Ensconced throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s in institutions dedicated to Native art, in recent years Native artists and curators have turned their attention to the opportunities for global visibility afforded by international exhibitions and art fairs, with particular focus on the Venice Biennale. Formerly focused on issues specific to the history of settler colonialism in the United States and Canada—land, treaty rights, and sovereignty; citizenship and the legal fictions of identity and blood quantum—the work of Native artists in the 21st century has come to share much with the work of a current generation of “itinerant artists” active in the international art world. Taking recent Native participation in the Venice Biennale as a case study, this article considers the new global visibility of Native artists and the problematics of “going global” for Native artists, whose aesthetic authority has been figured as literally “grounded” specific local landscapes. [Key words: biennial culture, globalization in art, indigenous artists]

American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. [Vine Deloria, Jr. 1994:62]

The success and viability of one’s work is now measured in proportion to the accumulation of frequent flyer miles. The more we travel for work, the more we are called upon to provide institutions in other parts of the country and world with our presence and services, the more we give into the logic of nomadism, one could say, the more we are made to feel wanted, needed, validated, and relevant. [Miwon Kwon 2002:156]

Europe is an Indian project. [Jimmie Durham (Quoted in Chaat Smith 2006:34)]

As art historian Miwon Kwon and others have noted, since the early 1990s the contemporary art market has become increasingly global and centripetal, ever-more-loosely organized around an endlessly proliferating network of commercial fairs (Art Basel, the Armory Show, Scope), prestigious periodic survey exhibitions mounted by globe-trotting curators (the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and a host of newer Biennials in sites such as Dakar, Gwangju, Johannesburg, and Istanbul), destination museums (Guggenheim Bilbao, Tate Modern), and glossy international magazines (Flash Art, Frieze, Artforum). In what follows, I use the shorthand term “Biennial Culture” to describe this transnational circuit, which has since the 1990s emerged as the dominant formation in the contemporary art world. Critics, curators, and academics have published numerous essays, forums, and roundtable discussions on the new dynamics of margin and center in Biennial Culture (Amor 1998; Becker 1999; Brenson 1998). Many observers have argued that institutions of the art world have been reshaped by the forces of globalization. Nigerian-born critic and curator Olu Oguibe hailed the new opportunities for non-Western artists and the emergence of “an environment in which contemporary artists from around the world may aspire to visibility” (1999:32). Carlos Basualdo (former curator of the Havana Biennial and current curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art) has linked Biennial Culture to a salutary politics of liberation and empowerment. “The global expansion of large-scale exhibitions,” Basualdo has written supportively, “performs an insistent de-centering of both the canon and artistic modernity” (2003–2004:57).

During these same years, contemporary Native artists have moved from a trope of land-based claims to authority to a “nomadic” model of artistic production. The implications of this shift are still unclear. Ten years ago, Plains Cree critic and curator Gerald McMaster
wondered if local identities and sovereignty movements would be commensurate with the “logic of nomadism” in a global age in which, as Kwon has written, one often finds oneself “out of place,” and “the distinction between home and elsewhere … seems less and less relevant in the constitution of the self” (2002:157). “As aboriginal people struggle to reclaim land and to hold onto their present land,” McMaster wrote in 1999, “do their cultural identities remain stable? … [H]ow will local cultural identities act as centers for nomadic subjects?” (1999:85). While contemporary Native artists continue to grant priority to Native peoples as a primary resource and the first audience for their work, with McMaster we might wonder if the artists discussed below, including Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne-Arapahoe, b. 1954), Rebecca Belmore (Anishnaabe, b. 1960), and James Luna (Luiseno, b. 1950), abandon indigeneity when they participate in Biennial Culture. The new global visibility of Native artists poses critical questions about the relevance of indigenous identities in a decentered and transnational contemporary art market. How can the currency of a theory of nomadism in the contemporary art world be reconciled with the urgencies of place-based identity/culture/politics espoused by indigenous artists and intellectuals? Is global visibility incompatible with Native identity? Will Native artists in Biennial Culture still be known as “Native”? Does their aesthetic authority still derive from an essential connection to local, indigenous landscapes? Or do they become the “itinerant artists” (with the concomitant access and privileges) Kwon describes?

In 2007, at the 52nd Esposizione Internationale d’Arte in Venice, Italy (popularly known as the Venice Biennale—the oldest and most prestigious of the recurrent international exhibitions of contemporary art), Heap of Birds created “Most Serene Republics,” a temporary site-specific artwork installed in three locations around the city (Figure 1). Near passport control and customs in the international arrivals area at Marco Polo International Airport, Heap of Birds installed a billboard that compared the Biennale to Buffalo Bill’s popular “Wild West Shows” of the late 19th century, in which Native Americans toured Europe as an exotic spectacle. The art instructed those arriving in the city to see the Biennale to remember (“Rammentare”) the Native performers—“Show Indians”—who died while traveling overseas. In two other locations Heap of Birds installed a series of industrially produced, enameled steel signs, similar to those the artist had employed in public artworks during the 1980s and 1990s (Figure 2). Along the Viale Garibaldi—adjacent to the Biennale’s primary exhibition spaces—Heap of Birds installed a series of signs that commanded viewers to honor and remember 15 fallen Native performers (Figure 3). In the Giardini Reali, Heap of Birds installed a second series of signs, all containing the ironic phrase “Grazie Repubblica Venezia,” reminding viewers that the wealth and culture of Venice (“the treasury visit/shame or pride; cappuccino; bello mosaics virtuosi”) were founded on a global vision for empire (“skilled wooden ships/slash through seas”), theft (“crusades of stolen goods”), and racial exclusion (Venice’s “first ghetto” was compared to North American Indian reservations). A single sign engaged contemporary global politics, imploring visitors to the “Bello Royal Gardens” to “Help Trim Bad Bush.”

This essay considers the new global visibility of Native artists and the problematics of “going global” for Native artists. I outline, briefly, the history of recent efforts to increase the international exposure of Native contemporary artists. I attempt to reframe the critical discourse

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around Native contemporary art and argue that the work on behalf of Native artists has thus far had the unintended effect of limiting their scope and visibility. I suggest a shift in terms of analysis away from issues specific to the history of settler colonialism in the United States and Canada—land, treaty rights, and sovereignty; citizenship and the legal fictions of identity and blood quantum—to an engagement with a transnational cohort of artists, critics, and theorists whose work examines issues of travel and encounter, displacement, migration, and exile from a cosmopolitan—and what some critics and curators term a “post-indian”—perspective.3

