

Indigenous Sovereignty and Colonial Commodification: The Response of Native American Curators to the 1992 Columbus Quincentenary

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Abstract

The year 1992 marked the quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, inspiring commemorative events that spanned across 30 countries. This global commemoration faced a critical response that examined the explorer's contributions to colonialism and violence against indigenous peoples in the Americas. As part of this backlash, several art exhibitions were curated that showed the work of Native American artists, including "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs" curated by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and "For the Seventh Generation: Native American Artists Counter the Quincentenary" curated by Phil Young. This paper examines the parallel between this counter-quincentennial, as well as the artistic institution at large, with the historical relationship between the United States federal government and Native American tribes.

Key words: colonialism, curation, sovereignty

1. Body of Paper

500 years following the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas, the United States federal government formed a commission and planned events to celebrate the Columbus quincentennial jubilee. The anniversary provided an opportunity for the public reexamination of Columbus and the legacy of colonialism in light of insipid government-led attempts to monetize the occasion across the globe. The efforts to monetize only garnered criticism from indigenous peoples still affected by the genocide and exploitation his legacy represents. This moment provides a perfect storm of politics, economics and identity that this paper will approach as a case study in larger questions of the relationship between colonized and colonizer in the Americas and mainly in the United States. This paper examines the discourse surrounding Native sovereignty as understood by both the federal government and Native Americans. Further, this paper will explore how western depiction of Native Americans and landscape contrasts with the work of Native artists as it applies to the quincentennial.

The 1992 quincentennial prompted public debate among American thinkers and academicians that divided neatly across political and racial lines. A series of public opinion and political articles submitted to major news outlets such as Washington Post, New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and Los Angeles Times during 1991 and 1992 framed the nation-wide debate over American national identity and historical misrepresentation. One Washington Post article quotes Cal Seciwa, then head of the American Institute of Arizona, as saying the expectation placed on Native Americans to celebrate a man whose arrival in this hemisphere marked the beginning of the subjugation of the native people is "like forcing Jews to recognize Hitler as [...] a magnificent person."² This position was presented alongside the arguments of Philip R. Piccigallo, then executive director of the Order of the Sons of Italy, who claimed that "[slavery] was the norm, not the anomaly [...] It was introduced by the pre-Columbian Aztecs who practiced other primitive rituals such as human sacrifice." He concluded that Columbus should not be judged by "idealistic concepts of the 20th century world, [but honored for his] courage, vision and the dignity and strength of the human spirit."³ The arguments in this article are consistent with the majority of publications writing on this topic. The represented

discourse simplifies the conversation to reframe the debate in questions of whether the negative effects of Columbus's contributions to history are overstated while beginning at a foregone conclusion that his actions were unquestionably for the enrichment of civilization at large and disparate from the enslavement and death of millions of peoples native to the Americas. Columbus is already assumed to be worthy of recognition if not outright celebration. The conversation as presented to the public distills the issue into a Eurocentric crisis of American identity and exemplifies ideas of "discovery" as an essential part of the American spirit, which necessitates the erasure of pre-existing cultures as legitimate.

