

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Decentering Durham

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/41m772kq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 43(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2019-09-01

DOI

10.17953/aicrj.43.4.2017

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RETROSPECTIVE: DECENTERING DURHAM



[Editor's Note: The next four essays, a conversation among Native American scholars and artists, were first published in First American Art Magazine issue 19 (Fall 2017): 84–89.]

For decades, Native activists have clashed with the art establishment over Jimmie Durham's ethnic fraud. What does it say that it took so long for Native voices to be heard?

Decentering Durham

Nancy Marie Mithlo

Museums are fascinating things. We speak of them as if they were monolithic entities, yet they consist of people, histories, and agendas, all functioning largely outside of public view. Art museums are even more opaque, for unlike history or science museums, what counts as evidence is less clear and more susceptible to interpretation. While the 2007 United Nations Rights of Indigenous Peoples guarantees Indigenous communities the right “to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations” of visual and performing arts, museums remain relatively immune to these ethical standards.¹ We are witnessing a time of shifting values in this area, however, where cultural institutions are pressed to be more responsive to Indigenous rights, due to the activism and increased centrality of Native American communities in the public sphere.²

The Walker Art Center's recent catastrophe in exhibiting the racially charged sculpture *Scaffold* (by non-Native, Los Angeles-based artist Sam Durant), which mimics gallows like the one used to execute 38 Dakota political leaders in Mankato, Minnesota, in 1862, exposes the self-referential reasoning that museums often employ.³ Following the decision to remove the piece due to public protest, Olga Viso, director of the Walker Center, apologized for the museum purchase: “I regret that I did not

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better anticipate how the work would be received in Minnesota, especially by Native audiences.”⁴ A recent related episode involving the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation elicited this response from Indigenous critic Jesse Wentz, who cited the “remarkable arrogance” of the Canadian media: “You don’t think we can see you?”⁵

UCLA Hammer Museum’s traveling exhibition, *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World*, curated by Anne Ellegood and first exhibited in Los Angeles, is currently featured at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (June 22, 2017–October 7, 2017). Ellegood worked with Olga Viso at the Hirshhorn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, next door to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) shortly after NMAI’s opening in 2004.⁶ Similar connective tissue exists within Native arts circles. Edgar Heap of Birds (Southern Cheyenne) spoke with Sam Durant (with Lucy Lippard moderating) during the 2007 NMAI Venice Biennale artists’ dialogue for Most Serene Republics.⁷ Heap of Birds was a scheduled speaker for the Walker’s Durham exhibit programming, as was NMAI curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche). A world of interior conversations and understandings are always at play within museums. Nonetheless, public cultural institutions and the people who work within them are uniquely charged to understand and uphold ethical community standards, however shifting these standards may seem.

Following the Walker Art Center’s removal of Scaffold, Viso stated, “I don’t think it is the acquisition process being flawed, but understanding that it’s on public land, it’s a more permanent basis of installation that required a different set of considerations that we didn’t take fully into account.”⁸ And yet, is this public accountability enough? Is the premise that only public institutions are expected to act in a spirit of inclusion, accuracy, and accountability truly reflective of the society we all wish to live in? For readers familiar with the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, both of 1990, these discussions will sound familiar. And yet, here we are almost 30 years later, still reminding museums that American Indians are real and relevant. Viso’s response that the Scaffold work was not “legible” due to the American Indian community’s reading of the work on “literal terms, and not on representational terms . . . really just seen through the lens of trauma,” is a troubling reflection on the profession of American Indian arts, populated with practitioners that, yes, can think beyond solely literal references.⁹

This institutional dismissal of American Indian tribal structures influences museum patrons and the public at large.

How does this appraisal of cultural institutions and their relationships with American Indian peoples relate to the *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World* exhibition at the Walker? It is no secret that Durham has consistently played the intellectual game of simultaneously claiming to be American Indian, specifically Cherokee, and not being a tribal member. It is a tired conversation, but one that still titillates certain art communities.¹⁰ Cultural institutions continue to accept his platform, and, in doing so, the directors and curators in charge continue to deny Indigenous cultural sovereignty to name our own members and leaders. This institutional dismissal of American

Indian tribal structures influences museum patrons and the public at large, leading inescapably to the invalidation of tribal sovereignty, including our rights to protect our land, language, children, health, education, and natural resources. The fact that this is a solo retrospective makes this institutional dismissal even more egregious, for rather than justifying one work of art in a group exhibition, the betrayal of tribal rights is complete. Museum visitors are voters. This is not a game.

