

# Native American Cosmopolitan Modernism(s)

## A Re-articulation of Presence through Time and Space

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The Native American contribution to the discourse which structures contemporary artistic practices in the US and abroad should be highlighted, as Gerald R McMaster states, instead of a desire for inclusion in a duplicitous narrative called the 'mainstream' or the 'canon'.<sup>1</sup> In lieu of the bad faith exhibited by anthropological approaches, the concept of cosmopolitanism offers a new understanding of how cross-cultural interaction on a national, as well as an international level, has shaped the Native American artistic experience throughout history. To be sure, as pointed out by art historian Janet Catherine Berlo, the history of Native American art history remains to be written, even in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> It is nevertheless pertinent to the intellectual discourse surrounding Native American Cosmopolitan Modernism to elucidate the extent to which the era of the late nineteenth century shaped the reception and understanding of the visual arts made by Native Americans. In short, the art objects of Native American cultures were then collected, constructed, and characterised by the multiple levels of (mis)understandings inherent to the epistemological status of the non-European Other as an unstable form for the contestation of and, therefore, comparison with Western man.<sup>3</sup>

The late nineteenth-century era, which Foucault observed as the dissemblance of philosophy into anthropology, witnessed the beginning of a history of Native American art based on the collective and cultural interests of US institutions. This historical formation reveals the prevailing dialogue between anthropology and art history as it applies to the modernism of Native American art. Terry Eagleton rightly described the cultural milieu at the end of the nineteenth century as a period in which 'civilisation' had acquired an inescapable imperialist echo. Another word was needed to denote how social life should be, rather than how it was.<sup>4</sup> That word happened to be 'culture', the opposite of 'civility', and used to describe the life-forms of 'savages' or a primitive social order known as

1. Gerald R McMaster, 'Towards an Aboriginal Art History', in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed W Jackson Rushing, Routledge, New York, 1999, p 81.
2. Janet Catherine Berlo, ed, *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1992, p 2.
3. Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989, p 77.
4. Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000, p 10.

the Indian. Culture began for the Native American as a decidedly tribal construct rather than a cosmopolitan one. Savages were cultured, whereas the civilised were not.<sup>5</sup> Eagleton presents this image of the savage as a 'life-form' in counterpoint to the ever-increasing Euro-American population. This paradigm served the ideological and economic purposes of exploitation occasioned by colonialism with the yielding of an aestheticised primitiveness imposed by the West.

When art historians in the field become interested in exploring and defining Native America's relationship to modernism, the ensuing discussion reveals a privileged, anthropological understanding of history exemplified by the ideological complex known as the 'salvage paradigm'. This theoretical structure has been fundamentally informed by a type of aesthetics of diversity inextricably bound to Western practices of art and culture collecting. It is also a paradigm related to an evolutionary conception of time and space. James Clifford points out that nineteenth-century evolutionism ordered the world's societies into a linear sequence constructed by endless imaginary redemptions that functioned aesthetically to preserve an 'authentic' past.<sup>6</sup> This convenient historical scenario had 'progression' as its measuring stick, until twentieth-century relativist anthropology was faced with redistributing human difference into separate groups known as 'cultures'. Non-Western groups in the Americas naturally occupied the lower levels of the evolutionary ladder in a special status called the 'ethnographic present' when, in fact, it was actually the past. The American Indian was then subject to assumptions about tradition, history and authenticity that were wholly imbibed with oppressive dichotomies that made up Western taxonomy, memory and consciousness. The main contrasts to be considered are those that have eluded even the most recent advances made by the postcolonial re-thinking of Native American modernism. Those structures to be re-examined relate to the production of inherited art forms as neither 'authentic' nor 'inauthentic', or 'traditional' nor 'non-traditional', but rather as a discursive field in its own right that has been continuously plagued by the idea of culture. An idea, according to Eagleton, that is born out of the perceived conflict between culture and civilisation, or 'the full-blown quarrel between tradition and modernity'.<sup>7</sup>