While the debate did ultimately motivate discussion around curriculum⁴ and the larger conversation of white American identity, commemorative events exposed a lack of general interest by the public in celebrating the anniversary of the explorer's arrival in the Bahamas. The oppositional voices speaking out against honoring Columbus made themselves present and known through protest.⁵ In contrast, the celebrations themselves did not inspire public enthusiasm or successfully produce any significant monetization, despite the inception of government-sponsored commissions in at least 100 cities across 30 countries.⁶ In 1984, the United States government established the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, which notably had no Native American members.⁷ Among its goals was a national initiative to establish celebratory events, including its most ambitious projects, Ameriflora '92 and the Chicago 1992 World Fair. Ameriflora '92, originally planned as a two-week celebration, bloated into a six-month long horticultural exhibition hosted in Columbus, Ohio, in hopes of increasing revenue. Instead, it failed to meet ticket-sale goals and saw only half of the originally estimated four million visitors across the duration of the event.⁸ After 95 million dollars were spent putting the show into motion, it failed to gain enough corporate sponsors or public support, even prompting criticism of co-opting a Black community space for a multi-year period in celebration of a white event.⁹ This parallel criticism highlighted the perpetuation of white America's subjugation against people of color and ultimately Ameriflora was unable to produce enough revenue to recoup expenditures, leading to the eventual conversion of the property into a public park. Plans for the Chicago 1992 World Fair to be held in concordance with the World Fair in Seville saw even greater failure. In 1985, after already financing twelve million dollars to the project, the city revoked its acceptance of the proposal due to concern over a lack of public enthusiasm or political and financial support. Once the speaker for the Illinois House of Representatives concluded in a feasibility study that the financial risk was not worth the investment and the state withdrew funds, the Bureau International des Expositions withdrew its sanction.¹⁰ Other such events and parades were canceled due to protests. Colorado, the first state to recognize Columbus Day as a holiday, saw Denver's parade canceled minutes before it was supposed to begin in response to over 500 AIM protesters holding a rally.¹¹ Because there were no larger social or cultural benefits behind hosting these events, the celebrations failed as soon as the finances backing them did.

In contrast to the government events, Native-led counter-events were of a smaller scale and were not rooted in economic goals or dependent on avowing white American identity. Artist and curator Jaune Quick-to-See Smith began the series "The Quincentenary Non-Celebration" and curated "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs" in 1990 as part of her response to the jubilee.¹² Smith used her curatorial role to create a counter-narrative, both visualizing the Native American survival of Columbian conquest and personalizing the extent to which Native American culture was devastated by European expansion. In an interview with Artnews, Smith explained that the show was designed to challenge the "perception of Indian artists as conservative and decorative" and to place Native American voices in the realm of politics and protest that were more notably recognized from Black and Hispanic artists at that time despite, as other Native American artists described, suffering from a similar "ghettoization".¹³ Her thesis in *The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs* is explicitly "in response to the celebration of the holocaust of America"¹⁴ and each contributor wrote an artist's statement or poem addressing their own individual responses alongside their work. In Smith's curatorial statement, she stressed the value of written text provided by these Native American artists which directly address the crimes of the United States government and the celebration of genocide. The element of writing was an inclusive way of showcasing the voices of the Native artists and was largely what differentiated her curation of Native American work from the majority white American curated shows in museum settings.

The relationship between Native Americans and the museum remains complicated. By the time of "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs", several art shows featuring the works of indigenous artists were closed as a direct result of the Indian Arts and Crafts act of 1990, including the Red Earth Festival in 1992 and the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee Oklahoma. This act required artists to provide proof that they were "authentic Indians" with consequences for the artist including up to 250,000 dollars in fines, five-years of imprisonment, or both. Additionally, any gallery that displayed work that did not meet these requirements could face up to one million dollars in fines. As such, Native American artists creating Native American artwork were subject to greater scrutiny not only legally, but by gallery owners that would refuse to show the work of anyone that did not prove their Indian status and the provenance of the artwork as originating with themselves.¹⁵ Such laws were ostensibly put into place to avoid the monetization of counterfeit artifacts and art, but are categorically flawed and rooted in colonialist definitions of Indian

that were derived from federal Indian policy during 19th century periods of removal and assimilation. Ultimately, such truth-in-advertising laws were a causal factor in the limitation in viewership of artwork produced by contemporary Native American artists, sanctioning the discrimination against those artists that either chose not to be or were unable to be recognized as holding legal Indian status with any federally recognized tribe.