In the most basic frame of analysis, Durham and his supporters elevate his status as an early Indian rights advocate, glorify his self-exile abroad, and tolerate the male-centric platform that arises around his artistic reception. American Indian activism is enacted daily by most Native educators, parents, artists, and professionals simply by living, and no one is waiting to be commended for their alignment with the cause. The assertion that Durham is noteworthy for activism 40 years past does not serve to qualify him as a spokesperson in 2017. Durham's self-exile purportedly—because he is not eligible for enrollment as a Cherokee and therefore cannot exhibit his art as Cherokee in the United States—is simply showmanship. The Hammer Museum described Durham's status in his biography as "He is a Native American of Cherokee descent."¹¹ The Walker does not identify him as Native. May I again cite Jesse Went: "You don't think we can see you?" My gender critique is based on the way that Durham's career attracts similarly minded followers who rely on bravado, exceptionalism, and ego, rather than on community building, survivance, or even joy. When will we have a one-woman Native arts show that enjoys the multimillion-dollar budget that this traveling exhibition commands?

Durham's work and its reception has the effect of taking the air out of conversations that offer alternative commentaries on the current state of American Indian life and culture—perspectives that lack the dismal, dismissive, and self-involved perspectives of this artist. Cultural institutions, if even and only by your faith in the public good, please decenter him.

NOTES

1. "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," *United Nations* (March 2008), web.

2. See standwithstandingrock.net; "Obama Announces Final White House Tribal Nations Conference," Indian Country Media Network (August 9, 2016), web; and "Generation Indigenous," The White House: President Obama and the Native American Community, web. The Dakota Access Pipeline Water Protector movement must be credited for this recent forward momentum in the public sphere, along with the Obama Administration's White House Tribal Leaders conference and the Gen-I convenings at the White House.

3. Andrew R. Chow, "Walker Art Center Delays Opening of Sculpture Garden Following Controversy," *New York Times*, (May 30, 2017), web.

4. Olga Viso, "Learning in Public: An Open Letter on Sam Durant's Scaffold," *Walker News* (blog), May 26, 2017, web.

5. "An emotional Jesse Went on the 'remarkable arrogance' of an appropriation prize," *CBC News* (May 15, 2017), web.

6. Jori Finkel, "The Artist Jimmie Durham: A Long Time Gone, but Welcomed Back," *New York Times*, (March 10, 2017), web. It is reported that conversations occurred about a potential Hirshhorn Museum–NMAI joint application for the United States pavilion for the 2007 Venice Biennale at the time that Viso and Ellegood were on staff at the Hirshhorn. When the name of Jimmie Durham was proposed by the Hirshhorn, NMAI ultimately declined. The *New York Times* reports this conversation in this way: "Mr. Durham first met Ms. Ellegood in 2006. She was a curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and had the idea of pairing him with the artist Sam Durant to represent the United States at its Venice Biennale pavilion. But when questions arose about the fact that Mr. Durham is not registered as a citizen with the Cherokee Nation, he withdrew from the project."
7. Most Serene Republics, *National Museum of the American Indian*, accessed June 9, 2017, web.
8. Alicia Eler and Jenna Ross, "'I take full responsibility,' Walker director says of 'Scaffold' controversy," *Star Tribune* (June 5, 2017), web.
9. Ibid.
10. Lucy Lippard, "From the Archives: Jimmie Durham—Postmodernist 'Savage,'" *Art in America* (February 1, 1993), web. This essay was recently reprinted in full online, accessed June 9, 2017. My review of Lippard's essay was not reprinted. See: Nancy Marie Mitchell, "Letters: 'Identities Clarified?'" *Art in America* (July 1993): 23. In the Letters to the Editor section, Durham states, "I am not Cherokee. I am not American Indian," followed by a reference to U.S. legislation.
11. "Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World," *Hammer Museum*, via *Internet Archive* (January 28, 2017), <https://web.archive.org/web/20170128070337>; <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2017/jimmie-durham-at-the-center-of-the-world/>. This description was removed on June 21, 2017.