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Note on the Process of Performance

James Luna with Renée Sueppel

My initial foray into a national art scene was an installation/performance titled *Artifact Piece*. In 1986 I placed myself on display at the Museum of Man, San Diego, and surrounded myself with personal artifacts and labels. This wasn't as easy as it may sound. The idea for this piece was in my notes for years and that idea began the creative process. I wanted the installation to be similar to other exhibits in the museum, but at the same time, I realized that there was an important figure missing. So, unlike the museum's displays of its collection of extinct animals, my installation simply included myself as a living Indian, dressed in a towel breechcloth. I labeled the scars on my body and surrounded myself with personal objects from home and events of the time: a Sex Pistols poster, influential books, music cassettes of Jimi Hendrix and others, a toy model of a black Volkswagen bug, a "Billy Jack for President" button, family portraits, a Godzilla toy, and a statue of baseball great Willie Mays. By comparing the expected and unexpected, *Artifact Piece* challenged the viewer to rethink common stereotypes of Native American people. The installation/performance received wide media exposure, highlighted in *Art in America*, Lucy Lippard's

For more than thirty years, performance and installation artist JAMES LUNA PUYUKITCHUM (Luiseño/Mexican American descent) has been working in innovative and versatile media and giving voice to Native American cultural issues. With numerous solo exhibitions and eighty-five group exhibitions, he has performed and exhibited in venues that include New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe. A recipient of numerous grants and awards, at the 2005 Venice Biennale's 51st International Art Exhibition in 2005 he was selected as the first sponsored artist of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. In 2011 he received an honorary doctorate in humanities from the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe. He resides on the La Jolla Indian Reservation. RENÉE SUEPPEL holds an MFA in Intermedia from the University of Iowa. A co-founder and past director of *THAW: A Festival of Film, Video and Digital Media*, Renée has been interested in Native American culture since 1968. She is grateful for the opportunity to work with James Luna on this article.

Mixed Blessings, and several other art journals. For me, this work stands as an example of an installation that generated emotion in its simplicity, directness, and seamless interaction with the audience. There were lessons from the simplicity and complexity of *Artifact Piece* that would guide me in composing many performances that followed. Still *Artifact Piece* was a kickstart to my career as an artist, after which, armed with fame, I ventured further into performance art and installation.

Growing up Native in California, I saw the reactions of non-Native people when I didn't meet their stereotypes of a Native American, or when my art didn't meet their stereotypes. In the United States, we Indians have been forced, by various means, to live up to the ideals of what "Being an Indian" is to the general public. In art, it means the work "Looked Indian," and that look was controlled by the market. If the market said that my work did not look "Indian," then it did not sell; if it did not sell, then it wasn't Indian. So I began to conceptualize and formulate ways that would visually confront and shift people's perceptions of "Indian" in order to free myself and Native people from the confines of the imagined: from expectations that lock us in history and deny us a voice and place in contemporary culture.

I am sharing the history of *Artifact Piece* to give you an idea of how I got started as a performance and installation artist and help you visualize the structure and process of my work. I have built upon this structure and process for over thirty years. When in 2012 the Institute of American Indian Arts awarded me an honorary doctorate, I was humbled to receive this distinction with author N. Scott Momaday and poet John Trudell, who are cultural heroes and icons, especially for those of us who grew up during the late 1960s. Later, thanks to the multicultural movement of the 1990s we were accepted into the mainstream venues of museums, galleries, and universities, and most importantly, included as artists in school curricula. The visibility and focus that the multiculturalism movement provided was followed by a stream of financial support in the 1990s—a time like no other, either before or since.

MY TECHNIQUES

I think visually. I accumulate notes, write and rewrite scripts, and develop my performances in segments. Eventually, in the final process of writing, I find a tie that binds a performance piece together. I don't write a script for approval (this would be a form of censorship). I do, however, take into consideration cultural traditions that demand respect and consider this as I write and perform. As I develop a performance, I choreograph movement and actions to reinforce and contrast the monologue. As an example, I will describe the process of developing *Futuristic Retro Ritual*, a one-man, one-character performance piece that premiered during the 2013 WOW Festival at the La Jolla Playhouse.