Early Native American representation in white society was characterized through the robbery of human remains and artifacts as well as the display of living people. One hundred years prior to Chicago's failed attempt to host the jubilee celebration, the American city hosted the 1893 World's Fair: Columbian Exposition. Native Americans were incentivized to participate in the exhibition for the economic benefits doing so presented, and most participated in a working capacity. However, many of the indigenous people were subjects of scientific study or put on display like living museum pieces, including groups of schoolchildren and 'savage' Indians shown together to represent the success of assimilation. The fair's organizers denied requests from members of the 'five civilized tribes' (Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Seminole) to have their own displays,¹⁶ effectively curating a Eurocentric experience of Indian for the white public while silencing the subjects of display. Diana Taylor has pointed out that these institutions "have literalized the theatricality of colonialism—taking the cultural other out of context and isolating it, reducing the live performance of cultural practices into a dead object behind glass."¹⁷ Museums included Native American art from an ethnographic perspective, and the works were not included in art collections or considered to be legitimate art. Further, these artifacts, as well as remains of indigenous people, were taken and displayed without the permission of the tribes that these objects were derived from. It wasn't until 1990 that the United States passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which required the return of cultural items, including funerary items, remains, and objects of cultural patrimony, and sacred objects, to the descendants of the indigenous people that were robbed of these items.¹⁸ The items, many of which cannot be traced to any particular tribe, are still in the process of repatriation, and it is worth note that the majority of Native American presence in museums was in the display of items that were shown by and for white society without tribal permission.

Increasing attempts were made to include Native Americans in the museum during the 1980s and 1990s, but they failed to reform the institution. In his 1985 critique in *Art in America*, James Clifford examined then recent exhibitions and installations in New York that displayed modern Western art in contrast with the art of 'primitive' societies. He argued that non-Western artifacts should be redefined as art worthy of criticism and that the white curators of these exhibitions were excluding artwork, especially Pre-Columbian artwork, that did not appeal to modern sensibilities.¹⁹ The majorly white-populated museum's involvement of tribal art was, as Native American people had been during the 1893 exhibition, used in service of the 'civilized' and 'modern' west. As a result, white curators only placed artwork that appealed to the western audience and the colonialist narrative. Yet when indigenous peoples were included in the museum space, they were charged with educating and reconstructing the institution on the museum's behalf. Further, by nature of being indigenous, it was implied they were innately qualified, willing, and obligated to do so.²⁰ Native American artists were primarily relegated to shows themed around these goals and Native identity and were otherwise rarely considered for exhibitions.

Few Native American curated shows have been included in the larger and more influential museums that are so enmeshed in western institutions. The Chicago Field Museum did not have its first major Native American curated exhibition until March 2020, and the curator, Nina Sanders, expressed her concerns that curators in the 21st century continue to be "people from New York City who've never seen a native person but went to college for anthropology, read about us in books, and saw us in Hollywood movies."²¹ The lack of Native American curators in museums contributes to the mythologies that have developed around Native American people by the rest of the world. Postcolonial fantasies of Native American cultures abound, constricting the indigenous peoples of the Americas into one monolithic tribe derived from the work of 19th century Romantic artists and 20th century film. Even the ethnographic approach to image making by earlier 16th and 18th century colonial artists were discarded in favor of imagery that promoted a Romantic worldview, going so far as to adopt the Plains Indian as the subject of myth making because they were still 'untainted' by the encroachment of white settlers.²² The Romantic artists defined the Native peoples of the Americas in visual terms that suited their preferred narrative, which required Indians to be observable objects in an untamed land, not autonomous actors that were already coexisting with white society.

Depictions of Native Americans painted by white colonizers are common in museums and exhibitions of American art while contemporary art produced by Native Americans remains unfamiliar in comparison. In order to be shown or considered sellable, many Native American artists have been obligated to follow this westernized view and display stereotypical images of Plains Indians in keeping with the heavily commercialized pastiche of 19th century western art.²³ Richard Canon, a gallerist, expressed that "the anglicized ideal of a constantly evolving art is, in my experience, a dead end in Indian art"²⁴ in an 1984 *Art West* article highlighting Rodney Banashley, an Apache and Zuni artist that created traditional dolls and aged them to achieve an artificially antique sensibility. The art that most successfully generates revenue is set in the mythic west as seen from the eyes of the colonizer, or is traditional object making that

further places Native Americans into the past and plays into the ongoing myth of the vanishing race. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's curation of "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs" is significant in the largess of Native voices assembled together in the absence of the commercialism of a western defined economy and without white curatorial influence. The reasoning behind the vitalism Smith stressed on the inclusion of so many Native writings, especially those of the artists about their own work and opinions, are made abundantly clear in consideration of the absence of freedoms Native artists have historically experienced in museums.

