

SOVEREIGN ACTS II

Wanda Nanibush

This text accompanies the exhibition Sovereign Acts II

Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Dayna Danger, Robert Houle, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson, Jeff Thomas

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Curator: Wanda Nanibush

The history of Indigenous peoples performing cultural dances and practices for international and colonial audiences is an important part of Indigenous art in general and performance art specifically. From the early contact years onward, the Indigenous performers known as 'Indians' faced the conundrum of maintaining traditional cultural practices by performing them on stage while also having that performance fulfill the desires of a colonial imaginary. These performances took place within the context of colonial policies of assimilation and subjugation.ⁱ The exhibition *Sovereign Acts II* starts from the idea that the performers were aware of how they were being viewed and worked with audience expectations, carving out a future and an identity for themselves despite the constraints they found on every stage. In *Sovereign Acts II*, the artists Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Dayna Danger, Robert Houle, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson, and Jeff Thomas, contend with the legacy of colonial representations as well as the legacy of cultural performance by utilizing a variety of aesthetic strategies such as reenactment, remixing, memorialization, mimicry, parody, masquerade, and portraiture. They return to the history of performing 'Indian' and its conundrums to recuperate the erased and objectified performer as an ancestor, an

artist, and an Indigenous subject. Through this return they seek to understand their own relationship to performing culture in a contemporary art context, often turning the gaze back onto an audience and making the colonial desires that underpin colonial imagery visible. Lastly, some of the artists use performance itself as an entry point in rewriting colonial historical narratives from an Indigenous point of view. The exhibition seeks to highlight the artists' works as performative 'acts' that negotiate expectations as much as represent culture and identity. It is important to state that representing Indigenous culture includes aspects of contemporary culture, not just the pre-contact culture of the colonial imaginary. The Indigenous acts of making work follow the path of the past Indigenous performers to present negotiated and highly conscious representation of culture and/or identity.

There are works that diverge from specifically using the history of performing 'Indian' on world stages. In curating the exhibition, I was led to work that while not dealing with the history of performing culture were dealing with identity as something to be performed and in a continual process of negotiation. Performativity is a "repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration."ⁱⁱ If culture is something that comes about through a process of reiteration and ritual that must be repeatedly performed to produce what is spoken of the cultural performance then it is also a space of creating normative identity. The construction of culture has the temporality of sedimentation. For Indigenous peoples, the sedimentation of colonial discourse has been six centuries long. For Butler, performance becomes a way of disrupting or reconfiguring or plainly opposing normativity. These resistant performances come out of the difference that comes from failing to live up to the ideal of the norm, in this case 'Indian-ness' as savage or romantic. "Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; [culture] is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration."ⁱⁱⁱ Culture here is a difficult word taking on many meanings in many contexts. I am using it to specify what others would call ethnicity and worldview but which include processes of subjection,

colonialism, and racialization.

Indigenous peoples of the Americas, to hazard a generalization, speak of themselves as having oral cultures with long standing storytelling traditions. History in an oral culture is something performed for the purposes of maintaining, creating, and changing cultural identity. History is performed repeatedly for each generation, undergoing in every instance of iteration a subjective inflection, action, emphasis, and, sometimes, plot of the storyteller. Through dance, ritual, ceremony, medicine, storytelling, and song the self was sought. The self in this view was not pre-given, unified, or unchanging and these performances of culture, history and identity were/are also the 'culture' of Indigenous artists and performers. Song, dance, ritual, and ceremony were banned at the height of the nineteenth century when staging Indigenous cultures for entertainment was most popular. The prohibition, while attempting to break the cultural identities of Indigenous peoples, actually marked those very activities as central or integral to any conception of Indigenous and thus became central to any contemporary Indigenous identity whether in repudiation or reclamation. The colonial discourse on assimilation whereby Indigenous peoples were to 'become white' externalized the process of discursive production of idealized normative social/political identities. The colonial authorities, which includes the church had to say what 'white' is and thus create structures and institutions to assist Indigenous peoples in becoming white. It further reinforces how all of society was being subjected. The critical distance created by both failing to be either the right 'Indian' or the right 'white' is the space of agency afforded to Indigenous artists. In not being cultural informants or artists who reject cultural affiliation there is an agency to critique any pre-given identity. They do not recourse to a 'true' or authentic culture to replace the critiqued stereotypical or subjugated versions. Social construction and self-representation mutually influence each other, which for de Lauretis, leaves "open a possibility of agency and self-determination at the subjective and even individual level of micropolitical and everyday practices."^{iv} There is also a space opened up to actively create Indigenous cultures through the use of personas, fictional biographies, family histories, personal narratives,

