

A Different Sort of (P)Reservation: Some Thoughts on the National Museum of the American Indian

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"Aren't bows and arrows sometimes just bows and arrows?" (Burchard 1991:59)

In the past decade, for a variety of reasons—e.g., the gains of feminism and the civil rights movement, the profusion of mass media, a growing awareness of non-Western/non-European cultures, the increasing commodification of cultural production, and the emergence of postmodern¹ theory, to name a few—the museum has become increasingly contested terrain, and its practices the subject of voluminous critique. What is the role of the museum in contemporary society? What is exhibited and what is excluded? Who is to interpret the material and to what end? Responses to such questions, including the reinstallation of permanent collections, temporary exhibitions, academic treatises, institutional directives, and even a children's book, *Make Your Own Museum*², have proliferated in recent years, typically with the intent to subvert traditional museum practice by challenging narratives, modes of display, and strategies of representation. The new National Museum of the American Indian in New York City is one institution that has worked to subvert the museum status quo, but whether it stands as a model for future institutions or as an object lesson in the dangers of trying to be all things to all people is debatable. In this essay, I will address critically the efforts of the NMAI, with the intent of placing it within the larger cultural discourse on museums and the representation of cultures and their objects.

The museum has historically validated the values and beliefs of the powerful majority, while at the same time justifying its own existence through a rhetoric of social benevolence and equality. It has been struggling

to define itself and its audience for centuries. A creation of the modern world, the museum was ill equipped to represent various collective cultures and identities. The pervasive disenchantment with modernity and its institutions in recent decades, has forced the museum to reconsider its purpose and practices. With the recognition that culture is an historical construct comes the realization that our representations of it are incomplete. As James Clifford has written, culture is neither an object to be described nor definitively interpreted but is instead "contested, temporal, emergent" (1986:18-9). Implicated in this emergence is representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders. This discovery has had serious implications for the museum.

Inherently resistant to alteration, the goal of the museum has always been definitive—not provisional or variable—interpretation and explanation. By removing objects from their original contexts and making them stand for abstract wholes, museum collections create the illusion of an adequate representation of the world. Modes of display override specific histories of production and appropriation.³ Systems of ordering and classification promote and validate notions of progress, universality, and objective truth. The advancement of a binary frame of reference, typical of Western thought, serves to undermine external realities of diversity—high/low, us/them, black/white. As Douglas Crimp has written the history of museology is "a history of the various attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogeneous system or series" (1983:49). But the traditional museological practices outlined above are no longer tenable and institutions

have been forced to respond. As a result, I would argue that the museum has been undergoing a Kuhnsian paradigmatic shift.

The inclusion and representation which the museum currently seeks have, however, never really existed. This is not to say that these goals are not worthwhile, but rather to point out that the democratization of the museum is not simply a question of reverting to the way things were. Current vogue notwithstanding, the basic demands of museum reform have remained fairly consistent for the last century. The rhetoric of the stated aims of museums and the political realities of their actual functioning are, as Tony Bennett (1990, 1992) explains, inherently contradictory. Though there exists a desire for openness and accessibility to all, the museum succeeds brilliantly at differentiating populations. Easily categorized on the basis of class, race, and especially education, the museum audience tends to be an insular group possessing a particular form of cultural capital. Museums, nevertheless, engage themselves in an unending quest to furnish equality of access.

Despite its exclusionary practices, the museum is sustained by the fiction that it provides an adequate representation of the world. Even as the paradigm of the white Western male as representational norm is slowly shifting, the museum will never be all-inclusive, and will never adequately represent anyone or anything. Still, it does a good job of faking it—presenting itself as an arbiter of truth and universality. While the demands the museum generates are insatiable, as Bennett explains, people continue to work to address them. Firmly rooted in the modern ideology of representational adequacy, museum reform is an inherently incomplete project. But in critiquing museological practice, I do not want to discount the validity or merit of museums. My analysis is motivated by a desire to sustain their viability and relevance for contemporary society.

The National Museum of the American Indian

A brief history of events leading up to the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) is in order. Its founder, George Gustav Heye was a New York banker who over a fifty-four year period, amassed one of the largest collections of Native American objects in the world. Until recently, the collection was displayed in the Museum of the American Indian in upper Manhattan, with Heye as director from 1916 until his death in 1957. The American

Museum of Natural History had hoped to receive at least part of the collection, but in 1987 negotiations broke down and the trustees of the Museum of the American Indian became officially affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution.⁴ The NMAI and the Smithsonian planned the relocation of the Heye collection to a new national museum in the last available location on the Mall in Washington D.C., just east of the National Museum of Air and Space. President George Bush signed legislation establishing the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989. The Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (H.R. 5237), designed to “to facilitate a more open and cooperative relationship between Native Americans and museums”⁵ became Public Law 101-601 in 1990. Recognizing the importance of transferring control of Indian culture to Indians themselves, the repatriation law represented a significant shift in museum policy and practice.