Another traveling exhibition from 1993, "For the Seventh Generation: Native American Artists Counter the Quincentenary" was curated by art professor Phil Young, who taught at Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York. Young, along with twelve of the artists included in his exhibition, also participated in "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs", while Jaune Quick-to-See Smith participated in Young's show. Young built upon the same historical foundation as Smith to curate "For the Seventh Generation" as another outspoken protest of the quincentenary jubilee led by indigenous voices. The exhibit originated in Columbus, New York and was hosted by the Golden Artist Colors gallery in symbolic protest.²⁵ The city, occupying the ancestral lands of the Haudenosaunee people, was the first municipality in the United States to adopt Columbus's name. The town gave Young complete control over the content of the exhibit, and he chose to show an intentionally wide array of media, mirroring the equally wide array of tribal nations, languages, cultures, and identities the artists represented. Like "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs", the artists' tribal affiliations were included alongside their work, regardless of whether their Native identities were legally recognized by the United States federal government, and Phil Young himself was identified as an unenrolled Cherokee in both shows.

Young stated in the introduction to the show's catalogue that he and the other artists were expressing an "unswerving rejection of the five-hundred-year-old celebration of Columbus's invasion and resulting atrocities. Each, in our own way, shares in a long line of creative people who are caretakers of our cultures. We are called upon to participate in the traditions of restoring harmony and meaning by creating beauty and confronting untruths."²⁶ The artists shown explicitly sought to expose the exploitation and genocide of Native Americans in light of the government's push to commodify history through celebration. Young gave accompanying talks at schools on the artwork in the show, historical accuracy, and the Columbus jubilee as the exhibition traveled, and the artists made a collective statement that "we are part of a much larger voice keeping vigil for the truths that are denied and covered up by the Columbus hoopla every year. We stand against the Columbus Quincentenary and for the Seventh Generation."

These shows contain a specificity of anti-colonialist intention that holds a different relationship to capital than the government sponsored jubilee celebrations. "For the Seventh Generation: Native Americans Counter the Quincentenary" was sponsored by Golden Artist Colors, which donated 300 dollars apiece to the institution of each participating artist's choosing, and the venue owner for the initial Columbus show acknowledged the political rather than monetary inspiration behind it. The rural location and town size of under 1000 guaranteed that audiences would be small and there would be little revenue generated. "Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs" was self-sponsored and similarly disinterested in financial gain as a primary or even secondary motivation. The two shows both served to contemporize and personalize Native American issues and survival into the modern day to a public that was largely only familiar with Native Americans from history books and movies. The events sponsored by the United States government, in contrast, were tied to Columbus only in name and were designed as a vehicle to profit off of a historical moment.

The capitalist exploitation of Native Americans by the United States government during the 500-year anniversary of Columbus's invasion directly follows a historied tradition which becomes most apparent in the United States' approach to land and in the many treaties colonies and countries signed and later voided. These arguments against allowing the native peoples of North America to share the lands that were taken from them by colonialist governments are well-documented in arguments over productive land use. Hayter Reed, the commissioner of Canadian Indian policy, boasted in 1890 that "the policy of destroying the tribal or communist system is assailed in every possible way and every effort is made to implant a spirit of individual responsibility instead."²⁷ These sentiments echo decades earlier policy in the United States promoting the forced assimilation of Native Americans in pursuit of transforming them into civilized and productive citizens based on capitalist and Eurocentric conceits of normative behavior.