ceremonial actions, archival deconstructions, and performative interventions.

World fairs and exhibitions of colonized peoples was a large part of popular entertainment during the early and mid 1800s. Indigenous peoples were exhibited as exotic, almost disappeared examples of 'primitive man'. Ishi is an example. The shows cemented Europeans' image of Indigenous peoples as belonging before or outside modernity and urbanization. They were often exhibited alongside technological innovations, further reinforcing western man as the innovator, the one destined for progress. The exhibitions were also used to disseminate the science of racism whereby another peoples' inferiority could be scientifically verified by types of bodies and dress.

The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of Wild West shows, the most famous of which was Buffalo Bill's, in the colonial territories of North America. They coincided with the systematic slaughter of the Buffalo (almost complete by 1880) and the suppression of Indigenous cultural traditions, in particular dances and practices that resisted and posed threats to colonial rule. Many practices were prosecutable: by 1884 in Canada and 1904 in the United States. The most targeted were the Sundance and the Ghost Dance—not least of all due to their connection with uprisings against the Americans and Canadians, most famously at Wounded Knee. Ironically, the earliest dance to be caught on film is Thomas Edison's *Ghost Dance*, which documents a staged ghost dance by a travelling troupe of Sioux performers from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show who dropped by his studio in 1894. These same performers had been in jail for being at Wounded Knee and were released into Buffalo Bill's care with the hopes that the stage would civilize them. It is on the stage that they were able to continue the dance. The performance was not as it would have been in their community setting. The way the bodies move and the costuming is not what would take place in a ghost dance. The dancers would have known this and yet to get out of jail, see the world and bring that knowledge home, they performed stereotypic movements.

In their critiques of colonization and the history of colonialism, the artists show how

any form of cultural identity as much as any other identity based on being a man or woman or straight or gay must be performed repeatedly in order to become real; and that it must also be repeatedly policed to stabilize the status quo of power distribution in the larger society. Indigenous performers had to contend with colonial policing of “Indian-ness” as well as their families’ and communities’ understandings and expectations. There is a third space, however, where the two meet: in the travels and performances, which produced more complex conceptions of Indian-ness. This space—where many conceptions compete and stereotypes compound and collide—becomes a freer un-policed space to perform consciously different identities. In seeking specificity of a particular nation, place or tradition, or in the subjectivity of the performer, artists attempt to unwind themselves from the colonial imaginary. Colonialism was resisted and because of this there is more than just a colonial ‘Indian’ to source for identity construction. No one can have the final word on the nature and culture of Indigenous identity but there is still much to be said that has been silenced by colonial representations. Embarking from specific historical moments, the artists in *Sovereign Acts II* seek to define themselves from in and outside colonial histories, and within constantly changing traditions of family, home, people, and territory. Performance is an act of cultural and political resistance as well as a means of remembrance and commemoration. It offers glimpses of a forgotten past, and uses creative fiction as a force against colonial narratives of capture, savagery, loss, and disappearance.

NOTES

ⁱFor Canadian Indian Policy see J.R. Miller, ed. *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991). For American Indian policy see: Vine Deloria, ed. *American Indian Policy in the Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

ⁱⁱJudith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990, 1999), XV.

ⁱⁱⁱJudith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (Routledge: London and New York, 1993, 2011), 10.

^{iv}Teresa de Lauretis, *The Technology of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 9.