In October 1994, the museum opened in its temporary home at One Bowling Green in lower Manhattan. The museum’s proximity to the Statue of Liberty and the new Ellis Island Museum makes it a prime tourist destination. (It also lies along a former Algonquin trade route.) Indeed, all of the museum’s exhibits adopt travel as a device—the three inaugural exhibitions are titled *Journey of Creation*, *This Path We Travel*, and *All Roads Are Good*. Visitors to lower Manhattan can “experience” the history of migration and immigration in the course of the afternoon. A cultural resource center dedicated to conservation and research is planned for 1997 in Suitland, Maryland. The opening of the Washington D.C. museum is scheduled for 2001, but given the current cultural climate, this date is not definite.⁶

One can view the decision to insert a monument to Native cultures inside the 1907 Beaux Arts building that also houses a federal bankruptcy court, as a bit of postmodern *jouissance*, or alternatively as yet another instance of American subordination of Native culture (Fig. 1). The building’s status as a landmark precluded architectural modification, thus dictating the museum’s restricted floorplan. The exhibition space is limited to a narrow path that snakes around the perimeter of the building’s first floor. The spacious rotunda which one encounters when entering the building is left empty—its use requires governmental consent. The NMAI can use it for museum receptions. This central space could be utilized imaginatively but the displays are relegated to the museum’s periphery. As one reviewer described it, “the Heye Center has



1. George Gustav Heye Center for the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Photo: Roy Gumpel.

been developed as a parasite; the Customs House its host. With no exterior markers other than signage, the museum gains civic significance from the landmark's status. But in return the center . . . cedes any possibility of contesting the values for which the Customs House stands" (Urbach 1994:88). The museum is wholly contained by the architectural space; a photographic banner at the foot of Broadway is the only indication of its presence inside. Susan Power, a Dakota Sioux writing in *Bazaar* magazine, has interpreted the arrangement quite differently. "For many Native Americans a circle symbolizes the universe, so the museum's exhibits end where they begin. To view the exhibits is to circumnavigate the globe or dance around a drum" (1995:112).

The NMAI was given the mandate to develop a public museum devoted to Native American culture. There were few models for the NMAI's organizers to follow, however W. Richard West, Jr., Southern Cheyenne, was appointed founding director of the museum in 1990. The institution is largely a Native American undertaking—most of the museum's staff and trus-

tees, and all of its artists and selectors are of Native ancestry. This is atypical—few museums devoted to indigenous culture have been put into the hands of indigenous populations. Represented by others, Native Americans have tended either to be primitivized in natural history museum dioramas or excluded (with a few exceptions) from art museums. Does self-portrayal constitute a significant departure from traditional museum practice? Has it done so thus far? It is important to acknowledge that, given the newness of such collaborative efforts, there will be differences of opinion and interpretation among different segments of the concerned population, such as indigenous peoples, anthropologists, art historians, and others.⁷ How could there not be? The NMAI's efforts at subverting traditional museum practices bear this out.

Cultural representation is not a problem to be solved but is rather an ever-evolving process. This is true for European and American museums—which continue to grapple with the representation of complex and heterogeneous publics—and ethnic or non-Western museums alike. In the case of the NMAI, I

believe that everyone's intentions were good, but that they were faced with a task of enormous complexity. What was the best way to display the Heye collection of nearly one-million objects? As fine art? As artifact? On video? On computer? The NMAI, in a clear case of curation by committee, opted for all of the above. While multivalent interpretation and explanation can work to destabilize institutional authority, it can also overwhelm even the most curious and dedicated museum visitor. Walking through the exhibition space, I felt I was thrust in the middle of dueling museological paradigms—unequal parts art, ethnographic, history, technology, and children's museums.

Journey of creation

An informal discussion with a number of museum employees shed light on some of the problems that ultimately emerged in the three inaugural exhibitions.⁸ Initially, the curatorial staff of the original Museum of the American Indian was given the task of selecting objects for a coffee-table book on the Heye collection. The staff's (at this stage, primarily non-Native) approach favored beauty over utility—Western standards of aesthetic quality were the admitted criterion. Through this glossy book of photographs, the curators saw an opportunity to circulate objects considered too fragile for display. When the works had been selected, however, the curatorial staff was informed that these objects were now to comprise the inaugural exhibit of the new museum. Richard W. Hill developed a voluminous proposal for an exhibition, *Creation's Journey: Masterworks of Native American Identity and Belief*, in which he envisioned incorporating themes of great importance. The section titles read like a Jenny Holzer art installation: "Objects Live When Used as Intended," "Journey of Interpretations: Search for Definitions," and "Refining the Art of Being an Indian." But instead of choosing new objects to correspond with Hill's themes, the works pre-selected for the coffee-table book were used. This helps to explain the disjointedness of the exhibit. *Creation's Journey* attempts in a very small space to simultaneously showcase objects as masterpieces, stress their utility, illuminate their symbolism, express their spirituality, contest their interpretation, and assert their timelessness.

Highlighting the ways in which various agents confer aesthetic, cultural, and economic value on objects is a welcome effort as value is a subjective, transitory, and historically based category. Contrary to Kant's claim, the aesthetic disposition of the object

is not a gift of nature but is necessarily pluralistic and conditional. The NMAI's labels attempt to address the multiplicity of conditions responsible for the status of the object. The exhibition delivers what the press release promises—"a multivoiced perspective that rarely has been seen in museums before."

Indeed, multi-vocal interpretation has been embraced wholeheartedly by the museum—some objects have up to five explanatory labels. The exhibition space is invaded by a cacophony of voices from audio-tape and interactive video monitors. But this is multivocality with a caveat—a binary is produced whereby Native (meaning those with official tribal affiliation) voices are deemed "authentic" and authoritative, while the opinions of non-Natives come off as inferior or misinformed. Certainly, the erosion of the practice of speaking for "others" inherent in ethnography is a welcome development. But while the right to self-representation is imperative, the NMAI comes dangerously close to replicating the universalizing tendencies characteristic of the very Western institutions it purports to displace. The NMAI's rhetoric would seem to advance the notion of a generic or "normal" Indian, and this has the effect of replacing one stereotypical representation with another—homogenizing an inherently heterogeneous group of people (Native Americans) in the process.