This essay argues that, in its scope, “Most Serene Republics” exemplifies a new tendency in work by Native artists. Heap of Birds’s installation at the Biennale invokes long histories of Native American travel and participation in a global popular culture (the touring Wild West Shows of the 19th century are compared to the contemporary global art marketplace) and links North American Native histories to global histories of power and domination (Indian reservations are compared with the European Jewish ghetto), all in addition to weighing in on the current role of the United States in international politics. As such, “Most Serene Republics” represents a shift from Heap of Birds’s earlier artistic practice—as well as that of a generation of Native American contemporary artists. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Native artists’ claims to aesthetic authority were seen to emanate from the artist’s emplacement (literally: groundedness) in a specific local and indigenous landscape. While not abandoning the cause of indigenous sovereignty, Heap of Birds and other Native artists in the increasingly transnational contemporary art world have reframed their practice. “Most Serene Republics” embodies a new praxis and syntax for Native artists and invokes a new set of key terms. The new work focuses on narratives of travel, encounter, displacement, and exile, themes that are at the forefront of contemporary art practice and theory (Mercer 2005, 2008). New works by Heap of Birds, Luna, Belmore, and a younger generation of artists are reimagining the local in relation to the global and engaging with the global discourses and markets of the contemporary art world. As such, while cultural and geographical specificity are still very much at issue, the work of Native artists in the 21st century—in the vibrant Biennial Culture of recurrent global exhibitions and fairs and in a host of new international institutions—has come to share much with the work of a current generation of “itinerant artists” whose studios have been supplanted by airport waiting lounges and dealers’ booths at international art fairs, and whose “post-studio” practices engage multiple spaces and locales, patterns of movement and contact, diaspora, and contemporary global nomadism. Work by these Native artists no longer imagines local or indigenous places, cultures, and histories in opposition to the global but imagines the local as one point in a transnational itinerary.4

The contemporary reimagining of Native notions of identity and place—the attempt to displace the binary of the local and the global—resonates with what Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake describe as a “dialectical countermovement” between the local and the global. “Globalization,” they write, “paradoxically, has led to a strengthening of local ties, allegiances, and identity politics within different nation-state formations.” They cite Stuart Hall’s notion of a “tricky version of ‘the local’” which operates within, and has been thoroughly re-
shaped by ‘the global’ and operates largely within its logic” (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996:5). Wilson and Dissanayake describe this as the “transnational imaginary […] the as-yet-unfigured horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence” (6). As they demonstrate, questions regarding the relationship of the local to the global have been pursued by critics for over a decade. Such questions interest writers attempting to theorize the situation of artists in the transitional art market. Writing in a 1998 special issue of Art Journal entitled “Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local,” the editors noted “the emergence of a global art produced by an international band of cultural nomads who travel widely to create and exhibit their work, much of which derives from their experience of homeland, displacement, migration and exile” (Amor et al. 29). In a general sense, these questions concern how the processes of economic and cultural globalization interface with culture making at the local level. These issues are now becoming relevant for a number of Native American artists and their supporters—curators and critics—who are pursuing greater exposure in the international contemporary art market and who are currently working to reconcile the forces that propel artists toward the transnational art market with the imperative that Native artists are grounded in the first and last instance in local identities and places.

However, while many critics and supporters have hailed the new visibility of Native artists on this international stage, the discourse surrounding the currency of Native contemporary artists has lagged behind the larger critical enterprise of examining the positioning of artists between the local and the global—a project that has for over a decade occupied many of the most prominent theorists of 21st-century Biennial Culture.

Territorialized Discourses

In key works of the 1980s and 1990s, Native artists produced work that addressed land and indigenous sovereignty, cultural property, and stereotype and identity—issues specific to the history of settler colonialism in the United States and Canada—and understood their artwork to speak to Native audiences and communities first and foremost. For the most part, Native American contemporary artists remained ensconced in alternative galleries and in institutions dedicated to Native American/First Nations arts—such as American Indian Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, the American Indian Community House in New York, the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, or the Heard Museum in Phoenix.

“Artifact Piece,” an influential performance by Luna, raised critical issues regarding cultural property and took familiar representations of Native Americans in mainstream museums to task. In this work, first enacted at the Museum of Man in San Diego in 1986, Luna placed himself on display in a sand-filled vitrine, surrounded by didactic labels that identified him by name, occupation, and tribal citizenship, and that offered interpretations of scars and other details of the artist’s body (Figure 4). Smaller cases placed nearby contained Luna’s college diploma, divorce papers, kitchen utensils, and other personal possessions. With its exhibition of Luna’s body and personal effects, and its tone of anthropological seriousness, “Artifact Piece” recalled the spectacle of Native remains collected by museums and universities. Luna’s performance installation reversed the relationship between viewer and viewed, focusing critical scrutiny on the institutions and audiences that have historically constructed Native Americans as anthropological specimens and scientific curiosities. As such, Luna’s critical interrogation resonated with the efforts of Native American activists who successfully lobbied for the passage of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (1990), which provided the legal framework for the return of sacred objects and human remains from museum and university collections to Native communities for reburial or exhibition in tribal museums.

Issues of identity were the object lesson of Luna’s “Half Indian/Half Mexican” of 1990 (Figure 5). The triptych of three photographic portraits recalls a police mugshot. Luna appears in two profile views—one clean shaven with his long dark hair streaming down his shoulders, and one with his hair cut short and sporting a shaggy mustache. The central image is a frontal photo-
graph of the artist with his “Indian” half on the left and “Mexican” on the right. Luna’s work references the history of Spanish missionization and subsequent ethnic intermixing in California, and skewers the notion that identities can be neatly quantified in percentages.

Issues of land and sovereignty were addressed by Edgar Heap of Birds in a series of temporary, site-specific, public artworks. “Native Hosts,” installed in several North American sites in 1988, comprised industrially produced aluminum signs of the type used to identify national parks and historic sites (Figure 6). Signs located in New York’s Central Park greeted visitors with the message “New York [in reverse type] your host today is Shinnecock.” In Vancouver, the signs read “British Columbia [reversed] your host today is Musqueam.” Reversing the colonial names of familiar places, Heap of Birds’s installation subtly defamiliarized the cityscape and informed viewers of the nations that once claimed aboriginal sovereignty over these lands. The deliberate use of the present tense (as in “your host today is Musqueam”), rather than the familiar past tense of the natural history museum and popular notions of the vanishing Indian, challenged viewers’ understanding of Native cultures as “disappeared” and, indeed, viewers’ very sense of being “at-home” in North America.

In contrast to the out-of-place non-Natives addressed by “Native Hosts,” Heap of Birds’s installation “Day and Night,” installed in Seattle’s Pioneer Square in 1991, memorialized displaced Native peoples living in urban ghettos (Figures 7 and 8). Flanking an existing portrait bust of Chief Seattle (also Sealth, Seathl or See-ahth, c. 1786–1866), a leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish Native American tribes in present-day Washington, Heap of Birds placed two porcelain steel panels, with text in English and Lushootseed (a local, Native language), implicitly arguing that although many native peoples are now urban, they maintain deep and powerful connections to traditional communities and indigenous senses of place.

Similar to Heap of Birds, Belmore asserted long-standing Native connections to land and spirituality in her 1991 “Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother” (Figure 9). In this work, which continues to travel to Native communities across Canada, Belmore created a six-and-a-half-foot megaphone through which Native peoples were invited to voice their aboriginal connection to place. It is from these connections to specific local landscapes, languages, and indigenous knowledge—that either their own or those of their indigenous audiences and collaborators—that Native artists have drawn their aesthetic and moral authority.