Walter Benjamin's essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), engages a view of the past that cuts through historicism at the exact point where the truth content of images is retrievable by historical materialism.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin's historical materialist standpoint is not only one of empathy which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly, but also succeeds to expose the barbarism inherent in collecting cultural treasures as spoils for the victor at the expense of so-called Others. The issue of placing empathy has many effects on canon formation in the West as hitherto applying it to conceptualisations of cross-cultural dynamics, now often fashionably discussed as the rhetoric of difference in the hopes of inclusion. It is for current scholars writing Native American art history to realise (without amazement) that exclusion from a canon formed by empathy for the victor is truly not an intellectually gratifying undertaking, even if fortified by philosophical investigations into the histories of aesthetic theory (which should be the aim of writing Native American art history). When that realisation occurs, the presence of the Native American artist will

5. Ibid, p 13.

6. James Clifford, 'The Others: Beyond the "Salvage" Paradigm', in *The Third Text Reader: On Art, Culture, and Theory*, eds Rasheed Araeen, Sean Cubitt and Ziauddin Sardar, Continuum, London and New York, 2002, pp 160–1.

7. Eagleton, op cit, p 11.

8. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited with introduction by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp 254–5.

become visible in an academic discourse rendered short-sighted by a self-imposed epistemological crisis that has masqueraded as a wider intellectual problem in the history of art. In order to blast open the continuum of history, as Benjamin puts it, the universalism plaguing Eurocentric history should not be allowed to interfere with the Native American artist's experience with images of the past, which is the original concern of history.

It is easier said than done to dismiss outright the ideologies of the art institutions that excluded and repressed Native American artists while embracing a kind of multiculturalism devoid of critical debates concerning the function of modernity in the world and particularly in America. On an international level, institutional ideologies were exposed by Third World critics, most notably Edward Said. Art historians have since set in motion arguments to reveal a canon that included only white artists from Europe and North America under the guise of modernism. Since the mid-twentieth century, postcolonial critiques of modernism did much to further the studies of culture theory and engender critical debates concerning the politics of identity and representation in the grander scheme of things. However, as pointed out by Rasheed Araeen, the ideas of postcolonial theory and postmodernism are not only inadequate but inappropriate for understanding the predicament of an artistic discourse whose main obstacle is the historical responsibility to function subversively in order to penetrate institutions and challenge its structures.<sup>9</sup> These institutions are a conglomeration of ideologies that claim exclusive right to an idea of modernism made possible by the indiscriminate practice of imperialism and colonisation around the world. Araeen exposes the shortcomings of postcolonial theory by addressing the writings of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall in order to reveal pockets of dominant assumptions which might not have been challenged and might even function as reinforcement.

Araeen is mostly concerned with ideas that articulate the experiences of postcolonial mass migration of those who have suffered displacement from their original culture. There is a link of comparison. The articulation of Native American experiences abroad or even in their own homeland has not been adequately addressed by postcolonial theory and postmodernism. The anti-colonial struggle that modernity entreats has always been exercised by Native Americans across time and space or, in short, in history. As a political force to be reckoned with on local, state and federal levels, Native Americans have redefined modernity all along as a means of empowering their journey to freedom and self-determination. Native America's special relationship to the US state powers provides ample leverage for its artists' critical engagement with a restrictive canon of modernism. Indian artists, such as Jimmie Durham, have continuously resisted the dominant structures that shut them out of the art market.<sup>10</sup> A serious ideological struggle is taking place with art institutions in the US and abroad mostly because of their early collecting practices. Native American artists not only have to dismantle historical images of the 'Indian' but in addition breach a structure that maintains white intellectual supremacy over the academic field of art history. As Benjamin has rightly pointed out, that type of historicism exemplifies ideological bad faith, which impedes the struggle for the attainment of knowledge.

9. Rasheed Araeen, 'A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics', in *The Third Text Reader*, eds Araeen, Cubitt, and Sardar, op cit, pp 342-3.
10. Jimmie Durham, 'Cowboys and...', in *The Third Text Reader*, eds Araeen, Cubitt, and Sardar, op cit, pp 112-113.