The notion of representing one's self is seductive but, as anthropologist Virginia Dominguez points out, the ideology of the dominant group "so penetrates into the underprivileged sections of a population that there is no guarantee that the representation of a self produced by members of the minority population would necessarily differ from the empowered group's representation of their otherness" (1987:136). This is evident at the NMAI, a museum based on the collection, albeit enormous, of one white male. The minority population—in this case, Native Americans—must grapple at the NMAI with defining themselves not only through and against dominant paradigms, but also through the objects voraciously acquired by George Heye. The banker/collector's criteria unavoidably colors any representation in this institution. Each element of his collection would have had a particular significance for him, divorced from its original intent. As these works go through processes of donation, repatriation, and reinstallation, their meanings are similarly transformed.

Objects

The designation of an object as art or artifact is

often contingent on its utility or lack thereof. This puts a spin on Karl Marx's concept of use-value and commodities. Marx claimed that "nothing can have value without being an object of utility" (1977:421). In the art world, however, the common object becomes art only upon suspension of its utility. The collection, in fact, represents the total aestheticization of use value. The further the object is removed from use value, Susan Stewart explains, the "more multivocal its referentiality" (1993:151). Torn between whether to present objects as art or artifact, the NMAI does both. In *Creation's Journey*, Cultural Resources Director Clara Sue Kidwell and her colleagues try to question Western standards of aesthetic value, while at the same time appropriating them. Presented under spotlights and in vitrines, previously utilitarian objects are privileged as fine art in the first corridor of the exhibition. Wall texts point out the timelessness of Native creations, for example, and describe them as masterpieces. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that the litmus test for art seems to be whether or not an object can be stripped of its contingency and still "hold up." The contingency of the first few works on display in *Creation's Journey* is wholly suppressed, calling for their interpretation on purely aesthetic terms. Here, the NMAI mimics the approaches of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and Freer Gallery of Asian Art—pristine, minimalist institutions that shun contextualization in favor of aesthetic contemplation. The exhibition labeling repeatedly stresses that for Indians, art is inseparable from life. Accordingly, functional objects share the same space as decorative (market) baskets, jewelry, and the like. Not everything produced by non-Native Americans necessarily warrants inclusion in the museum. To suggest that everything does, again posits "other" populations as an entity to be represented.

The objects displayed at the NMAI do "hold up" and are quite remarkable, though you really have to concentrate to see them in the midst of so much labeling and interactive media. Stephen Greenblatt (1991) advocates a balance between resonance—the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand—and wonder, which he defines as the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention. Ideally, one hopes that wonder will not be sacrificed at the expense of

resonance, but at the NMAI, wonder fights an uphill battle. The museum, as a reviewer for *The Wall Street Journal* put it, "seems hellbent on upstaging its own treasures" (Gameran 1994:A16).

A few steps away from the pristine display that is the beginning of *Creation's Journey*, objects are suddenly presented in what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as *in context*—they are accompanied by labels, maps, aural commentary, video narration, and ethnically marked docents. Objects are also presented *in situ*, where "the object is a part that stands in a contiguous relation to an absent whole that may or not be recreated" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:388). A label written by project director Hill suggests that "objects like the bear clan hat might better serve humanity when used in the rituals for which they were intended" yet the bear clan hat of Chilkat Tlingit of Northwest Alaska is exhibited on a glass enclosed pedestal in the center of the room, a metonym for a past tradition. If humanity is better served by the absence of this hat than its presence, why is it here? The hat in isolation evokes loss; its partiality enhances "the aura of its 'realness'."

Few objects displayed in museums were ever meant to be seen there. Native and non-Western objects continue to go through a process of transformation whereby one society's functional or ritual objects become another society's art. Value, as George Simmel observed, "is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects." The placement of objects and things in unlikely contexts can accelerate or enhance value. An object is both aestheticized and commoditized by diversion, acquiring its privileged status as a result of the shift (Appadurai 1986:1).

Such decontextualization is at the heart of museum display and has been better addressed elsewhere, as in artist Fred Wilson's 1992 reinstallation of the Seattle Art Museum's permanent collection, titled *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*. In Seattle's African galleries, Wilson displayed material culture evocative of a dark and unknown Africa—traditional robes, masks, and tools, but interspersed among the artifacts were photographs of modern Nigerian office buildings, a contemporary business suit, and a gold Rolex (borrowed from a museum trustee). The text of one accompanying label read:

Certain elements of dress were used to categorize one's rank in Africa's status-conscious capitals. A gray suit with conservatively patterned tie denotes

a businessman or member of government. Costumes such as this are designed and tailored in Africa and worn throughout the continent.⁹

The presence of contemporary objects helped to displace assumptions about Africa's primitive existence, while the business suit cleverly illustrated the danger of allowing an object to function as the symbol of an entire culture. As James Clifford explains, "we have this ethnographic notion that some microcosm of culture inheres in a collected object. By putting it back into its 'context', you can sort of produce the culture around it" (1989:153). Museological efforts to the contrary, once removed from its original place of production or use, the object is always out of context. It is the discrepancy between object and context in exhibitions, Clifford suggests, that should be represented. Wilson attempts to illustrate this in his refashionings of museum displays, but the NMAI seems unable to do so without descending into didacticism, as with the signage for the bear clan hat.