In 1823, the United States Supreme Court upheld the decision of the District Court of Illinois that Indian land could not be sold by Indians to private U.S. citizens in *Johnson v. M'Intosh*. Federally recognized Indians had the right to occupy the land they were allotted, but were considered incapable of selling lands because, by right of discovery, only the United States government held the title to the land. This enabled the United States government to hold a monopsony over the acquisition of Native-owned land, allowing the government to purchase at low prices without affording tribes rival buyers. The case ruling also underlined the government's position of tying tribal culture to the justification of revoking land, stating "the tribes of Indians inhabiting this country were fierce savages, whose occupation was war, and whose subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest. To leave them in possession of their

country, was to leave the country a wilderness; to govern them as a distinct people, was impossible, because they were as brave and as high spirited as they were fierce, and were ready to repel by arms every attempt on their independence.”²⁸ The rationale in this statement is twofold, both that the removal of tribal sovereignty was a necessity in successfully holding dominion over the people, and that the land as managed by the indigenous tribes was put to poor use in remaining ‘wilderness’ rather than in being developed and monetized. The dispossession of indigenous lands in North America was often justified by Canadian and United States officials as a correction for the ‘communist’ hold of land in common by the people.²⁹ The ruling of *Johnson v. M’Intosh* galvanized the legitimacy of this complaint into American law.

The 1903 case of *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* further displays the United States government’s solidification of legal authority over tribal lands. In his lawsuit, Lone Wolf, the chief of the Kiowa, alleged that the United States government violated the Medicine Lodge Treaty and defrauded them of land. The court ruled against the Kiowa’s claim, asserting that the government could repeal treaties with tribes at any time³⁰ and affirming the government’s plenary power of the tribes which remains in place today. The outcome of this case underlined the United States government’s successful legal justifications for undermining tribal sovereignty. With that, it possessed the right to hold land or control over the economic functioning within and without tribes, which were defined as domestic dependent nations that could not self-govern. The relationship between the land and culture are intertwined, despite the literal objectification of land in western phraseology. The erosion of treaty rights becomes the erosion of the continuance of land resources and tribal autonomous cultures, economies, politics, and religions.³¹

The threat on Native American autonomy and land rights extends far beyond Columbus’s initial invasion of the Bahamas and the later European colonization of what would become the United States of America. The increasing imposition of the United States government on tribal nations continues into the 21st century. On March 27, 2020, the Trump administration sent a directive to the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe informing them of the impending disestablishment of their land after Chairman Cedric Cromwell reached out over concerns involving the COVID-19 pandemic.³² The timing of the directive is also worth note during a moment in which the full effects of coronavirus on Native communities are being obfuscated³³ and citizens are increasingly dependent on government resources. This directive was based on a 2018 decision by the Department of the Interior revoking the earlier 2015 ruling to approve trust status of 321 acres of land to the tribe. The government argued that because the Mashpee Wampanoag were not federally recognized at the time of the Indian Reorganization act of 1932, the government was not obligated to hold lands in trust for them.³⁴ A lawsuit challenging this decision is pending,³⁵ but as evidenced with the federal government’s removal of land trust in 2020, this directive will have potentially lasting effects on all tribes who did not achieve federal recognition until after 1932.