The Native American artist's experience in the US and abroad tends to defy all the categorical assumptions at issue in postcolonial cultural theory.<sup>11</sup> For example, the Native American has never been subject to the disjunction of the individual from the whole, as a result of modernity, and which occurs in the application of Said's postcolonial critiques to the non-white immigrants' move to the West. The appropriation of Said's ideas by art institutions succeeds in eliciting sympathy for the exiled person, which in turn allows the ruling system to construct a postcolonial Other.<sup>12</sup> Native Americans have indeed been constructed as postcolonial Others via the salvage paradigm and its related notions of culture, but they have never sought to become exiles, in the postcolonial sense of the word, and migrate to other more hospitable countries outside the Americas. Notions of modernity upheld in the art institutions of the US are problematised by Native Americans because theories of hybridity and ethnicity, in Bhabha and Hall's respective accounts, do not apply to the historical experiences of Natives in America. Araeen finds fault with Bhabha's theory of hybridity because it ultimately negates history in order to seek legitimisation from institutions in the West. As for Hall, Araeen questions the motivations behind a theory of ethnicity that does not go beyond identity politics to resolve the confusion between the subject matter and content of works that non-white artists make. What happens in the art-institutional context of 'multiculturalism' is the assumption that culturally specific routes need to be taken, by way of an artist's cultural identity, in order for that artist to be accepted or understood. This road can only end in the celebration of the Other by virtue of the ignorant act of essentialising those who do not conform to art historical norms.

In exploring the influence of culture on the works of Picasso, Mondrian and Brancusi, Araeen advances important issues concerning the direct link between European artists and modernity. The works of these European modernists are accepted into the canon without the least conscious effort at invoking their cultural affinities. They seem to engage with a concept of unitary modernism from which non-white artists are absented, even when subject matter and content show the influences of cultural difference. Araeen explains the disappearance of 'difference' in the works of European artists as a development of modernism in European cultures, as sums of the same whole, regardless of an artist's move from one culture to another. This condition explains why artists in exile from their own countries did not need to address their displacement because it was essential for them to transgress not only the cultures they left behind but also their experiences of exile.<sup>13</sup> That transgression signalled a move towards a universal type of modernism crucial to the production of new ideas and forms, even if European modernists were appropriating cultures outside the West. In contrast, Native American artists have social and political ties to their people and traditions, so their movement towards modernism is unlike that of artists in migratory exile.

Native Americans in the US and Canada present a different type of cosmopolitan modernism, based on the levels of sovereignty and Indian nationhood known generally as the reservation system. Originally conceived as a government-imposed system, over time and through space reservations have become systems in their own right with the land itself

11. Araeen, *op cit*, p 335.

12. *Ibid*, p 337.

13. *Ibid*, p 339.

often analogous to a separate country within another country. These sites are reconfigured spaces for the collective effort mobilised against the historical and contemporary practices of colonialism and imperialism, with a continuous focus on decentring the United States as national subject.<sup>14</sup> Philip J Deloria's essay, on the invisibility of Native scholars in intellectual spaces, echoes his concern for inclusion in another discourse that academe has routinely left unfilled. The issues that exclude Native American artists from the art historical canon are the same confronted by Native intellectuals in other fields of scholarship. These are reasons based on a universal, humanistic desire for social justice and a refusal to be assimilated into a repressive social order that American institutional and cultural structures have erected around citizenship. This firm stance can be held by most tribal groups because, by virtue of the existence of Indian Country, they have the opportunity to exercise some level of autonomy with their own understandings of social order and political self-governance. Indeed, Native Americans are constantly engaged in political and intellectual manoeuvring to build careful arguments in courts, Congress, and regulatory agencies so that treaty rights and sovereignty are kept intact.<sup>15</sup> It should be no surprise that Native artists have the ambition to penetrate an art market where modernism and theories of modernity are imbued with imperialist overtones. The de-humanisation and subsequent museumification of the Indian by the discipline of anthropology have sought to divorce the Native American, socially and politically, from the realities of experiencing and actively engaging in daily life among other people in the United States. The idea of culture is crucial to the construction of a national identity since it is nationalism that adopts primordial bonds to modern complexities.<sup>16</sup>