The museum barely touches on the complex and delicate issues surrounding reburial and repatriation. In a recent paper presented to the American Anthropological Association, Nancy Rosoff, Assistant Curator at the NMAI, addressed the traditional care practices that were being implemented at the museum's storage facility:

The Human Remains Vault is smudged with a mixture of tobacco, sage, sweetgrass, and cedar every week. . . . Drawers containing sacred materials such as bundles have been flagged so that people who are not allowed to handle this material will be able to avoid it. . . . The katsina dolls or tithu are given offerings of food everyday such as small pieces of bread, fruit, vegetables, and potato chips. These offerings are made first thing in the morning, before the person making the offering has eaten, because it would be disrespectful to eat before making offerings to the katsinas. (1994:6)

Rosoff's anecdotes illustrate that the transfer of objects is not a simple matter of exchange—collecting has consequences. The acquisition, storage, and display of objects are inextricably tied to discourses of power, knowledge, and domination. The procedures Rosoff describes could have been incorporated into museum displays as a way of addressing the conflicts over use and ownership.

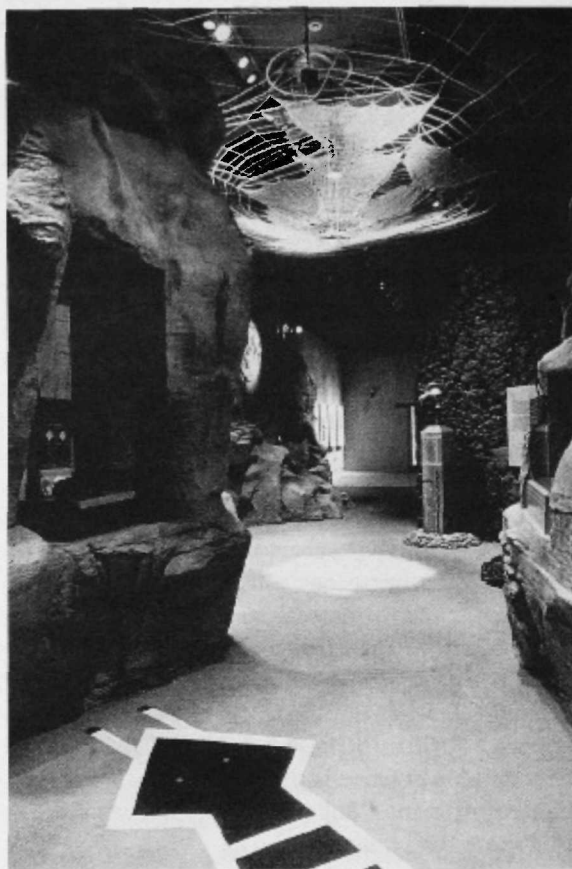
References to cultural pillaging and colonial domination are similarly oblique. For instance, the means

by which Heye managed to acquire over one million Native American items (the largest single repository of aboriginal objects from the Americas) is allowed to remain a mystery to museum-goers. Heye's connoisseurship is applauded, as is his generosity as a donor but no mention is made of his tendency (or determination) to effectively pick clean the cultural productions of entire populations. Heye did donate the objects, so the museum must be careful not to bite the hand that fed it. But the often dark history of how objects come to be displayed should not be kept hidden.

There is only one label in the museum, located at the end of an unmarked hallway, that refers to genocide. (I later learned from NMAI staff that the artists involved in *This Path We Travel* intended this space, which features glass-encased objects with no labeling whatsoever, to serve as an arena where the objects could speak for themselves.) The exhibition section titled "Profane Intrusion" consists of a reconstructed schoolroom and the aforementioned interior of a reservation house. The open diorama is meant to illustrate "how traditional values and civil rights were violated following European colonization and its aftermath." Apart from these two rooms, oddly enough, ethnographic practice is the target of far more wrath than governmental policy; anthropologists are chastised more than politicians.

All Roads Are Good/This Path We Travel

The collaboration with and celebration of contemporary Native peoples is made a top priority, yet the trope of timelessness is so pervasive as to make one wonder whether or not this or any museum can sustain a living culture. The desire for self-representation informs the exhibition *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture*. Twenty-three Indian artists, nominated by their respective communities, were asked to select objects from the Heye collection on the basis of "artistic, cultural, spiritual and personal significance." Their responses to the objects were recorded and appear in the exhibit on video, as label text, or as part of interactive computer displays. It is not readily apparent that the first person narratives it provides are contemporary. Dates have been suppressed in an effort to encourage the objects as "expressions of continuous cultures" rather than examples of specific periods. The participants are frozen in time, particularly in the computer exhibits—a talking head is in freeze frame, awaiting the touch of a visitor's hand to be activated. This mode of display



2. Installation view of *This Path We Travel*, National Museum of the American Indian. Photo: Katherine Fogden.

makes the works of one tribe or nation barely distinguishable from the next, illustrating Dean MacCanell's contention that "every nicely motivated effort to preserve nature, primitives, and the past, and to represent them authentically contributes to an opposite tendency, the present is made more unified against its past, more in control of nature, less a product of history" (1989:83).

While the displacement of structure and linear narrative can be an effective counter-hegemonic strategy, here it tends to promote confusion. The closest the NMAI comes to probing the diurnal conflicts of contemporary Indian-ness is with NTV (Native Television)—a series of videos screened on a television in the HUD tract house. Satiric versions of American talk shows, commercials, and newscasts address interracial relationships, racism, and popular misconceptions. NTV is effective in large part because of its embrace of humor—a quality it shares with many

Native artists but one that is generally absent from the rest of the museum.¹⁰

NTV was conceived as part of *This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity*, the museum's third inaugural exhibition designed and produced by fifteen American Indian artists over a three-year period (Fig. 2). The NMAI press release explains that the artists chose several "universal" Indian themes including creation, sacredness, gender, and environment. The natural world has been designated the property of Native peoples here and throughout the NMAI. The Indians' sacred relationship to the land is run into the ground, while the destructive tendencies of the non-Indian world are tacitly implied. This is problematic in its suggestion that for Indians, the capacity to respect nature is inborn, an assumption that, however inadvertent, perpetuates pervasive notions of the primitive/noble savage. In this respect, even the NMAI's representations of Native Americans differ little from those of a century ago—or even four hundred years ago as evidenced by the earliest surviving images of Native peoples.