Finally, defining one’s audience as primarily Native viewers has been a common tactic. Luna has explained his goals as follows:

I make work for Indian people first, because that’s my audience. Even though I may have a show where
very few Indians come, if any Indians come at all, because that’s not something the community does on a frequent basis, but I make it in a kind of way that’s very simple and direct. ... [I]f’s for Indian people to get—not so much enjoy or like, or say pat me on the back for—it’s for the Indian people to get first and then they can say whether they like or dislike it, or whatever. But if they get it, then I’ve succeeded. [Luna 1995:5]

Native American Artists on an International Stage

In recent years, however, Native artists have turned their attention to the burgeoning circuit of international exhibitions and art fairs, where their work is viewed by a wider audience that is not necessarily conversant with Native histories and connections to traditional places. Of particular interest has been the Venice
Biennale, the oldest and most prestigious of the recurrent international contemporary art exhibitions. Artists including Edward Poitras (Six Nations/Algonkian), Bob Haozous (Chiricahua Apache), Harry Fonseca (Maidu), Shelley Niro (Mohawk), and Jimmie Durham (Cherokee), as well as Belmore, Luna, and Heap of Birds, have exhibited in various capacities in the Biennale. Canada has twice sent Native artists as official representatives. Poitras represented Canada in a solo exhibition in that nation’s pavilion in the Giardini in 1995. Belmore exhibited in the Canadian pavilion in 2005. Native artists from the United States have never exhibited in the United States pavilion in the Giardini. Instead, Native artists have appeared since 1999 in “collateral events” organized by nongovernmental organizations—inde- pendently organized and financed but recognized by the Commissioner and listed on the Biennale program.

An example is Shelley Niro’s artwork for the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 (Figure 10). A short video loop, “The Shirt” featured Navajo/Muscogee-Seminole photographer Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie in a white T-shirt, mirrored sunglasses, and a United States flag bandanna-headband, standing motionless in a landscape in a series of brief shots. In each shot, the text on Tsinhnahjinnie’s T-shirt changed, allowing readers who understood English to read Niro’s pithy critique of Euro-American settler colonialism:

My ancestors were annihilated exterminated murdered and massacred
They were lied to cheated tricked and deceived
Attempts were made to assimilate colonize enslave and displace them

The punch line, playing on the classic tourist T-shirt, read:

And all’s I get is this shirt

In the penultimate shot, Tsinhnahjinnie appears topless, and is then replaced by a white woman (anthropologist and curator Veronica Passalacqua) who appears wearing the last shirt in the sequence, as well as Tsinhnahjinnie’s bandanna tied around her neck like a scarf, and sunglasses placed jauntily on her head. The closing images of the video pan across the landscape—drawing viewers’ attention back to issues of land and loss. Niro’s video was screened as one component of Pellerossasogna (Red Skin Dream), a collateral event mounted at the Biennale by the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3). As described by anthropologist and curator Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache), Pellerossasogna was organized with the goal of “the reappropriation of derogatory stereotypes as a means of sovereign self-empowerment” (Mithlo 2005:22). However, Niro’s work recalled the discourses of Native American art in the 1980s and 1990s—issues of land and indigenous sovereignty, cultural property, and stereotype and identity—transplanting them to a new international venue, rather than reconceiving them for a new global audience.

2005 as a “Breakthrough”

In the summer of 2005, visitors to the 51st Venice Biennale could view exhibitions by Belmore and Luna, whose work had been seen by many in the broader contemporary art world. Belmore served as the official Canadian representative in the Biennale, creating a temporary installation in the official Canadian pavilion in the Giardini (Figure 11). Belmore’s contribution, “Fountain,” featured a two-minute video loop, projected onto a sheet of cascading water. Under a gray, western Canadian sky, the video depicted a pile of logs on a beach as it erupted into flame. Not far from the shore, a woman (Belmore) struggled in the water, trying to fill a bucket, which she managed to fill, then made her way to the shore. She approached the screen and heaved the bucket’s contents toward the viewer, whereupon water appeared transformed into blood, which then ran down the camera lens/projection screen, partially obscuring Belmore as she walked out of frame.

Luna was not the official United States representative at the Biennale, and thus was not exhibited in the United States pavilion, which in 2005 featured a suite of paintings by artist Edward Ruscha. Luna appeared in Venice under the auspices of the recently opened NMAI with a performance and installation in the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, one of 31 official collateral events in the official Biennale program for that year. Luna’s contribution—in performance, installation, and video—was collectively titled “Emendatio” (Figure 12). A series of four-hour performances centered on a sacred circle marked with stones, insulin syringes, sugar, acorns, arrows, and Spam (evoking the health and economic crises of contemporary reservation communities), and involving the multiple costume changes associated with the artist’s various personae in previous artworks. Luna appeared as the “ordinary Indian” in T-shirt and jeans; in breech clout and shell necklace, with mocassins, Luiseno rattle, and feather headdress; and in his purple-sharkskin “Indian Lounge Suit” tailored by Nudie of Hollywood and featuring an embroidered image of the iconic “End of the Trail” on the back, accessorized with a fedora and sunglasses; as well as in other combinations and
permutations. Luna also constructed within the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, a temporary installation re-creating a Southern California Spanish colonial-period mission chapel (Figure 13). The chapel was created to suggest the specifically Luiseño historical experience of Spanish Missionization. An altar displayed candles, a crucifix, an abalone shell, an eagle feather, and a Luiseño basket. This installation was dedicated to Pablo Tac, a Catholic Luiseño who in 1832 set sail at the age of ten for Rome to study for the priesthood. While in Rome, Tac completed the first outline of Luiseño grammar, a partial Luiseño dictionary, and a history of the Spanish missions in California from an indigenous perspective. Tac died in Rome nine years later, never to return to his home. A reproduction of a Navajo weaving of the type traded widely across the Southern Plains and the Southwest served as an altar cloth, embroidered in a facsimile of Tac’s handwriting, drawn from his texts. A portrait of Pablo Tac (with Luna as model) painted by Cathy Rodriguez, a Luiseño artist, hung in the chapel. Finally, in keeping with Luna’s commitment to making work for Luiseño and other Native people, Luna built into the altar a video monitor that showed still photographs of Luna’s Luiseño ancestors and contemporary relatives and tribal elders. For Luna, the “Chapel” in “Emendatio” represents a new development in the artist’s oeuvre, which has generally drawn from Luna’s experience on the La Jolla Reservation in Southern California. In the global exhibition, Tac emerges as a precursor for Luna, as well as for Belmore and the other Native artists who are active in Biennial Culture. As an intermediary and culture broker, Tac might also be seen as a resource and model for 21st-century Native artists who are working to produce a critical contemporary art in a world where indigenous cultures have global currency. Luna’s work was at once specific to Luiseño history and sense of place and to Pablo Tac’s unique historical experience, engaging the historical experience of travel to the imperial center made by cosmopolitan Native travelers.

