a lack of professionalism, but rather a concerted effort to have the process of exhibiting art find congruence with other tribal norms. That we would choose to follow this methodology at the Biennale was so foreign as to be unthinkable to most reviewers and even potential exhibiting artists. Harried journalists often arrived at the 2001 exhibit *Umbilicus* demanding object lists with artists' names. When I explained that the installations were collectively designed and built by a team of artists, the condescension was palpable. Surely, their dismissal seemed to imply, we were amateurs!

Likewise, Native artists invited to exhibit under the NA3/IA3 collective enterprises often declined to participate once they understood that the organizers did not intend to supervise their financial and organizational needs, but rather expected the artists to raise their own travel, shipping, and subsistence monies as well as choose the art they intended to exhibit. The passivity (and often victimization) of the chosen artist role becomes glaringly apparent once these support structures and established art curatorial practices are dismantled. When asked to participate equally in the work of mounting an international exhibition, many artists declined, having become accustomed to the individualism and non-participation of established art curatorial practices.

In addition to the task of conveying our curatorial methodology to others, we face the difficulty of translating contemporary Native identity. Here I would like to quote from one of the few assessments of the 1999 exhibit *Ceremonial*—an article in the *International Herald Tribune* by Roderick Conway Morris. Morris sensitively tried to convey our perceived plight: while successfully "avoiding the folkloric," neither did we achieve full fluidity in the language of the postmodern, which appeared to be "alien." The resulting "dissonance" was evidently a "search for an idiom to satisfy both tradition and life in today's world." The exhibit's worth was attributed to its "poignant" and "thought-producing" qualities.[14] This exiled space—neither a prisoner to culture nor a hybridized, cosmopolitan individual—is one to which the contemporary Native artist seems endlessly condemned. We failed to achieve parity as postmodern participants, but we were deemed interesting in our

attempts all the same. A fundamental break in understanding occurs when only select conceptual categories are at play—postmodern, conceptual, and traditional. Recognition of cultural specificity is essential at this juncture.

The contemporary Native American art field has not reached a point at which it can effectively position the visual culture of Native North America as a component of indigenous knowledge systems in tandem with similar developments in economic, ecological, or political spheres. Indigenous knowledge (often referred to by the acronym "IK") is understood to reference the wisdom of Native approaches to agriculture, hunting, environmental management, or sovereignty efforts in legal realms. IK has not, however, developed along similar paths in the aesthetic world of global fine arts. This is not to say that Native people have never understood the broader ramifications of the visual as an integral part of a philosophical worldview, but rather that we have become distracted from this internal and processual orientation, which could offer a useful theoretical structure for aesthetic analysis. Instead of attempting to codify this still-emerging aesthetic, it may be more productive to define the contours of an indigenous orientation by what it is not. The Native American experience does not lend itself easily to standard artistic paradigms. Modernism, dialectics, and parody have been key concepts in the reception of contemporary Native American arts. These approaches, however, distract rather than clarify; they present Native aesthetic philosophers with a reactive rather than a proactive orientation.

The postmodern has a long history of being falsely applied to Native arts constructs. The failure of this point of reference to encompass indigenous ideologies is in no small part due to the immense difficulty of codifying an approach to knowledge that is fluid and often diffuse. The authors of "Globalisation and Indigenous Peoples: Threat or Empowerment?" argue that the Western tradition of education grounded in written traditions contributes to this problem. They provocatively ask, "Is it possible to present the fluid and multivalent characteristics of Indigenous systems of knowledge in an authentic manner, one that is not canonical but that is open to subtle formulations that are part of practice and traditional cultural values?"[15] Equally problematic is the frequency with which the intent of Na-

tive artists is misread. The artists featured in *Ceremonial* were not striving for an idiom to express the tensions between tradition and life in today's world as the *International Herald Tribune* reviewer suggested; they were expressing life in today's world. The binary of tradition and modernism—construed as our enduring "struggle"—constitutes a major obstacle to recognizing the multiple "sites of art" the Storr symposium advocates.