The relentless longing for a return to Eden seems to suggest that Native Americans live each day in regret over what has been lost. The NMAI purports to celebrate contemporary Indians but can only do so by inextricably linking them to a glorified (and constructed) primitive past. Toby Miller (1995) has explained how Australian Aboriginality is used extensively by whites as a theoretical trope—as a means of distinction, a laboratory for socio-cultural study, focus of nostalgia. The "modern" has always longed to know itself through differentiation from the "primitive." Australian and other aboriginal/indigenous populations have employed the discourse to political ends—i.e., land rights, reburial/repatriation legislation—but as Andrew Ross cautions "for those non-Westernized commoners who are likely still to be living out rather than celebrating indigenous practices, the outcome of this discourse of preservation does not usually lend itself to more democratic forms of self-determination; it tends to sustain, if not reinvent, tribal and patriarchal forms of hierarchy" (1994: 69).

The NMAI turns a blind eye to the approximately sixty-five percent of Native Americans who live in urban areas, including nearly 37,000 who reside in the five boroughs of New York City.¹¹ The number of Indians residing in New York exceeds the population on any reservation, with the exception of the Okla-

homa land areas and the Navajo reservation, which spreads across Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Given the NMAI's location in downtown Manhattan and the media campaign's exhortation to "Meet the Real Native New Yorkers," the urban reality of Native populations should have been addressed. Numerous Native artists are doing just that. Discussing his work in the premier issue of *Indian Artist* magazine, Apache sculptor Bob Haozous (not included in the NMAI) had this to say:

What I'm trying to do is reveal what has happened to Native American people by the oppression we've undergone and are still undergoing to reveal how we are changing but also to reveal how we romanticize ourselves and put ourselves on pedestals because of our ancestors' behavior. Too often we don't really look at ourselves today. In most galleries, you see images of Indians that are untrue. They don't include who we really are—very unhealthy in a lot of ways: alcoholism, violence, poverty, suicide, political problems, loss of land, religion and language. If you look at the images Indians project, they're beautiful images of the past. But our ancestors weren't having such a great time themselves.¹²

A non-critical celebration of the everyday ignores the equally "real" boredom, stress, and routine parts of everyday existence. As Larry Grossberg explains in his discussion of power and daily life, it refuses to acknowledge the ways in which the structures of oppression and domination are real and successful (1992:98).

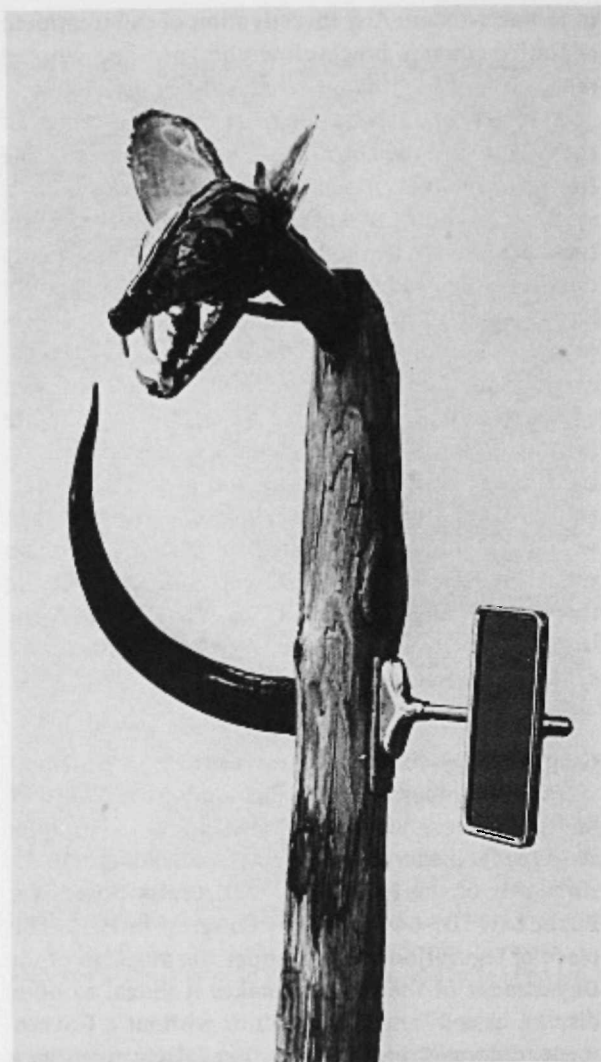
This is evident in the museum's representation of the role of women in Native cultures. The treatment of gender here is strictly essentialist, and reflects again a dependence on conventional binary structures. Traditional male and female roles are reinforced to the extreme. In the section on women, the visitor walks through an artificial rock formation, evocative of Santa Fe interior design trends. Fertility is accorded premier status—several large ceramic vessels, referred to in the press release as symbolic wombs, rest on the ground. The mouth of one particularly large pottery jar houses a television that broadcasts Native women making tortillas. The accompanying exhibition catalogue refers to the limits placed on women's activities in tribal societies but does not engage with issues of feminism or sex discrimination. I would have welcomed at least an acknowledgment of the problems of reconciling Western feminist discourse with the traditional roles assigned

to Indian women. Any investigation of the treatment of Native women, however, would have necessitated relinquishing the romanticized Native past.