Sovereignty as understood by federal law and as discussed above is self-determination by a person or body of persons, allowing them final rule. Tribal sovereignty is, in its most basic form, the level at which tribes hold inherent authority to govern themselves within the United States. However, sovereignty holds more complex political and artistic definitions in the pursuit of decolonization and tribal autonomy. Jolene Rickard speaks extensively on sovereignty as direct action and calls for the appropriation of the term as resistance to the United States definition of tribes as domestic dependents.³⁶ She calls for the diversification of the term, advocating for ‘artistic sovereignty’, defined by Karen Ohnesorge as the interpretation of art in terms of colonialism and anti-colonialism, and ‘intellectual sovereignty’, defined by Robert Allen Warrior as the determination of the inclusion into the intellectual practice of Native American scholarship.³⁷ Similarly, terms of ‘visual’ and ‘cultural’ sovereignty have been employed as expansions of indigenous critical thought involving Native American relationships to nationality, autonomy, and borders pre and post contact with settlers.³⁸ The Native artists and scholars utilize the concept of ‘sovereignty’ as a tool with which to place an academically ignored indigeneity into the pedagogy theoretically and philosophically, in a similar vein as feminism and Marxism. Rickard employed her viewpoint into her submission to “Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs” in her piece *Road Kill*, pushing the question “If we don’t strive to deal with the meaning of what we (Indian people) think, then what is the point?”³⁹



Figure 1. *Road Kill* by Jolene Rickard⁴⁰

With the introduction of Sovereignty into pedagogy, American art and Romanticism reenter the discourse. In addition to inventing the ‘idealized’ Indian, the Romantics of the 19th century created a mythology of the American landscape as something grand, sweeping, untamed, and empty. It weaponized the land as propaganda for settlers, displaying an idyllic, unoccupied space waiting to be claimed. Painters recast the land as a new object of voyeurism to be seen, admired, and conquered. Landscape was a tool used against Native people, and Native American artists have interrogated the subject extensively as well as their relationships to the art form. Seneca-Tuscarora artist George Longfish introduced the term ‘landbase’ as a conceptual idea to be utilized as an alternative to the western concept of ‘landscape’. Landbase, in contrast, is not an owned space, but the culture, history, spirituality, people and identity that create the fullness of a space. “When rituals are integrated into the setting through the use of materials and specific places and religion includes the earth upon which one walks -- that is landbase.”⁴⁰ Jaune Quick-to-See Smith employs a similar distinction from the western landscape, invoking “narrative landscapes” which unify imagery with text based on the focal point of land. The artists invest in the larger culture and wholeness not of anonymous land, but of a home. In Karen Ohnesorge’s critique of Smith’s assemblage piece *Buffalo*, she noted the appropriation of the tools of colonialism, which the artist employed to subvert the western landscape.⁴¹ Smith creates not just a pictorial image, but uses writing and articles in her collage to employ language that greater conveys ideas from distinctly indigenous points of view. Her insistence on the inclusion of writing in “Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs” highlights the value of writing in indigenous art and the clarification of intention by a diverse people group that has historically been misrepresented and reduced to characters for western consumption. Michelle Raheja, in discussion of visual sovereignty, further removed the concept from western thought, stating that “Native nations prior to European contact theorized about the concept of sovereignty in order to discursively distinguish themselves from the other human, spirit, animal, and inanimate communities surrounding them through performance, songs, stories, dreams, and visual texts such as wampum, pictographs, and tipi drawings.”⁴² Sovereignty as a concept is utilized in approach to the wholeness of identity relationships as extended to the connection between people and the space they occupy.

“Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs” featured a collection of works that address the complexity of these identity and economic issues unique to indigenous artists. These works are presented alongside invaluable statements from the artists unambiguously stating their intention and process, which inhibits projection from non-native observers. One such piece by Phil Young, *Columbus Is Alive and Well in St. Lucia!*, directly addresses the relationship between landscape and capital.



Figure 2. *Columbus Is Alive And Well in St. Lucia* by Phil Young⁴⁴

His piece consists of pictures of Indian rock art that he took while teaching in St. Lucia, presented alongside two ads and a “postcard-like” inscription to his wife that discusses the commodification of the Caribbean and how Columbus’s legacy is present in St. Lucia without ever having landed there. Young’s addition to the show reflects the process he took in “For the Seventh Generation” of utilizing the traveling exhibition as part of an educational circuit developed to discuss indigenous issues filtered through the lens of Columbus’s initial invasion.

Kay Walkingstick’s contribution to the show, *Tears/□□□□□*, was almost entirely sourced from indigenous materials with the exception of acrylic paint.