The past can be seized from history in an attempt to wrest tradition away from a conformism that has benefited long enough from empathy with the victor.<sup>17</sup> According to Benjamin, to articulate the past historically means seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger – an image that affects both the content of tradition and its receivers. Illuminating the ways in which Native American artists have engaged cosmopolitan modernism(s) means exploring, exposing, and analysing specific works by certain artists who, through their artistic practices, reveal what has been excluded from a canon of limited modernism. In a recent exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds made *Diary of Trees* with the intention of challenging an artistic discourse that has either negated or perversely aestheticised the history of Native American experiences in the US.<sup>18</sup> As a form of art in resistance to institutional ideologies, Heap of Birds succeeds in organising his body of work empowered by historical responsibility and artistic visioning. The *Diary of Trees* is the extension of an outdoor sculptural project, *Wheel*, for the Denver Art museum that has been re-contextualised for the gallery space. The conceptual programme for both works is based exclusively on Native American metaphysics of time and space. This represents an important divergence in the philosophy of history as a foundation for writing about Native American art. The relationship between tradition and modernity in the arts of Native Americans needs to be addressed on a continuum that does not adhere to Western philosophies of time and space. In order to scratch the surface of Heap of Birds's creative work,

14. Philip J Deloria, 'American Indians, American Studies, and the ASA', *American Quarterly*, 55:4, December 2003, p 672.

15. Ibid.

16. Eagleton, op cit, p 26.

17. Benjamin, op cit, pp 255–6.

18. This analysis of Edgar Heap of Birds's work draws from my essay, 'Diary of Trees – A Site of Convergence' for the Continuum 12 Artists series shown at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, New York, 22 November 2003–15 February 2004.

Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1958) contributed usefully to exploring the dialectics of the 'inside' and 'outside', as well as approaching the phenomenology of roundness with regard to the inspiration for *Wheel*. Heap of Birds's artwork not only functions subversively to penetrate and challenge institutional structures, but also incorporates all the fragments of social, political, and personal experiences whose truth content cannot be ignored.

With specific events in mind, *Diary of Trees* reveals an approach to history that relies on generational concepts of time in which the past and present are connected on a path that is anything but linear or dichotomous in memory. James Clifford has pointed out how the West organised a 'theatre of memory' whereby tribal groups are without history and instead have a mythic consciousness that allows them to resist or yield to the modern, but without the ability to produce or critically engage with it.<sup>19</sup> Anthropology notwithstanding, it is perfectly clear with *Diary of Trees* that historical moments have been reconfigured and articulated to engage with a discourse whose structure is formed by the process of modernity. It is also apparent that institutional legitimisation is neither sought after nor even possible, given the content of the work as a whole. With titles like 'Indian Religious Freedom Act', 'Federal Government Acronyms', 'Indigenous Global Allies' and 'Cheyenne and Arapaho Massacres', one would be hard-pressed to view the artist as a self-identified victim and

19. Clifford, *op cit*, pp 160–1.



*Diary of Trees*, installation by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indians, George Gustav Heye Center, New York City, 22 November 2003–15 February 2004

then celebrate his Otherness in the space exhibited. Heap of Birds is definitely interested in being critical about the country of his origin, the United States of America, but the nature of his works does not elicit enough sympathy to be reduced to reified commodities for the art market. Most other Native American artists, similarly engaged with modernism on social and political levels, are not institutionally celebrated in the West. It is a different story when Native Americans exhibit in other countries. US imperialism has functioned indiscriminately across enough borders to permit sympathy between people who have suffered the same injustices.

Native American artists are also not allowed to engage in modernisms that are not socially or politically driven. It has always been the case that acceptability of Native works of art depended on subject matter that was identifiable and representative of cultural affiliation, irrespective of the chosen medium. Araeen's critique of multiculturalism is correct in questioning the non-white artists' need to show their cultural identity cards upon entering the dominant culture. This is especially apparent on the contemporary art scene where Native artists have to interact with dominant cultural forms and produce something new that displays signs of their Otherness. The issue is twofold, however, because at the very instant that Native artists proudly display their cultural identity, they also challenge the institutional ideologies that allowed them to occupy a gallery space. Jimmie Durham has often written about the 'Indian art market' and its sub-outlet relationship to the dominant art market as expressed by successful artists like Fritz Scholder, R C Gorman, and T C Cannon. These contemporary artists of Native American descent were restricted to subject matter that was recognisably Indian. Signs of that 'Indian-ness' were imposed by outsiders with a romanticised view of history, and their own special access to modernism. In that sense, Native American artists function subversively even when they are not trying to challenge institutional ideologies.