In her extended review of “Fountain” and “Emendatio,” art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault notes that works by Belmore and Luna from the late 1980s and 1990s have become canonical for contemporary Native art and for performance art more generally (2006:722). She writes that “to experience their work together in an international location is to get a sense of how their trajectories through local communities and increasingly transnational art worlds have done much to shape the direction and discussion around Native art of the past 20 years in both Canada and the United States.” However, she cautions, “This should not be taken as career progress from the local to the global—both artists have always insisted that their first allegiance is to their own communities, as both source and audience.” As such, Belmore and Luna represent “artists for whom . . . Native ancestry is at once fundamental and surpassed” (742). While Townsend-Gault astutely observes that the move from a local to a global context should not be mistaken for “progress” (especially in the sense that the global represents an objectively superior venue for an artist’s work), she acknowledges that in moving to a new platform, Belmore’s and Luna’s contributions to the Biennale have transformed their practice. This transformation principally manifests in the reluctance/resistance to responding to non-Native demands for “translation” of Native cultural meanings and practices. For example, while “Emendatio” retains some relevant historical events and personages, Luna’s costumes and props have become unhinged from their referents—devolving into an intertextual play of signs of “Indianness” that troubles easy distinctions between the authentic and inauthentic (722). Townsend-Gault interprets this move as “anticipating and circumventing the predictable response to identity-politics-art to which audiences have become over-habituated” and thus “ontologically inaccessible to non-Native audiences—a “state of being” that remains essentially alien, although “it can be felt.” She writes, “Only an Indian could be doing this, now” (751). However, while the 2005 Biennale marked a breakthrough, Townsend-Gault continues to hold Native artists at a remove from the larger world of contemporary art. Townsend-Gault highlights strategies of cultural protectionism and veiling in the Biennale works of Belmore and Luna, but these tendencies have been part of contemporary Native artists’ practice since the 1980s.
Rather, works by Native artists at the Biennale invoke the experiences of Native peoples as global travelers, the political economy of Venice, global histories of colonialism and imperialism, and to a greater degree than previously for Native artists, engage with the global practices of contemporary art. Indeed, in their Biennale projects, many Native artists have begun to engage with what Wilson and Dissanyake term the “transnational imaginary” as they work in the same milieu as other “local” artists negotiating the theoretical and practical challenges of engaging with a global art world and its market. As such, while cultural and geographical specificity remain at issue, contemporary Native artists have begun to claim status as “itinerant artists” such as those described by Miwon Kwon—artists whose transnational practice speaks to a global experience of being out of place, of “always traveling through elsewhere.” (Kwon 156).

The International Exhibition

Native artists at the Biennale (and elsewhere in the broader contemporary art world) are most often identified as “Native artists,” rather than as “artists.” This fact—and the concomitant tension between a ghettoized (and downsized) version of art world success and access to the more prominent institutions of the mainstream art world—has driven Native artists and their supporters in search of opportunities for greater visibility. The simultaneous appearance of Belmore and Luna at the 2005 Venice Biennale represented the culmination of the efforts of Native artists, critics, and curators over several years. The Venice Biennale in particular has afforded Native artists a way to participate in Biennial Culture and the contemporary international art world, but it dictates that they present themselves as “national representatives” of a sort—that they appear as “Native artists”—firmly grounded in specific indigenous cultures and landscapes. The Biennale offers access to and visibility within the international art world to a degree unavailable at Documenta and other exhibitions. Artists and their supporters can mount exhibitions within the context of the Biennale, but only to the extent that they have the resources available to do so. Nancy Marie Mithlo, cofounder of the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3, formerly the Native American Arts Alliance), wrote of receiving the commissioner’s approval as a collateral event:

The act of applying to and being accepted by the institution of the Venice Biennale as an “a latere” collateral exhibition was a political coup, symbolic of our empowerment. A native arts organization sought and gained political acceptance as a sovereign nation by an international organization. For this group, it was something like gaining entry into the United Nations. [2004:233]

Mithlo’s assertion misrepresents the status of collateral events at the Biennale, many of which are mounted by nongovernmental organizations. However, it is the logic of the Biennale that artists appear as “national representatives” even when they represent stateless peoples (e.g., the Maori and Roma pavilions). Indeed, the Biennale—its product of nation building—highlights the ambivalent positioning of artists between local and global spheres. The “national pavilion” model of the Giardini, Aperto, and Arsenale carries over to the off-site exhibitions and collateral events. As Mithlo’s claim demonstrates, in the abiding “world’s fair” atmosphere of the Biennale, greater authority and legitimacy accrue to exhibitions that claim the mantle of “national representation.” Native artists, critics, and curators have targeted the Biennale because it is the one international exhibition that, because of its unique organizational structure, allows institutions and organizations to mount their own exhibitions and to an extent define the means by which they are represented. But the fact that the “national” model predominates reinforces the notion that Native artists are first and foremost defined by “Indianness”—allowing them access to a limited number of “ethnic slots.”

To understand fully the implications of the recent international visibility of Native contemporary artists requires a brief background on the history of the Venice Biennale. The first of the recurrent international art exhibitions, the Venice Biennale was conceived in 1893 and mounted in 1895. Like its sister institutions of the international expositions and world’s fairs, the Biennale was conceived as a showcase for the highest achievements of the modern nation state. A product of the consolidation of Italy as a modern nation, the first Biennale celebrated the recent independence, in 1866, of Venice from Austria and signaled the city’s reemergence as a center of international culture and commerce. The first Biennale included artworks from Italy and Germany, followed soon thereafter by Belgium, Egypt, and France. The Biennale grew in 1907 to include invited nations mounting individual exhibits in individual pavilions in the Giardini Pubblici and the adjacent Aperto. Currently there are 30 permanent national pavilions included within the gated and ticketed grounds. Nonrepresented nations and other groups exhibit in the Arsenale (also accessible only by ticketed admission). Participating countries lacking an official pavilion exhibit in rented spaces throughout the city.
Other nongovernmental cultural organizations and interest groups also mount exhibitions in alternative spaces. A number of these off-site exhibitions are granted official status as collateral events and listed in the official Biennale program.

The Venice Biennale’s multitiered system makes it unique among the more than one hundred biennials, triennials, and other recurrent exhibitions that have been launched in its wake, making it an ideal venue for artists and curators who aspire to the global visibility it affords. Whereas the more recently founded exhibitions are curated events, Venice is still organized on a “national pavilion” model. Each Venice Biennale is headed by a commissioner (a prominent curator or critic) who chooses artworks for an exhibition held in the Italian Pavilion and the Aperto, and accepts off-site programming for inclusion in the Biennale’s roster of collateral events. However, the primary experience of seeing the Biennale involves making one’s way through the city to find the many exhibitions financed and mounted under the auspices of various national ministries of culture and nongovernmental cultural institutions. This makes the Venice Biennale unlike exhibitions such as Documenta, held every five years in Kassel, Germany, which is organized by a team of curators, or other global biennials, which are selected by a single individual.