In 2013 I was considering some new work, so I started by reviewing successful visuals and monologues from previous performances that incorporated ritual-like acts. I wanted the piece to be fun and to carry serious messages that addressed questions of identity, ritual, memory, and history. I was inspired to write this performance script while listening to music from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The music took me back



FIGURE 1: James Luna with Arthur Renwick Band, *Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art*, Winnipeg, 2012. All subsequent photographs are by Karen Asher and were taken at this same performance. Images courtesy of *Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art* and Karen Asher.

to my flower-power-love-generation and Indian-pop college days. The soundtrack of music is selected from known and forgotten psychedelic, pop, and blues tunes. Donovan's "Fat Angel" comes to my mind as a now-obscure, but really great tune that is definitely a song of this period. Another song that got radio airplay was Fleetwood Mac's "Albatross," but it faded into the tie-dye sunset along with their blues roots. This music brings together people who experienced the 1960s and how the music was part of the cultural changes happening in the United States. The performance begins with music that makes people from my generation sit up and say, "I remember that song" and others wonder, "Who is singing this?" "Whose music is this?"

I also use sound as part of the timing in a performance. As I developed *Futuristic Retro Ritual*, I thought of how timing paces the performance, the length of the work (scenes and total length), the cadence of the monologue, and the actions presented. For example, I pause and turn to the audience and say, "What do you think?" This action and the moment of silence that follows are effective tools I use to emphasize an interaction between me, the audience, and the message of the performance.

The stage is lit by the image of a campfire on a TV screen, candles, and disco-club lights. The air is filled with the smell of incense and a psychedelic music soundtrack. In these introductory scenes, I begin to confront the audience when I hop out of the wheelchair and warm my hands near the image of a campfire on the TV screen. I enter through the audience space in a wheelchair. I roll up to the stage, then walk onto it, warm my hands by the TV campfire, and say "Cowabunga!" Then I pick up a stick of

incense, smell it, wave it in the air, then look to the audience and say, “Patchouli, it smells like pussy. What do you think?” I gesture to the audience. “My name, my name is James, my Indian name is One Who Carries the Burden of the People on His Shoulders. Are there any veterans here tonight?” I look into the audience, and then give my version of a Native American veteran salute, finishing with a peace sign. “Let’s hear it for the bell-bottoms.” I point to my bell-bottoms and gesture for a response from the audience.

I got stuck in that flower-power generation of the 60s and 70s. People seemed to care about us. And TAKE—again. They came to see what kind of answers we had to life. They forgot we were only human. But we are Indian. We were even in fashion, such as Red Bone singing—come and get your love. We’ll call her Sunshine. She drove to the Pala res store. (She was) blonde, tall, tan, with protruding nipples.

I gesture with both my hands as if cupping breasts.

A guy made his move; they jumped in the van and took off to a place on Morales Lane. She moved in and took care of the place. A woman like that comes to the village and throws everything off. You can’t pull that same kind of bullshit on an Indian woman because they are MEAN. One day she (Sunshine) just backed up the Dodge and she was gone.

I gesture as if leaning on the back of a pickup truck. “[There were] good memories of her, meeting, leaning against the pickup . . . Ol’ Sunshine. . .” I look upward in a dreamy way and say, “I know I was worthless.”



FIGURE 2: Luna raves!

We Indians were a hit during this period, probably for all the wrong reasons, but at least we felt noticed and included. We were the source for a “spiritual answer” for all and besides we were on peyote, according to many. The memory of the days I spent with Sunshine reflects this period of time in the United States. While I was in college, there was a sense of hope in the country. The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 guaranteed Indian tribes and all ethnic people the Bill of Rights, due process, and other civil liberties. People were protesting the Vietnam War on the streets and burning draft cards; the American Indian Movement occupied Alcatraz and marched on Washington; people in the Movement were marching on Washington; César Chavez established the United Farm Workers’ Union; and women were agitating for an Equal Rights Amendment. We were the love generation; at the same time, we channeled our outrage about injustice through activism.

I considered the experience of flashbacks for its “hippie” and “cosmic” connotations. One of the Beat writers who inspired me during that time was Allen Ginsberg, and in “Flashback #58- Conversation with Allen Ginsberg,” one of the performance’s “flashback” scenes, I talk about this and his poem “Howl.” The purpose of these visual and dreamlike flashback stories is to take the audience away from the moment and “be” in the past:

I’m having a conversation with bro, Allen Ginsberg. Zen, poetry and what happened to the New York Yankees. You changed my life, when I opened your book of poems, Howl, transformed me into a world I only dream about. I hope you don’t mind but I kind of re-wrote it: I saw the best minds of my reservation, overweight, naked, running through the dirt streets . . . looking for . . . The Casino! HOOOOOOWL, HOOOOOOWL!