Outside of this non-humanistic view of multiculturalism, most Native American artists draw on their cultural identity in order to formulate and articulate their experiences as an act of empowerment in a country whose institutions have repeatedly displaced or silenced them. With a firm grasp of historical events and an agenda never to forget what happened before, *Diary of Trees* presents a past that is not only concerned with tribal issues in the US but also those of indigenous communities around the world. As an object of knowledge that concerns itself with its own space, *Diary of Trees* engages artistic practices that move beyond mere description to actual criticism. It was Benjamin who had pointed out that critique is concerned with the truth content of a work and commentary with its subject matter. The relationship between the two depends on the way they are bound together and subsequently come apart in order to decide on the artwork's immortality. The critic's job is to inquire into truth because it is the history inherent in a work of art that prepares for its critique as it gains power through historical distance. In *Wheel*, Heap of Birds has assembled the crucial components of a visual language that engages contemporary artistic practices while speaking from a distinct Native perspective. This body of knowledge was extended to become *Diary of Trees* and subsequently enacted for the gallery space, a dedicated site of convergence for the evaluation and expression of tradition, modernity and artistic agency. As redemptive

acts, *Wheel* and *Diary of Trees* both function symbolically as the temporal index that Benjamin foresaw was indissolubly bound up with an image of happiness achieved by reflections on the past and obtainable by one's own relationship to it. The historical materialist's job is to expose the nature of empathy with the victors who owe their cultural treasures not only to the great minds and talents who created them but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries.<sup>20</sup> The art historian must take a similar stance when approaching history to write about Native American art with a humanistic interest in grasping the knowledge inherent in the objects themselves. In analysing Althusser's *Reading Capital*, John Tagg explains how this approach is the very reverse of ideological discourse, because to present a *new object* requires not only thinking of the object's difference but also distinguishing it rigorously from the old object.<sup>21</sup>

Conceptually speaking, *Diary of Trees* offers such a body of knowledge that yields much in the way of unsettling a positivistic, scientific discourse that persists in opposition to structuralist and poststructuralist vocabularies. The full-blown quarrel between modernity and tradition seems to fall into the ambiguities created by a desire to collapse the space between the metaphor and non-metaphor as theory's main obstacle. Perhaps it would be easier to say that the discursive field of Native American art offers that new object as counterpoint to ideology. Native American art can offer that resistance to canon formation because the nature of the visual arts made by Native peoples does not permit a distinction between the old and the new at any point in time. Any theoretical basis for the construction of a new canon has to be reconfigured by the discipline of art history and by way of its own conceptualisation of history. This is a view of history that has, so far, formed an idea of Native Americans and their art solely from a Western perspective, which favours the virtue of its own truth content. It is exactly this misconception that scholars have of Native America's past which provides a different perspective on modernism and modernity never in need of legitimisation from any institution. Native American artists embody a space that is neither 'inside' nor 'outside', metaphorically speaking or not, but which allows for an engagement with modernism by virtue of a periphery that has actually functioned as the true centre all along. One can view Native American artists like Heap of Birds as the person Bachelard describes who has the power to make *space withdraw*, to put space, all space, outside, so that a meditating being might be free to think.<sup>22</sup> Such a freedom is still alive in a humanistic ideal that Tzvetan Todorov believes possible with the decrease of scientism, nationalism, and egocentrism, so that new forms of expression can pave the way for a 'new canon' in the history of art, or rather a more cosmopolitan framework for paradigmatic artworks.<sup>23</sup> When this happens, the cross-cultural contribution of Native American artists will be manifest.

20. Benjamin, *op cit*, p 256.

21. John Tagg, *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics, and the Discursive Field*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p 5.

22. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans from the French by Maria Jolas with a new foreword by John R Stilgoe, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, p 251.

23. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Deflection of the Enlightenment*, Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford, 1989, p 13.