In 2007, off-site collateral events at the Venice Biennale included group exhibitions from nations (such as Australia, which was also represented in the Giardini) and regions (Latin America and Central Asia); exhibitions of “stateless peoples” (Maori, Native American, and Roma); thematic and experimental projects such as “Floating Territories: A Transbiennial Project,” installed on a boat with ports-of-call in Istanbul, Athens, and Venice; as well as privately funded solo exhibitions by well-known contemporary artists including Joseph Beuys, Lee Ufan, and Bill Viola. Thus, within the hierarchy of the official, quasi-official, and nonofficial spaces, the art of any number of individuals, ethnic identities, and nations could be seen, but not all enjoyed equal status or visibility.

The Critical and Curatorial Project of “Nation Building”

The position and relative status of Native artists within the global contemporary art world has been the subject of numerous recent discussions, most notably at the symposium Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Identity, organized by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and held in Venice in December 2005, to coincide with Where Art Worlds Meet: Multiple Modernities and the Global Salon, a conference mounted by Robert Storr, director of the 2007 Venice Biennale. In the symposium and publication, explicit comparison was made to the earlier efforts by African critics and curators to use the Biennale to increase the international prominence of African and African Diaspora artists—artists who were similarly underrepresented in the international art world. Curated by Olu Oguibe and Sudan-born Salah Hassan, Authentic/Ex-Centric at the 2001 Venice Biennale was the first exhibition of African art organized by African curators at the Biennale, outside of the Egyptian pavilion, which has been in place at the Biennale since 1897. Described as the “African Pavilion,” the collateral exhibition was listed among the off-site programming, granting African artists a new degree of visibility at the Biennale.

Visibility, for Hassan and Oguibe, was the first priority. In explaining the imperative to exhibit the work of African and African Diaspora artists in Venice, they wrote,

*If you do not exhibit, you do not exist!* Exhibitions are the building blocks of art history and therefore crucial in moving art from the private to the public domain. In the cultural politics of the past two centuries, exhibitions and the curatorial practices behind them constitute the most enduring and perhaps most powerful means of selecting, staging, and, ultimately, canonizing art. (2001:65)

The import of Hassan and Oguibe’s project is clear: in the “African Pavilions” at the Biennale, in numerous other exhibitions mounted and catalogs published, and in the academic journal *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, published in conjunction with the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University, Hassan, Oguibe, and others have established African and African Diaspora contemporary art as a vital enterprise with a sophisticated theoretical armature and a robust institutional infrastructure. However, contemporary artists of African descent have been represented in ways that differ significantly from the curatorial positioning of contemporary Native artists. The initiative to increase the visibility of African artists has been framed in terms of diaspora—showing together the work of artists working in Africa, Europe, and the Americas implicitly makes the argument that artists of African heritage are “global people,” united by the common experience of colonialism and the slavery, and that the culture(s) of the African Diaspora are “traveling cultures.” Much of this work thematizes the experience of the Middle Passage, expatriation, and exile, concomitant with the ways in which African and African Diaspora culture generally have been theorized through the lens of Paul Gilroy’s
influential notion of the Black Atlantic (1992) and patterns of global movement. At the 2005 NMAI symposium, the crucial project of building visibility for the work of Native artists was reiterated by a number of participants. Jolene Rickard, Mohawk artist and former NMAI curator, engaged Hassan and Oguibe ambivalently, but acknowledged that the project of global visibility was crucial for Native contemporary art. Arguing that “the entire world is activated around trying to accommodate the emergent Chinese [contemporary art scene],” Rickard complained, “there is no such global focus on the recognition of indigenious people or our art.” Rickard questioned whether the institutions of the contemporary art world as currently arrayed could possibly be turned to the advantage of Native artists. She asked, “Where does the presence of indigeneity fit in an international art world that has thus far constructed Native American existence or reality as an absence?” However, she wrote, stakeholders in the viability of Native American contemporary art must “consider if the museum and artwork space represent a valid and necessary site of negotiation” (2006:60). As Rickard cautioned, we might wonder whether embracing uncritically exhibition and visibility as values necessarily entails participation in the already-in-place cultural politics of the contemporary art world. But while Native critics and curators have cited Hassan and Oguibe’s aphorism “If you do not exhibit, you do not exist,” the critical discourse around contemporary Native art remains based on claims to authority that are predicated on Natives’ essential connection to specific local landscapes, place-based identities, and abiding claims to sovereignty. In describing Belmore’s “Fountain,” Rickard invoked an obscure repertoire of culturally specific references that were deeply coded and, for the most part, illegible to non-Anishnaabe audiences. As Rickard writes, the many references to water and tragedy that figure prominently in her work allude to the Micipijiu, a “great horned cat or underwater lion” that inhabits waterways and “embodies the unthinkable tragedies of human experience” (2005:73). Rickard argued that these references informed Belmore’s work, even if the artist did not acknowledge them.

Such discussions have been limited by critics’ and curators’ embrace of the Biennale’s “national” model. Arguing that Native artists “do not have the luxury of ignoring the mainstream,” Nancy Marie Mithlo and the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance (IA3) have worked to place Native artists each Biennale since 1999 (2006:89). In this undertaking, Mithlo and IA3 have maintained two distinct and, possibly, contradictory goals in working to get Native artists into the Biennale: to increase international visibility for Native American art, and to assert a project of cultural self-determination. IA3 equated exhibition at the Biennale with sovereignty, arguing that Venice offers the salutary opportunity for Native artists to present their work without the restrictions they face in the United States and Canada: “The beauty and wisdom of a Native aesthetic might finally be recognized if Native Americans themselves were the ones speaking” (86). Apache sculptor Bob Haozous, for example, has offered the contradictory explanation that exhibiting in Venice was an attempt to demonstrate “that our art came from our culture and that we are going to try desperately to get it back to our culture” (Mithlo 2004:233).

It is not clear how the presence of Native artists in Venice contributes to the project of cultural self-determination that many artists, critics, and curators advocate. Indeed, Mithlo has written of her concern that the values of the international art world and its markets may be incompatible with Native identities: “Visibility alone is really only another form of voyeurism. Indian people have been subjected to the incessant gaze of the West since Contact. It is not enough to be looked upon, serving as the exotic other in an exchange that has profound negative implications for self-representations” (2006:87). Significantly, Mithlo understands Hassan’s point as being more subtle than the commonly quoted aphorism suggests. In fact, Hassan called not just for visibility, but for “reciprocal traffic” (2006:87–88). As a corrective to the uncritical drive for visibility, Mithlo stresses the need for a “proactive frame of reference” in Native artists’ agenda for the Biennale. By this, Mithlo means a critical and curatorial project that is grounded in what she terms a Native worldview or “Indigenous Knowledge Systems” (IKS) commensurate with “Native approaches to agriculture, hunting, environmental management, or sovereignty efforts in legal realms” (2004: 229). Here, Mithlo refers to a commitment to and a belief in cultural expressions as communal—thus place-based—grounded in “community rights” rather than mere individual artistic expression (2004:240). Mithlo is concerned that Native values are incompatible with the existing structure of the global contemporary art world, in which market values predominate, and in which Native artists remain disempowered and subordinated by Western regimes of value: “An unchecked market economy might naturally lead to a ‘capitalist determination’—the idea that economic worth overrides all other considerations, including communal or social values” (2004:234). Mithlo cautions, “Arts conversations in the vein of the popular hybrid, globalized norm can appear to be liberatory and progressive but in fact be reifying. The anxieties of the postmodern West are served by a dialectical conversation with the non-West” (2006:93). Citing Native political movements and the
emerging academic field of Native American Studies, Mithlo argues that Native artists should no longer engage the colonial relationships that have held them back and should instead focus on “nation building.” She concludes, “An indigenous arts discourse must by definition occur outside established intellectual disciplines and political structures” (2004:234). The problem, however, is how artists, critics, and curators can actually utilize IKS in the global contemporary art world. Mithlo has written of her and other Native artists’ disappointment at the “resounding silence,” indifference, and condescension with which their work has been received by the mainstream art press. According to Mithlo, the collaborative efforts of the Native artists exhibiting in *Umbilicus*, a collateral event organized by IA3 in 2001, were “so foreign as to be unthinkable to most reviewers and even potential exhibiting artists” (2006:91).