A spider web symbolizing the trickster-creator of the Lakota and the spirit-being Spider Woman of the Navajo, links the male and female sections in "a symbolic creation of both life and art." The representation of men throughout the museum essentially duplicates the traditional dioramas that even natural history and anthropology museums are in the process of trying to replace. Men are presented as hunters, carvers, and drummers, who, through traditional rites of passage, teach their sons to do the same. Male identity is addressed by tracing the stages of life from infancy and youth to maturity and death, while portrayals of women focus on their childbearing years. A winding path depicting a curving rattlesnake (again with the Eden-ic return) directs one's movement through the "Male" section of *This Path We Travel*. The Grandfather Pole is erected as a (none-too-subtle) symbol of masculinity.

Grappling with the contemporary

The contemporary artists included in the NMAI are limited to those who are members of a federally or state-recognized tribe, and whose work adheres to the standards of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board Act, Public Law 101-644 passed by Congress in 1990. This piece of legislation created under the auspices of the Department of the Interior makes it illegal to offer, display, or sell "any good with or without a Government trademark in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular Indian or Indian tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization." That Indian communities would seek government regulation of their artistic production strikes one as rather ironic. The legislation is designed to secure the "authenticity" of Native cultural production and to prevent non-Indians from capitalizing on Native traditions. It seems instead, however, to limit rather than enhance self-determination and, as such, is deeply problematic. Should the government be given the authority to regulate acceptable subject matter for artists? As Jean Fisher points out, no other ethnic group has their artistic identity legislated by the state rather than by self-determination (1992:50). By dictating what does and does not constitute Native production, this legislation serves to marginalize the artists who are supposedly protected by it. The law is especially debilitating for those Indians not officially registered with tribes. There is



3. Jimmie Durham, *Not Joseph Beuys' Coyote*, 1990.
Collection Michelle Szwajcer, Antwerp Belgium.
Courtesy of the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.
Photo: Philippe DeGobert.

a visible tension between aesthetics and custom, with the excluded third term being the contemporary. A desire to let Indian traditions evolve into new types of cultural production is overshadowed by a need to cling to a mythical past. Works by contemporary artists that clearly appropriate from both Native and Western sources have been accorded lower status and generally are absent from the NMAI.

The commodification of Native culture is addressed in a re-creation of the interior of a reservation house. A variety of foods bearing Indian names—Mazola Corn Oil, Big Red, etc. sit atop a refrigerator. A glass case on the opposite wall displays pop culture Indian products ranging from a Village People album cover

to a synthetic wig of black braids and headband. The point is well taken, but the museum gift shop downstairs belies it. The museum has two stores: upstairs one finds arts, crafts, and reproductions in line with U.S. Public Law 101-644—i.e., objects chosen to “provoke the spirit and reflect the diversity inherent at the National Museum of the American Indian.”¹³ Downstairs one finds mass-produced mini-tomahawks, drums, moccasins, and CDs of Native music for sale, along with “authentic” Native American food on the shelves—wild rice, jam, beans, and popcorn. A rubber stamp kit featuring the faces of Sitting Bull and other legendary Indian chiefs can be purchased for seven dollars, while thirty dollars will buy you a Prehistoric Cave Painting Kit. The museum tableau aims to make the audience sensitive to the danger of cultural stereotypes while the gift shop blatantly reinforces them.

In fact, the two gift shops demonstrate a tension inherent in Native cultural production—“authentic” versus tourist art. In her argument against the institutional disavowal of tourist art, Ruth Phillips (1994) explains that objects displaying traces of aboriginal negotiation of Western artistic and economic systems had to be excluded from formal programs of collecting and exhibiting in order to maintain the standard museum representation of Natives as “other.” Pre-contact objects are privileged at the NMAI, the emphasis on the involvement of contemporary artists notwithstanding. One would hope that the nostalgia for the premodern could be replaced with an appreciation of the richness to be had from intercultural exchange. Appropriation is celebrated in Western art, characterizing, in fact, much of postmodern cultural production. Must it be denigrated in aboriginal cultural production? Phillips believes that viewing Indian works as indicative of adaptability and survival would function to subvert the text of colonialism by disrupting “the rarity value produced by the evolutionist credo of the disappearing Indian” and by denying “the escapist fantasy of refuge from industrialism that was structured by the dialectics of primitivist discourse” (1994:114). Further, Fred Myers suggests that the emphasis on self-representation that informs current dominant discourse has the tendency to dismiss out of hand cross-cultural productions of identity. Myers argues that these intercultural productions should be viewed as “redefinitions and rediscoveries of identity worked out in the face of challenging interrogations from an ‘other’” rather than as less sincere cultural expressions (1994:680).

In his article “Borderzones: The ‘Injun-uity’ of Aes-

thetic Tricks," Indian artist Gerald McMaster (1995) writes of the struggle not only between Natives and non-Natives, but within Native communities as well. He describes an ambiguous zone, a site of articulation for the contemporary Native artists that is frequently crossed, lived, and negotiated. This space is conceived as an area for practices of resistance and the articulation of self-identity in the postcolonial world (McMaster 1995). I do not think that the NMAI has allowed for such a space. McMaster, a Plains Cree, is included in the *All Roads are Good* exhibition but his installation, consisting of a circular arrangement of moccasins in various sizes and colors, is pointedly uncontroversial. "When the Native artist speaks as the author rather than the bearer of (another's) meaning," Jean Fisher writes, "she or he precipitates an epistemological crisis" (1992:45). But the Native voices at the NMAI function to perpetuate rather than displace traditional colonial discourse of the vanishing Indian.