My critique follows a line of inquiry similar to the one historian Philip J. Deloria advanced about modernity in his 2004 book *Indians in Unexpected Places.*[16] Deloria argues that Indians have been denied modernity because of their utilization as carriers of authenticity and primitivism. Indian people, he concludes, helped to create modernity in dialogue with others by being cast as actors in representational moments that juxtaposed primitivism and modernity. By virtue of this role in the ideological discourse of the West, Native Americans serve as a "functional narrative" for the anxieties of modernism. Indians function as an inverted norm, the underside of modernist realities. Viewed in this light, Native bodies are only shadows to the real work of modernism happening in the arts as well as politics. Any hesitancy to work for what our *International Herald Tribune* commentator described as "the worldwide postmodernist gallery and curatorial establishment," situates the Native as not simply exiled from participating in the mainstream but also as unwilling or unable to participate. Reliance upon an inclusion/exclusion orientation results in only two role options—reluctant primitives or angry Indians. Both approaches lead to tiring and ultimately uninteresting results.

Without recognition of these larger metanarratives at play, arts conversations in the vein of the popular hybrid, globalized norm can appear to be libratory and progressive but in fact be reifying. The anxieties of the postmodern West are served by a dialectical conversation with the non-West. Viewed as indicators of the ground, how can Native arts constructs possibly be read correctly as critical arts appraisals, as positive form rather than negative outline? In *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (1996), Fatimah Rony asserts that the "Other" can never be an active critical agent and is not capable of being perceived as multidimensional or contradictory, "the Native Man in ethnographic cinema is not even perceived as being an actor: his

performance is always 'real.' "[17] Even if desired, "postmodern" is simply not an available construct under these analyses, unless Native representatives relinquish their subjective identities as Native altogether. Here we fall into the "I'm an artist first, an Indian second" identity trap of having to prioritize one's subjectivity, a quandary that non-ethnic artists surely do not face.

Given these parameters, a venue such as the Venice Biennale might seem to offer little beyond reifying categories of Indianness. Native arts serve as a useful Other to established fine arts practices; as a pure local inserted into the cosmopolitanism of the global in the sense that the *International Herald Tribune* review positioned *Ceremonial*, or as a sorry convert to Western norms, a sanitized version of once colorful, exotic peoples. How can a transformative moment possibly be accomplished within these conceptual boundaries? The arguments that I have presented here suggest that an indigenous orientation can offer libratory potentials. Indigenous knowledge as a theoretical orientation suggests that a multivocal, processual, and participatory approach to global arts activism can avoid the liabilities of either legitimization through acculturation or rejection by the West. The problem is how to translate this theoretical orientation into practice—how to begin the process of education whereby indigenous participation in global initiatives is not about tokenism and does not rely upon tired interpretative tools.

Richard Ray Whitman asserted in *Umbilicus*, the NA3 exhibit for the 2001 Biennale: "We are asked to give, give, give. We respond by giving, giving, giving."[18] A responsibility to service is a central tenet of indigenous museum curation. Unfortunately, this "Red Man's Burden"[19] of helping others has extracted a cost by forcing Native art efforts to start with the ignorance of others, rather than Native self-wisdom. Is self-expression necessarily premised on dismantling the misconceptions of others who are unmotivated to relinquish their own comfort and control? Should Native artists and cultural workers commit to this burdensome task of cultural translations, given our often strained social, political, and economic capital? DuBois provocatively suggests that in response to racism, "A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems."[20] Why Venice? Why now?

Cultural Translations

The Native presence at the Venice Biennale has demonstrated how engagement with the global arena has positively served Native self-representation efforts. Rather than homogenizing cultural particularities under the rubric of globalization, the institution of the Venice Biennale offers both fluidity in global arts currents and continuation of the local-to-local relationships that are a hallmark of indigenous social norms. The Venetian people who have assisted Native arts endeavors over the course of four exhibitions and a number of years feel an affinity in our struggles for sovereignty. Venetian colleagues consider their city a sovereign body in relation to the nation-state of Italy. They are thus outraged when Native sovereignty efforts are denied. Our bond is defined by common political understandings about the environment, war, and the retention of cultural specificity. We enjoy food, friendship, our children growing, the passing of time, and observations about the art world. Venice has allowed a space that is non-totalitarizing. Within the existing constructs of this nationalistic venue, Native artists have taken themselves seriously. Exterior legitimization from the American press and major arts institutions once seemed valuable and important for the meaningful continuation of contemporary Native arts dialogues, but these parameters have ceased to carry as much weight. When once we wanted recognition, now the emerging cultural translations of "multiple art worlds" are sufficient.