The repeated appeals to unique needs of Native artists and the bitter claims that Native artists are inevitably misunderstood in the mainstream art world merely point to the failure of “nation building” for the purposes of promoting the work of Native contemporary artists, or vice versa (Brown 2007). Indeed, Mithlo’s claim that Native artists at the Biennale “gained political acceptance as a sovereign nation” is made all the more untenable by the fact that the exhibiting artists of IA3 were members of several distinct tribal nations. If after years of effort, Mithlo believes that Native artists deserve more than “token mention of the exotic Native in mainstream contemporary arts curricula, publications, or exhibitions,” it remains unclear how this goal is compatible with Mithlo’s simultaneous insistence that Native arts be an autonomous discourse, with “sovereign intellectual standing” (2006:86). Indeed, the goals of “nation building” and constructing an autonomous discourse, as Mithlo herself noted, may be incompatible with participation in the global mainstream and an increasingly transnational art world. But in attempting to use the Biennale as a platform for accessing the larger art world (because Venice is uniquely suited to such a project), the critical and curatorial agenda to increase the visibility of Native artists must be forwarded as a “nation building” enterprise, as in Mithlo’s assertion that acceptance at the Biennale was one-in-the-same with recognition as a “sovereign nation.” Such appeals to the authority of national cultures are becoming increasingly untenable. In constructing Native artists in this way, critics and curators actually limit their currency in an increasingly decentered and centripetal contemporary art world.  

**Native Artists in International Context**

Even as they exhibit at the Biennale and other international venues, Native artists continue to be defined by many of their most vocal supporters in terms of rootedness and emplacement. This erases the histories of the displacement and exile of Native peoples, and excludes Native artists from the privileged discourses of the contemporary art world. Rickard’s reading of “Fountain,” for example, obscures Belmore’s connection (and debt) to an international tradition of body and performance art. While it is true that Belmore maintains her commitment to Native communities as the first and most important audience for her work, locating Belmore’s artistic genealogy solely within Anishnaabe tradition effectively returns Belmore to a local stage.

Also speaking at the *Vision, Space, Desire* symposium, Canadian Museum of Civilization curator Lee Ann Martin (Mohawk) described the historical and spatial specificity of Luna’s and Belmore’s Venice projects in 2005, placing their work in a more expansive global context. Even as they are, as Kwon might argue, in “the wrong place” (i.e., they have deliberately unhinged their work from its authorizing North American context), Martin describes their projects as very much attuned to the particulars of history and to Venice as a place connected to a global history of Native North American people. “As the artists emplace themselves in Venice,” she writes, “they claim this space within their telling of Aboriginal history. Their symbolic acts further dramatize our intertwined history where, beginning in the 17th century, glass factories on Murano Island first manufactured glass heads for trade with Aboriginal peoples in the Americas” (2006:100). Martin calls attention to the “intertwined history” of Europe and the Americas, citing the traffic in Native peoples and Native participation in global networks of trade as every bit as formative for modernity as the histories of Africa and the African Diaspora cited by Hassan, Oguibe, and others.

Moreover, the international prominence of Belmore and Luna owes much to their dialogue with the broader contemporary art world. While their work often addresses at the level of content issues affecting Native communities, Belmore, Luna, and their cohort of Native artists work exclusively in contemporary media—i.e., performance, video, and site-specific sculpture—rather than in traditional indigenous expressive modes. To consider “Fountain,” “Emendatio,” or “Most Serene Republics” solely at the level of content ignores important considerations of form and context. Like many contemporary Native artists, Belmore, Luna, and Heap of Birds graduated from mainstream art schools and universities. Belmore attended the Ontario College of Art; Luna studied at the University of California, Irvine; Heap of Birds studied at the Royal College of Art in London and holds degrees from the University of Kansas and the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. Their work
is informed by a generation of conceptual and “post-studio” artists. Belmore cites the influence of Ana Mendieta. It is also possible to read her work in dialogue with 1970s body artists, including the Viennese Actionists, Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Chris Burden, or women performers whose work invoked the experience of pain and violence, including Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann, and Valie Export. Luna cites the performance artist Bas Jan Ader as among his most influential instructors at UC Irvine in the 1970s. Belmore’s use of rivulets of water as a projection screen link her project to the works of contemporary video-installation artists such as Stan Douglas and Rodney Graham, which interrogate the presumed transparency of the projection apparatus. Comparisons may also be seen with other international artists whose works—in form and context—address issues of exile, cosmopolitanism, nomadism, and the experiences of non-European peoples in Venice. At the Venice Biennale in 1995, Caï Guo Qiang brought a traditional Chinese fishing boat loaded with Chinese herbal medicines from Quanzhou to the Grand Canal, in his artwork entitled “Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot.” In 2001, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra created “133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond” in the Arsenale. Sierra hired illegal street vendors from Senegal, Bangladesh, China, and Southern Italy—individuals with naturally dark hair and features—who agreed to have their hair bleached for an artwork in which these normally invisible merchants temporarily became the most visible individuals in the Biennale. Sierra then gave over his allotted exhibition space to the vendors to sell their counterfeit Fendi, Prada, and Gucci bags in the exhibition hall. Fred Wilson, exhibiting in the U.S. Pavilion in the Giardini in 2003, thematized the history of African presence in Venice.

