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The native as image: art history, nationalism, and decolonizing aesthetics

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Summary

This thesis engages the Western history of Indigenous arts by critically analyzing the methodologies employed in the construction of this history. It is an assessment of not only the discursive production of the Native subject as image but also an examination of the sites of its dissemination. Thus, it focuses on analyzing the contributions by art historians and anthropologists in constructing the Native, as well as the sites where their scholarship is put to work, namely the museum, the archive, and the academy. At the same time, this thesis also considers the simultaneous production by Native artists and theorists in negotiating the intersections and disjunctures of Western and Indigenous epistemologies. The ultimate argument made is that Native art production constitutes not just a decolonizing response to a Western gaze but, at the same time, an enunciation of sovereign subjectivity.

This treatise is divided into chapters that correspond to each of the sites of discursive dissemination mentioned above. Chapter one focuses on the photographic archive as a specific situation where images of Native Americans have been, and continue to be, accumulated en masse and deployed as part of the process of constructing the United States as a nation-state. It posits as a specific example the vast body of work by Edward Curtis (1868-1952), analyzing its ideological implications specifically within nationalist discourses, examining the content of his work—the image of the authentic Native before disappearing forever—as well as its aesthetic invocation of nostalgia. His work aimed at producing a desire for a distant past, imagined as a romantic realm populated by noble savages whose present descendants were but merely shadows, disappearing remnants of their powerful ancestors, a convenient narrative for nation building. The aesthetic strategies Curtis used to incite nostalgia have also been valuable for Native artists eager to affirm their own history. By critically observing how Curtis straddled the ethnographic and artistic practices of his time in the name of nation, the relevance of his archive today is made clearer.

Chapter two looks at the impact of Curtis's work on the way that both Native and non-Native viewers imagine the Native subject today. This chapter focuses on the direct and indirect responses to this oeuvre by contemporary Native artists. The legacy of Edward Curtis's massive photographic archive documenting the purported "vanishing Indian" is continuously co-opted by various Native artists who have approached Curtis's representations as belonging to their own iconographic traditions. The theoretical framing for this chapter introduces a discussion of nostalgia as an effect that is aesthetically, and, in the case of Native artists, retroactively produced in the name of self representation.

While in the first two chapters I emphasize an analysis of the vast production of, and struggles for control over, visual representation located at the site of the archive, chapter three looks at how certain academic methodological approaches to the archive can obscure, and at times render invisible, the Native subjects represented. The focus here is on the figure of Aby Warburg (1866-1929), considered one of the "fathers" of art history, and a contemporary of Curtis. While they have little in common, a trip Warburg took to the American southwest led to an engagement with Native communities there that similarly resulted in his production of an archive of sorts, made up of photographic documentation, various notes, and a collection of Native objects. Warburg's memories of this excursion, along with its archival record, contributed to the development of a now famous lecture, which he delivered twenty-seven years after his trip. Of all his work, this lecture—which includes a sensationalized description of the Hopi snake dance ceremony—has become emblematic for scholars today of an intrepid interdisciplinarity. My analysis of current treatments of Warburg and his engagement with the Hopi is a case study of the limits of the capacity of interdisciplinary fields to be self-critical about their role in the production of the Native as image.

While much emphasis has been placed on Warburg's methodology and his art historical milieu, I also examine his engagement with anthropology to better understand his trip to the American southwest. His journey provided him with the opportunity to develop insights into the persistent re-emergence of ancient symbols, leading many of today's scholars to praise his unorthodox approach as highly productive. However, his comparison of the ceremonial activities of Native

Americans, particularly those that incorporate the snake, with those of ancient Greek cults that also focused on this highly symbolic creature ignored the significance of these ceremonies for the Hopi, thus, denying them subjectivity in their performative enunciation of their identity. Today's scholars, whose focus is on Warburg and his method, repeat this denial. A comparison of Warburg's anthropological endeavors with Curtis's allows for a better analysis of the aftermath of Warburg's visit to the southwest, such as how his collecting activities contributed to the development of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, a significant institution in defining Germany vis-à-vis the Native other.

And it is the site of the museum that is the focus of the fourth chapter. An analysis of various exhibitionary practices of museums allows for a consideration of the importance of location and the negotiation of space as constitutive of Native identity. I am particularly interested in the site specificity of museums—the meaning produced by the visitor's journey there—and the contributions by these institutions to the production of communal identities, especially through their production of ideologically charged space. By applying Mieke Bal's work on exhibition as a speech-act, I explore the representation of Native bodies within the space of the museum to consider the agency of Native artists to intervene in the production of the museum as place. I also compare traditional western museums with tribal museums to argue for the different readings prompted by their specific geographic location. Part of this analysis involves not only looking at the significance of place in engaging museums, but also looking at how space is produced within museums, particularly through the use of display technologies such as dioramas and replicas of traditional dwellings. My treatment ends with an exploration of examples showing how the significance and function of these traditional Indigenous dwellings have been reclaimed, a re-appropriation that also converts these manufactured spaces to Native places.

In the final chapter, I look at the work of contemporary Native artists in order to reverse the perspective on the production of otherness and consider the production of the self, primarily through an analysis of self-portraiture. It looks at the multiple forms of address of Native self-portraiture, which can be interpreted as engaging the viewer as a figure explicitly representing both an individual sub-

ject as well as a member of a Native community. In this sense, I liken this genre of self-portraiture to testimonial literature in which the author tells his or her own individual story as, at the same time, the story of a whole people. It discusses the role of postcolonial theory as a means of framing this specific type of visual production in order to consider these images as postcolonial critiques in themselves. The chapter ends with an analysis of “About Face,” a recent exhibition exclusively dedicated to Native self-portraiture. Using Bal’s definition of an “allo-portrait,” a self-portrait depicting the artist in the guise of someone else—a self-othering, I analyze the show’s failure to adequately define the genre of Native self-portraiture. I argue that, while self-portraiture may appear to promise an unmediated opportunity for self-representation, its dissemination always requires a discursive framework. The inability of the show’s curators, and the contributors to the catalogue, to contextualize the work within categories that take Native perspectives into account points to the discursive framing that self-portraiture requires, a framing that, as a form of representation in itself, has the potential to, once again, silence the voice of the Native. As with the whole of this study, this chapter advocates a reading of Native imagery—both of and by Natives—that is attentive to that Native voice.