Figure 3. *Tears/□□□□□*, by Kay Walkingstick⁴⁵

She eliminated dependence on western production from the majority of the piece, divorcing the work from the economic dependence that the United States has created for Native Americans through the seizure of land and limited legal sovereignty over the past 200 years. Her piece, a funerary item, is an expression of her anger and sadness towards the genocide of the Native American population, and she includes in writing under the funerary object the numbers of the tribes decreasing from 20 million to 2 million people. Alongside her work, she declares that the murder of indigenous people continues into the current century.⁴³ The piece is sourced from indigenous materials not only as a removal of economic dependence on the nation that has committed these crimes against the indigenous people of the Americas, but additionally because the object was made in memory of Native Americans and required a physical separation from the oppressing force that Walkingstick confronts here.

Robert Houle and Greg Staats’s collaboration *Extinct/Distinct* interrogates the appropriation of Indian names, juxtaposing two images beside one another under the words “Extinct/Distinct”.

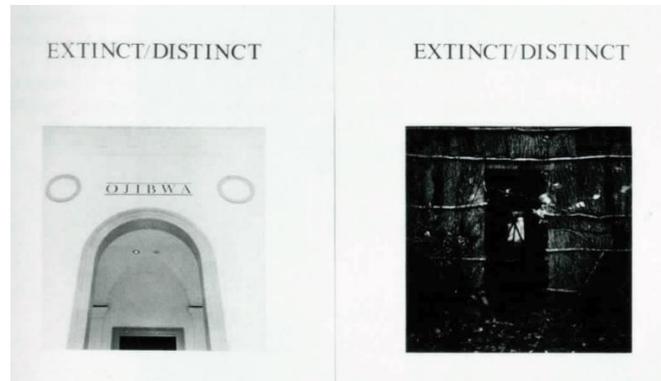


Figure 4. *Extinct/Distinct* by Robert Houle and Greg Staats⁴⁷

The first image was taken of the word ‘Ojibwa’, which was posted over the museum installation of “Monument for the Native People of Ontario” by a German artist, Lothar Baumgarten. He appropriated the word as part of a piece that was in the same vein as previous works by white artists. Houle and Staats identify Baumgarten as perpetuating the same exploitative treatment of Native people and reconstructing the mythology developed around the Indian. The artists additionally pointed to the difficulty in producing documentation of this appropriation, as the exhibit was guarded by a security officer that did not want them taking pictures. This struggle added to an irony the artists felt cemented their alienation from the ownership of their own tribal names. “Symbolically, the liberation of one’s tribal name becomes a demarcation in the political struggle for sovereignty; and the ritualistic juxtaposition of the ancient Iroquois longhouse completes the medicine wheel.”⁴⁴ The two images are visual opposites, the former a white, geometrical, and cold snippet of the museum that frames ‘Ojibwa’ clinically and removes the word from its contextual home. The second image is darker, the geometry imperfect, unsculpted, and non-western. In showing this image next to the one from the museum, the artists force the observation of the museum as dead and the longhouse as living, questioning which of the two images represents ‘extinction.’

The works presented in “Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs” alongside “For the Seventh Generation” ground the larger questions of Native American relationships with the government and the museum in this moment of the Columbus quincentennial. The historical and legal subjugation of tribal nations in pursuit of creating social and economic dependence on the United States was put into the forefront of the conversation for reexamination. My contributions to this conversation serve to reflect on the relationship between the institutions of the federal government and the museum with Native American tribes and artists historically and in the present through this quincentennial moment. In light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic at the time of writing, several elements of this paper will need to be reexamined in the future, including Nina Sander’s curatorial contribution to Native art history, the Mashpee Wampanoag’s ongoing battle for legal recognition, and the effects of the pandemic on Native American communities and art practices. As Smith concluded in her curator’s statement, “The strength of these Indian voices is testimony to the fact that American Indians are alive and well. May their voices ring throughout the land!”

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