Heap of Birds’s “Most Serene Republics” was, no doubt, informed by the artist’s own career as a traveler and culture broker. As a graduate student, Heap of Birds spent a year in London and traveled extensively to view works of art in European museums. As a professional artist, Heap of Birds has visited Asia, Australia, and Africa, and has collaborated with indigenous artists in numerous locales, in North America and abroad (Rushing 2005:366). He is the consummate “itinerant artist” as described by Kwon—an in-demand lecturer and visiting critic, and actively sought out as a producer of site-specific public artworks. It is significant that Heap of Birds’s first public artwork involving text-based signs was produced in response not to Native American political issues, but the Apartheid Regime in South Africa. For an exhibition at Cleveland State University in Ohio in 1987, Heap of Birds created “South African Homelands,” comprising hand-painted signs with the text “OH!/

As Heap of Birds’s installation implored viewers to remember lost Native warriors-cum-performers, “Most Serene Republics” had a precedent in an earlier artwork by Heap of Birds, “Building Minnesota” (1986). Installed along the banks of the Mississippi River near downtown Minneapolis, this project commemorated 40 Dakota warriors found guilty by a military tribunal after the U.S.–Dakota Conflict of 1862, and sentenced in execution orders signed by Presidents Lincoln and Johnson to hang in punishment for their participation in the uprising. Each of the 40 signs features in Dakota and English the name of an individual warrior, such as Ma-K’a’ta l-na’-zin (One Who Stands on the Earth), above the phrase “DEATH BY HANGING.” As Jackson Rushing notes, “The word HONOR, which appears at the top of each sign, functions as both directive and descriptor” (2005:377). Similarly, each of the signs along the Viale Garibaldi in Venice memorialized an individual Native performer who died while traveling overseas. But while the Dakota warriors honored in “Building Minnesota” were executed in retaliation for their efforts defending the communities and homelands, the performers remembered in “Most Serene Republics”—many of whom were former combatants—are perhaps more tragically ambivalent figures as they were willing participants in a transnational circuit of production and exchange, whereby indigenous cultural heritage was unhinged from traditional senses of place and became, in effect, a global commodity. At Venice in 2007, Heap of Birds again assumed the mantle of the cosmopolitan, commenting on the history of Venice and on the Bush administration. Heap of Birds’s project for the Biennale engaged the histories of travel, tourism, and exotic encounters with otherwise considered the vagaries of cultural translation in a global context, and claimed a place from which to address the political deceptions of the present day.

Conclusion: Jimmie Durham in Exile

This essay would be incomplete without mentioning, if briefly, Jimmie Durham (Cherokee, b. 1940), a notable exception to the pattern of Native artists exhibiting abroad as Native artists, in exhibitions supported primarily by Native American institutions and organizations such as IA3 and NMAI. Durham provides an interesting model for beginning to think about Native artists working in a global contemporary art market. In 2006 at the Whitney Biennial in New York, Durham
screened “The Pursuit of Happiness,” a 13-minute silent film that is tempting to read in terms of the artist’s biography. Set in the American Southwest, but shot on location in Italy like the classic spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, the film chronicles the rise of a fictitious Native American artist named Joe Hill (played by the Albanian-born, Berlin-based photographer and video artist Anri Sala), who mounts a successful exhibition of art made from roadside garbage, sets his trailer home on fire, and decamps to Paris (Figures 14–16).

Durham’s career has followed a similar trajectory. After an extended sojourn as an art student in Geneva in the late 1960s, he returned to the United States in 1973, to North Dakota, to join the American Indian Movement, and later became the director of AIM’s International Treaty Council, serving at the United Nations, and authoring a number of key policy documents and theoretical essays on Native American political activism. Durham left AIM in 1980, and in the 1980s in New York, began showing at the long-standing East Village gallery Kenkeleba House. Durham garnered acclaim for work that skewered conventions of museum display and popular stereotypes of Native Americans. A 1982 series of sculptures made from found objects including street refuse and animal skulls, arranged as in a European Cabinet of Curiosities, was exhibited under the collective title “The Manhattan Festival of the Dead.” His 1984 installation, “On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian,” brought together what Durham labeled “socio-facts and scientifacts” (faux-artifacts including a pair of “Pochahontas’s Underwear,” decorated with feathers and shells) interspersed with maps, photographs, and didactic texts describing the lives of present-day Native Americans.

In 1990, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA) legislated penalties for exhibiting as “Native made” artworks produced by artists without proper tribal credentials (i.e., enrollment in a federally recognized tribe). Following passage of the act, Durham, who is descended from a band of Cherokees who resisted removal to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) in the 19th century, but who has never enrolled with the Cherokee Nation, had two exhibitions canceled because of his lack of legal status: American Indian Contemporary Arts (AICA) in San Francisco canceled a planned solo exhibition and the Center for Contemporary Arts in Santa Fe postponed a solo exhibition, pending Durham’s ability to substan-
tiate legally his identity as Cherokee. But by 1987, Durham had already left the United States for good, relocating with his partner, Brazilian-American artist Maria Thereza Alves, to Cuernavaca, Mexico, and ultimately relocating to Europe, where he has lived and worked since 1994.

Durham’s 1988 residency and exhibition at the Orchard Gallery in Derry, Northern Ireland, is a key work for understanding his work from the early 1990s to the present and for critically evaluating the strategies of Native artists working internationally. In Derry, Durham engaged with local Catholics to create a work that spoke to their condition, living under British occupation. Through a process of embedding himself in the Republican community, Durham developed a position of empathy, as a Cherokee and Native American activist. He wrote,

> Reading Irish history while in Mexico I was shocked by the long duration and viciousness of the English oppression of Ireland; but I was equally shocked by the dehumanization set up by English linguistic terminology. Both the massacres and their justification, and then the specific vocabulary used against us by the English, and by the English who called themselves “Americans” had been tried and proved on Ireland. [1988:n.p.]

Although he arrived in Derry with initial plans to produce a “savage billboard,” or a sculptural project, Durham became dissatisfied with the idea of creating work for Derry based on his own background and previous work. “It is a little absurd to be the lone artist,” he wrote, “riding into town to make some object or processional construct for the locals, and then to ride out” (1988:n.p.). Instead, Durham allowed himself to be directed by the environment of his new surroundings:

> The people of Derry forced themselves upon me—I came in at the invitation of the gallery and I had my little bag of sculpting tools—“Okay, where do you want that sculpture?” and someone took me to one bar and sang some Irish songs, and someone gave me a beer and told me to sing a Cherokee song, and a process started of talking to people about what they thought of the British occupation of Derry and what they thought of themselves as Irish, so they told me what sorts of things I could do and how to do them, not in the sense of ordering me, but by listening to who I was and what I was up to, and in real solidarity telling me who they were and what they were up to, so in a real sense the entire city became my teachers and collaborators—not once did they imagine that I wouldn’t do my own thing, they demanded I do my own thing, but they demanded that I do it with them, and that’s why it was a success. [Durham 1989]

Durham’s experience in Derry resonates with what French curator Nicolas Bourriaud has termed “Relational Aesthetics.” Bourriaud has described Relational Aesthetics as an international development in “post-studio” practice, exemplified by the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Liam Gillick—“an art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its symbolic context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space” (Bourriaud 2006:160). As Durham explained to an interviewer, “I haven’t been a studio artist for at least 20 years, probably longer. I don’t sit in my studio and think of something to do and do it. In other words, I only do things specifically for a show or a project because I want it to be connected to whatever I am up to in society and whatever society’s up to” (Ingberman 1989:30). Rather than produce a discrete sculptural object for Derry, Durham elected to create a work that was “more complex, more ambiguous, and more in solidarity with the people I’ve been singing with in pubs” (Durham 1988:n.p.).

