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TRANSGRESSING THE “NATIONAL”: METAPHORS OF EMANCIPATION

The contemporary Native American art scene recently engaged its diametrically opposed constituent (the “mainstream”) on the international art front in a move that sought to challenge the latter’s penchant for a narrow conception of global cultural relations. With multiculturalist rhetoric serving as the complex backdrop for aspirations and desires, the boundaries between and among these two communities marked and constructed the differences that continue to pervade their relation to one another. As a highly visible social and cultural institution, la Biennale di Venezia provided a site whereby its exclusionary practices could be examined and critically reevaluated, in an intellectual project, to highlight Native American artistic and curatorial practices in the United States and abroad. What seemed to be at stake, considering the titles of both symposiums, *Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon* (headed by Robert Storr, incoming director for the 2007 Venice Biennale) and *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*, organized by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), were issues of cultural production and the relations of power that determine meaning and, to a large extent, exchange value. A sense of displacement permeated the meeting grounds—an international venue that required travel from most of its participants—and forged a politics of space

that often accompanies the process of globalization and informs international relations.

Native America's migration toward the international, as signaled by NMAI's endeavors at the Biennale, can be seen as a form of global social criticism¹ in its efforts to locate culturally hybrid art forms within and beyond its own social and cultural spheres or traditions. In this way, we begin to see *culture*, in hybrid terms, as open-ended and constantly reimagined in a space where border identities are transgressed in order to pave the way toward renewed concepts and cultural transformations. In fact, the achievement of a non-Eurocentric conceptualization of multicultural relations depends upon a critical engagement with structural inequalities if the risks of homogenization of Native American experiences are to be overcome. To be sure, this collective effort to move beyond the local, or national, engenders a space of colonial encounter, known as the "contact zone," where knowledge of and action toward "the other" have historically translated into convictions of inferiority and assimilation of subordinated cultures.² This comparativist stance toward "the other" privileges one's own cultural categories and denies the internal multiplicity of the hybrid in a process that empowers the imperial and impedes critical self-reflection. Todorov defines this ethnological moment as a "double movement" in which the possibility of recognizing "the other" as both different *and* equal is precluded at the outset. For scholar Jean Fisher, it describes the West's failure to engage in a dialogue of equality and relinquish its control over meaning production as it constantly re-centers itself as the privileged subject of knowledge.³

Critical engagement with the "mainstream" thus entails a rereading of hybridity as a space in and through which Natives can voice their own subjectivity by locating their cultural poetics as a politics that calls into question structural inequalities within the art world. This intervention would mean foregoing any desire to measure success in terms of recognition of and by the "mainstream" so that risks of the "double movement" of which Todorov speaks would be deflected. In fact, this typical response to domination describes an effort by the subordinated person to establish mutual relationships in a contact zone where recovery of the self often means a simultaneous loss of the self. Scholar Geeta Kapur questions this method of

engaging the mainstream because even if the center-periphery model is turned inside out, the positions might change but the model that keeps it in place would not.⁴ Instead, a dialogue that contributes to the reciprocal illumination of one culture by the other is needed from both sides. Not only does this stance offer a way to negotiate the psychology of colonialism inherent to the contact zone, where hierarchies are invoked for domination, but it also situates the Native American subject as an effective agent employing a politics of resistance that avoids assimilation and cultivates self-worth.

In fact, a redefinition of cultural hybridity at home is essential to the critical project because the Native American experience in the United States is still shaped by mythical, nationalistic discourse conceding a substantial amount of historical amnesia concerning its relationship to indigenous populations. It is a condition whereby cultural hybridity is theorized as a metaphor for national sovereignty as differences become reified and power and social inequalities erased, thereby limiting the potential of hybrid social forms and movements to seriously challenge structural inequalities. Indeed, what becomes germane to the discussion, in the quest for visibility on the international art scene, is that one's own reading of the colonial character of the contact zone informs the efforts made toward reimagining one's own relationship to the mainstream. When this stance is taken and deployed as a challenge to neo-colonial oppression both at home and abroad, the contact zone ceases to engender the will to dominate and, instead, offers a vision of liberation for all those involved.

NOTES

1. The term "global social criticism" is used in terms of international theory's use of a postcolonial approach toward international relations. See Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

2. This construction of the relation of self to other is discussed by Tzvetan Todorov, foreword by Anthony Pagden, in *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1999).

3. Jean Fisher, "Editor's Note," *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (London: Kala Press, 1994), x-xiv.

4. Geeta Kapur, "A New Inter Nationalism: The Missing Hyphen," in Jean Fisher, ed., *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (London: Kala Press, 1994), 39-49.