Conspicuously absent from the NMAI are those whose work addresses relations with the white community and problematizes Native identity and traditions—James Luna, Jimmie Durham, Edgar Heap of Birds, and Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, are just a few examples. (Luna was invited to participate but chose not to.) The work of these artists circulates through the non-Native art system—Durham and Quick-To-See-Smith have gallery representation in Soho, for example, which almost seems to have been grounds for their exclusion here (Fig. 3). One senses at the NMAI persistent refusal to allow for a voice that transgresses the acceptable signifiers of Indianity—a voice, that Fisher suggests, would "contaminate the aesthetic with the political" (1992:45).

The inclusion of a work like James Luna's *The Artifact Piece* would have served to highlight the problems inherent in cultural representation. By literally exhibiting himself in San Diego's Museum of Man in this 1986 work, Luna attempted to displace nostalgic notions of a lost or disappearing culture so often associated with the non-western display of objects. Label text described the scars on Luna's body as acquired in various drunken brawls—a reference to the problem of alcohol on the reservation. Accompanying glass display cases held his personal effects including 1960s rock-and-roll albums, shoes, and a United Farmworkers' Union button. Luna demonstrated how anything placed under glass in a museum suddenly merits curiosity and attention. The site-specific work also served as a counterpoint to the Museum of Man's large collection of Edward Curtis'

photographs of vanishing Indians, who had posed in costume to document their own disappearance. In contrast, the NMAI seems to yearn for the mythic past Luna aims to deconstruct.

In *The Artifact Piece*, Luna performed the role of ethnographic specimen as part of an exhibit on the "contemporary Indian." This act echoed the experience of Ishi, the Yahi Indian who was installed at the University of California at Berkeley's Museum of Anthropology from 1911 until his death five years later. Humans have, in fact, been displayed as living rarities from as early as 1501, when live Eskimos were exhibited in Bristol, England. "Other" peoples ranging from Tahitians to Cherokees to Hottentots have been showcased in diverse locales including zoos, taverns, circuses, and by the mid-nineteenth century, world's fairs. Ethnicity continues to function as spectacle for a consuming public, in forms ranging from Hawaiian luaus to staged Aboriginal sand-painting at New York's Asia Society.¹⁴ The oft-cited goal of such events is to promote greater cultural understanding but what is often delivered is a reinforcement of preconceived notions about other cultures.

Recently, Luna again parodied notions of Indian authenticity (particularly as expressed in rituals, festivals, and pow-wows staged for tourists) in a 1993 site-specific museum performance at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art. As part of "The Shame-Man Meets El Mexican't at the Smithsonian Hotel and Country Club," Luna put himself on display and performed the quotidian. Visitors walking through the museum came upon a "live" diorama featuring Luna and performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña. Wearing ethnic attire, Luna brushed his teeth and vacuumed the floor like a "real" Indian. Luna's performance of the everyday no doubt makes a joke at the visitor's expense, but it also aims to unpack his or her assumptions. Luna "masquerades" as a "real" Indian, and with such humorous masking of a "nonidentity (the other is never where he sought, since he is, in truth, of the Euro-American imaginary)," Fisher suggests, "... boundaries of the stereotype are exceeded and the colonial text loses its coherence" (1992:45).

The political and instructional function of such performances of ethnicity has been persuasively argued by anthropologist Fred Myers. Issues of colonization and authenticity always lurk in the wings, but culture-making is still taking place. While Luna's self-display can be read as objectification, Myers suggests that the gaze of the audience/visitor is crucial to the

performer as an authentication of their experience (1994:682). The production of culture is never one-sided. The essential role of the audience is further explicated by art historian Carol Duncan (1991, 1995), who suggests that the museum both structures and invites a performance whether or not the visitors consider themselves performers. This performativity may be embodied in something as simple as an individual following a prescribed route—which is precisely what visitors to the national museum do. There is little room to wander as the design rigidly delineates one's path through the NMAI's exhibition space, which is awkwardly nestled in the former United States Customs House. The museum, like most ritual sites, Duncan explains, "is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special kind of attention—in this case, contemplation and learning" (1995:11).

The West as America

Indian culture was presented in a revisionist light by a group of non-Indian curators and academics in the Smithsonian Museum of American Art's 1991 exhibition, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*. Its imagery was deeply ingrained in the American consciousness—Indians in canoes, frontiersmen on horseback, pioneer families at the dinner table. It was not the paintings but rather the means of interpreting them that set off a firestorm of protest in the United States Congress. Lambasted for its political correctness, the exhibition was grounded in a desire to expose the myths and ideologies of Western expansion. *The West as America* incurred such wrath because it exposed a darker side of American identity formation. The Smithsonian is perceived as a symbol of all that is great about America. For this very institution to present the ideology of the West in a negative light was inconceivable.

The deconstructive rhetoric of *The West as America* came from the mouths and pens of white academics, and was interpreted as anti-American. Such self-reflexivity was deemed "perverse and destructive" by historians like Daniel Boorstin and Charles Krauthammer, who suggested that the tone of the exhibition was more in line with the strategies of Communist subversives than members of a democratic society. There was much political capital to be acquired in trashing *The West as America*. As Bryan Wolf suggests, Senator Ted Stevens "scents blood in the air—not the pigmented kind from Leutze's painting *Teocalli* but the political kind that produces howls and votes. His

attack on the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art is but one movement in a larger effort to transform culture into a 'wedge' issue" (1992:430). The same hue and cry has not emerged over the National Museum of the American Indian. Why not? Is criticism tolerated only when the downtrodden are at the helm? Or has the NMAI resisted attack because of its current satellite location, far from the institutional fortress that is the Mall in Washington, D.C.? It will be quite interesting to see how the museum will be received once ensconced in the nation's capital.