Durham’s voluntary exile and nomadic artistic practice have set him apart from many former Native peers since the late 1980s. Working from his base in Berlin and later Rome, Durham’s immediate milieu has been the circuit of international biennials, art fairs, residencies, and the contemporary art trade press. While his ability to exhibit in the United States as a Native American artist has been limited by the IACA, Durham has continued to exhibit in Europe and Canada. Durham’s international exhibition credits include his 1988 residency and exhibition at the Orchard Gallery in Derry, Northern Ireland; a 1992 solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London; work in the 1992 exhibition of Native American and First Nations artists, “Land, Spirit, Power” at the Canadian Museum of Civilization; Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany, in 1992; and the exhibition Unpacking Europe in the Netherlands in 2001. Durham was included in “The Everyday Altered,” a group exhibition at the Venice Biennale curated by Mexico City/New York/Paris-based artist Gabriel Orozco at the 50th in 2003, the 2004 Biennial of Sydney, Australia, and, in 1993 and 2006, in the Whitney Biennial in New York. Most recently, in 2009, Durham has been the subject of a career retrospective at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France. Writer and curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), a friend of the artist since the two worked together on the legal defense team for the American Indian Movement in the aftermath of the 1973 standoff at Wounded Knee, has described Durham as an “escape artist.” “He made it over the wall,”
Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in Theorizing Cultural Heritage... and the increasingly global and nomadic practice of the contemporary “itinerant artist.” Indeed, Durham’s peripatetic career should be understood not as a renunciation of his indigenous identity, but as thematicizing a fundamental aspect of Native experience in the aftermath of the European invasion of the New World. As a Cherokee whose ancestors were displaced from their traditional lands in the southeastern United States in the early 19th century, Durham explains that he was “born in exile.” As such, Durham suggests ways of thinking about the local and the global that transcend such simple binaries.

Durham’s example also suggests other histories of Native American cosmopolitanism and stories of travel: Kiowa and Cheyenne warrior-artists including Howling Wolf and Making Medicine who produced an extraordinary record of rendition and imprisonment at Fort Marion, Florida, in the late 1870s; the “Boarding School Generation” of Native activists and intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that included Mourning Dove, Charles Eastman, Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa), and Francis La Fleche; Pueblo artists such as Fred Kabotie and Pablita Velarde who worked as anthropological informants and culture brokers in the early 20th century; the experiences of Oscar Howe, Dick West, Patrick DesJarlait, and a generation of Native men and women in the military and the civilian defense industries during the Second World War; and the Vietnam experiences of T. C. Cannon and Bob Haozous; or the globe-trotting, “post-indian” Tricksters in Gerald Vizenor’s postmodern fiction. As Scott Pratt writes, traditional homelands have retained their place in Native senses of self and community as “the center in terms of which the events of the story get their meaning” (2001:116). While this remains true, all of these individuals constructed Native identities that were compatible with the expanded modern world that Native Americans have navigated since first contact.

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Notes

1 The currency of “nomadism” in contemporary art and theory has been informed by the writings of Deleuze and Guattari: “The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.) But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinate to the paths they determine, the reverse happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo” (1987:389).

2 A forthcoming volume to be published by the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) on Heap of Birds’s installation at the Biennale was unavailable at the time this essay was going to press. “Most Serene Republics” was one of 34 off-site exhibitions listed as eventi collateralli—“collateral events”—recognized by the commissioner and published in the official guide to the Biennale. NMAI opened to the public in 2004 in a new building on the National Mall in Washington, DC. NMAI was founded with the collection from the Heye Foundation Museum of the American Indian, which was relocated from New York to Washington, DC. While the flagship Washington museum focuses on traditional works drawn from an extensive permanent collection, NMAI’s George Gustav Heye Center in New York maintains an ongoing program showing the work of living artists. See Berlo and Jonaitis 2005 and Cobb 2005.

3 Here I am invoking Anishnaabe literary theorist Gerald Vizenor’s term, “post-indian.” Vizenor writes, “The indian was simulated to be an absence, to be without a place. . . . The postindian is after the simulation. . . . The postindian was simulated to be an absence, to be without a place. . . .” Vizenor’s term, “post-indian.” Vizenor writes, “The
tions of indigeneity that informed an earlier generation of artists and intellectuals (Vizenor and Lee 1999). See also *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World*, an exhibition curated by Gerald McMaster and Joe Baker for the Heard Museum and the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian (2007). Moreover, parallels may be seen with an emerging generation of African American artists that curator Thelma Golden has described as “post-black” (Golden 2001; Oliver 2005:n.p.).

For analysis of a similar pattern in Native experience generally, see Ramirez 2007.

Belmore’s exhibition was sponsored by the Kamloops Art Gallery and the University of British Columbia’s Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery. Installations in the national pavilions that comprise the *Giardini* are sponsored by national cultural councils and ministries, nongovernmental arts agencies, and private sponsors.

For example, Jimmie Durham featured untranslated Cherokee texts in his artworks, poetry, and essays—producing a distinct effect of difference and distance between the artist and audience not literate in Cherokee syllabics. “What I want them to know,” Durham explained to an interviewer, “is that they can’t know that” (Ingberman 1989:31).

Artists such as Cai Guo Qiang, born in Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, illustrate the arbitrary and flawed notion that national identities are meaningful descriptors in the contemporary art world. In 1999, Cai represented the People’s Republic of China at the Biennale (where he won the prestigious Golden Lion Award), although he emigrated to Japan in 1986 and has lived in the United States since 1995. As Cai’s case exemplifies, while visibility is cast in terms of “national representation,” the reality of artists’ lives and practice is more complex.

Hassan and Oguihe wrote, “The exhibition reflected the reciprocal traffic of ideas and influences between Africa and other parts of the world, and offered a glimpse of the ways these artists have interpreted and translated the aesthetic and social experiences of both historical and postcolonial Africa as part of a global sensibility” (2001:65).

An illuminating comparison is *Relations: Indigenous Dialogue*, mounted at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2006 and billed as the First Indigenous Biennial. *Relations* suggested a possible alternative model to Venice and international Biennial Culture. In organizing an exhibition comprising work by eight Native artists from the continental United States, Hawaii, and Canada, the participants of *Relations* sought to explore a transnational sense of indigenous identity, raised critical issues regarding the situation of local artists and communities in a global system, and concerned themselves with the efficacy of art in the perpetuation (as distinct from the preservation) of tradition (Grimes and Sanchez 2006).

Several of these influences are suggested by Townsend-Gault (2006), who is one of the few critics to compare the work of Native contemporary artists to their non-Native peers.

Illuminating comparisons can also be made to literary critic Édouard Glissant’s writings on “errantry”—willful wandering—which Glissant defines as a relational and dialectical mode of encountering the Other. Glissant writes, “Errant, [the traveler] challenges and discards the universal—the generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming it for one presupposed sense and one destiny. He [the errant traveler/wanderer] plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum up or to possess it.” Quoted in Bishop 2006:77.

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