One of the greatest compliments I received during the course of working together on multiple exhibitions in Venice came from Italian curator Mario di Martino during the 2003 project *Pellerossasogna*. Following the exhibit opening, a dozen or more people converged for a home-cooked dinner in the garden behind our shared apartment. The fish that I had purchased at the Rialto that morning was not overdone, and the pasta was light. After much eating, we sat back lazily in our chairs, laughing and visiting over cigarettes. As the sky grew dark, it began to rain softly, and we reluctantly made our way inside, carrying plates, glasses, half loaves of bread, and empty wine bottles. At the dining room table, Sherwin began to paint watercolors on scraps of paper. Some climbed to sit on the sills of the open windows, while others tossed cushions on the floor and relaxed. Laughter

from a hallway phone conversation mixed with the sound of a radio played in the distance. Posters, photos, papers, luggage, shoes, wet clothes, backpacks, and dirty dishes surrounded us. Mario sighed contentedly and—smiling and waving his hand dramatically in the air—declared, "I feel like I'm in a Fellini film!"

These simple commonalities hold real promise for demonstrating how marginalized communities may adopt the Biennale for generative self-ends that enhance rather than diminish cultural concerns. In this fashion, we give, but we also receive.

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NOTES

1. The arts collective NA3 sponsored three exhibits at the Venice Biennale—*Ceremonial* (1999), *Umbilicus* (2001), and, under its new title Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3), *Pellerossasogna* (2003). For more on these efforts, see Nancy M. Mithlo, " 'We Have All Been Colonized': Subordination and Resistance on a Global Arts Stage," *Visual Anthropology* 17: 3–4 (2004): 229–45, and Mithlo, "Reappropriating Redskins: *Pellerossasogna* (Red Skin Dream): Shelley Niro at the 50th La Biennale di Venezia," *Visual Anthropology Review* 20: 2 (2005): 22–35.

2. Interview with author, 1999.

3. Luna made the comment in an interview with Blake Gopnik, "Indian Artists in Venice: Off the Traditional Path," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2005.

4. See the Venice Biennale website: (http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/directors/storr/en/61002.html).

5. Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe, *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (Ithaca: Forum for African Arts, 2001), 7.

6. Ibid., 6.

7. Ibid., 7.

8. Catherine A. Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

9. Hassan and Oguibe, 22.

10. W. E. B. DuBois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (1897): 194.

11. Ibid., 197.

12. Speech by Davide Croff about the symposium *Where Art Worlds Meet.* See the Venice Biennale website (http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/directors/storr/en/61002.html).

13. Carlos Basualdo, comments at *Where Art Worlds Meet.*

14. Roderick Conway Morris, "Biennale Celebrates the Local," *International Herald Tribune,* June 12, 1999.

15. Claire Smith, Heather Burke, and Graeme K. Ward, "Globalisation and Indigenous Peoples: Threat or Empowerment?" in *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World,* ed. Claire Smith and Graeme K. Ward (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 1–24.

16. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

17. Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Cinema, Race, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 178.

18. Richard Ray Whitman, *Umbilicus,* in *La Biennale di Venezia 49th Esposizione Internationale d'Arte: Platea dell'umanità - Plateau of Humankind - Plateau der Menschheit - Plateau de l'humanité,* eds. Harald Szeemann and Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli (Milano: Electa, 2001), 208–09.

19. Nancy Marie Mithlo, "Red Man's Burden: The Politics of Inclusion in the Museum Setting," *American Indian Quarterly* 28 (2004): 3–4.

20. DuBois, "Strivings of the Negro People," 197.

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