Conclusion

Museums have traditionally advanced a nationalist agenda, where they are represented as embodying all that is great about a nation and its people. Such a policy is exclusionary at best and dangerous at worst—as nationalism, Richard Sennett has written, "creates a mythic land in which people understand themselves and each other. The myth disguises inequalities and legitimates attacks on people whose lives are different" (1994). Ironically, the NMAI veers dangerously close to projecting a pan-Indian nationalism. Representation in the national archive is after all, universally desired—but can the colonized avoid the adoption of the colonizer's paradigm? In its efforts to instill Indian pride, and to bring a greater understanding and tolerance to the non-Indian public, the museum more often than not glosses over tension and difference. The exhibitions, as a visitor commented in the NMAI's guest book, result in a ". . . homogenization of all cultures."

While a diversity of perspectives and opinions is key to the success of cultural institutions, perhaps too many people were involved in this instance, resulting in a rather unfocused pastiche of approaches. A 1992 report by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association after the Canadian exhibition *The Spirit Sings*, called for every future museum representation of First Peoples to be the product of an equal collaboration between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. Phillips sees this as a sign that the colonial era of the museum is drawing to a close (1994:117). While this spirit of cooperation is laudable, the experience of the *Creation's Journey* exhibit suggests that collaboration in and of itself is not enough. Another recent Smithsonian venture, the display of the *Enola Gay*, similarly demonstrates the extent to which the museum is a highly politicized arena. Today, museums are acknowledged to be

ideology-producing entities in need of reform. While this recognition has resulted in a rethinking of museological practice, it has also made the museum an increasingly contested terrain. Every effort was made to make the display of the Enola Gay exhibition collaborative, but some groups are simply louder and in possession of greater political capital. In a step backwards, caving to pressure from Congress and powerful veteran's groups, the Smithsonian made the decision to display the Enola Gay as a Hegelian object of contemplation—all didactic explanation has been excised from the exhibition.

No one can argue with the value of celebrations of creativity and heritage, but for them to succeed some engagement with contemporary conflicts and realities is called for. As art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains, "insofar as critical practices do not exist in a vacuum, but derive their forms and meanings in relation to their changing historical conditions, the problem of definition must always be articulated in terms of the present" (1988:206). The problem of cultural representation is not so much a problem to be solved but rather one in need of continual reworking and restrategizing. By unveiling the presence of the political, the economic, and the social within the cultural institution, museums such as the NMAI can function as a dialectical forum rather than as a ceremonial monument. ❖

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Notes

- Influenced by, among other things, continental theory (Foucault, Lyotard, Barthes, *et al*) and political activism, and applied to everything from architecture to academe, postmodernism is notoriously hard to define. Yet it can be said that the various intellectual, artistic, and social currents that have aligned themselves with the postmodern share the following: an awareness of language as an explanatory mode, a concern with a critical deconstruction of traditions, a desire to illuminate rather than deny social and political affiliations, a wish to radically revise structures of power and their corresponding cultural hierarchies, and a desire to recover the history of others. For a variety of cultural perspectives on postmodernism, see essays in the exhibition catalogue *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990.
- This "educational" kit, put out by the J. Paul Getty Museum, has everything needed to make your own museum in miniature—stickers of great works of art from Canaletto to African masks with gallery walls to stick them on, cardboard cut-outs of museum guards, visitors; Classical statuary with gallery floors to display them on; geometric shapes for creating one's own abstract works, and a guidebook featuring the history of museums—all for \$29.95.
- Susan Stewart (1993) suggests that the collection replaces history with classification and exists beyond the realm of temporality. Museological attempts to place objects in context are concerned not with historical representation but rather with inventing a classificatory system which will define time and space in such a way that the world can be accounted for within the parameters of the collection.
- Of this new partnership, artist Jimmie Durham cynically surmised, "Last summer the Smithsonian held a daylong meeting in Albuquerque and 'heard from a number of Indian and museum spokespersons representing many viewpoints'. Surely those viewpoints have been collected, and just as surely they will be packaged and properly displayed" (Durham 1993).
- Daniel Inouye cited in Geoffrey Platt, "The Repatriation Law Ends One Journey — But Opens a New Road," *Museum News* (January/February 1991) 91.
- At the time of this writing, Congress is set to vote on the dismantling of the National Endowment for the Arts, which will, of course, adversely affect the future of this and all other cultural institutions.
- I include myself here as a writer operating within white academic discourse. I am not of Native ancestry nor do I presume to speak for (or against) Native Americans. My intent here is a critique of museological practice and not of Native culture.
- I met informally with members of the curatorial staff at the NMAI's storage facility in the Bronx in April 1995.
- Label text cited in the exhibition catalogue, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*. For a comprehensive account of museum "interventions" like Wilson's see Corrin 1994.
- A show devoted to the use of humor in Native art was held at the Center for the Arts/Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco this summer. In the accompanying catalogue, *Indian Humor*, Jolene Rickard writes, "What's worth a laugh is that someone out there will inevitably dig this piece because it was made by an Indian" (1995:12).
- Most museums displaying non-Euro/American artistic productions have tended to ignore contemporary realities. Efforts to bring primitivized cultures into the present are a recent phenomenon. See the exhibition catalogue for Fred Wilson's reinstallation of the Seattle Art Museum's collection, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*, 1992.
- This was Mr. Haozous' response to the question of what issues are facing contemporary Native artists in *Indian Artist 1:1* (1995).
- Amy Garmann, in her review of the NMAI for *The Wall Street Journal* suggested that the museum's curators "would do well to study" the upstairs shop where items were "more respectfully displayed than the museum's own artifacts: Grouped by tribal affiliation and medium, they are in well-lit cases with cards listing only the artist's name and nation" (1994:A16).
- For a cultural analysis of these spectacles, see Ross 1994 and Myers 1994.

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