FIGURE 3: James Luna and Arthur Renwick.



FIGURE 4: *Luna becomes a turtle.*

Please keep in mind that performance is a visual art form. On stage I am not an actor but being James Luna, who is a Luiseño/Payómkawichum (People of the West). A motion is worth a thousand words like a word is worth a thousand actions. I can't tell you what comes first, because the words and movement develop together in my mind. In my performances, no hostages are spared. I challenge people who have knowledge of "Indian rituals" and people who have no knowledge, or only romantic notions.

SPIRITUALITY AND CONTENT: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN CULTURES

As I compare similarities and differences between an "Indian ritual" and organized Western religion, a duality is established. For those who are knowledgeable, there are multiple layers of meaning—for example, when I reference typical tribal actions such as smudging. Incense is used in both Indian rituals and in Western organized religions. Here, I intentionally use musk-scented incense. I did not use actual sage or tobacco, because Indians use it in real offerings to the directions, and that might be seen as sacrilegious. Still, I do the correct actions with respect and a straight face. Some members of the audience have questions, like, "Is this real?" Others gasp and say to themselves, "How beautiful," and exhale with a grateful sigh of thanks for the privilege of the experience.

There are more similarities in Indian and Western organized religious practices: the use of the cross and the actions that follow (as prescribed) in addition to the use of incense, liquids, and sacrifice. Both practices encourage followers to sacrifice personal time: to volunteer, to share thoughts as a group or community, and to encourage patience. I build on the religious theme in the performance as I talk about the new pope in “Washing of the Feet.” In this scene, I take a classic Catholic ritual, the action of washing feet, and juxtapose that with a monologue referencing the current celebrity status of Pope Francis. After the sex abuse scandals involving Catholic priests and children, I thought it was interesting that Pope Francis chose to recreate a foot-cleansing ritual at an impoverished school, washing the feet of a little girl.

They elected a New Pope. To Californians and the Southwest people, the Catholic Church was our holocaust. They took land, our ways, our names and religion. Could the New Pope be different? He has done some significant things [I nod my head]. He took a very old ritual. He took it to the people. He went to a school for underprivileged, low-income kids, chose a young girl and washed her feet. I say, damn it! I thought about that, and I thought I would do it. I thought I would recreate this ritual.

I choose a woman with whom I have spoken before the show (in this performance her name is Roberta). She says, “What, you want to wash my feet? Well I’m not taking off my hose” as she walks from the audience and sits on a chair near the stage. I begin washing her feet with holy water, which was tequila. I squeeze a lemon and sprinkle salt on her foot. “Holy water,” I say as I hold up a bottle of water and I take a drink, and I say, “For you and all the people. Rocks!” I start to lick Roberta’s foot, then I put as much of her foot into my mouth as I can. I look to the audience and say, “Somebody had to do it.” Then I stand up, gesture to the audience and say, “A hand for Roberta, ladies and gentlemen.” The audience applauds and Roberta returns to her seat.

The actions of the pope have been closely followed by the media. I do think this particular ceremony, in this current culture, can either be seen as a beautiful act or a perverse erotic act depending on one’s worldview and personal taste. Either way I saw this scene as an important part of the overall performance by bringing in an audience member and engaging her in the performance in a “risky” way. Incorporating the audience into the performance and using their vulnerability is another characteristic of performance art, one that differs from traditional theater.

The closing scene of the performance is called “Pipe Ritual.” In a classic Indian tale often a whimsical lesson is thrown in, as the tales were used by elders in the instruction and education of life. So this scene follows the template of an Indian tale. The monologue and the actions in the “Pipe Ritual” scene are juxtaposed. This scene speaks to the future and unifies themes, actions, and visuals. While telling my story, I take pieces of common PVC plastic pipe and put them together to form the shape of a peace pipe:

I realized this early on—about this visual gift I was given. Well I was always a little different, always doing artistic stuff. I wasn’t shy about things when I should have

been. Something about it is that if you are artistic, you don't see things like other people, the way regular people see things. Sometimes things so simple, they are unique. I'm talking about all artists: musicians, painters, designers. The trick, the real trick is to take those things you see and speak to them, make things better, make things less. [The] next step: teaching people, [art making is] not just a pretty picture. As I age, I am still learning ways to make art and about how and why I do this thing called art.

As I talk about being an artist and seeing things that other people don't see, I make a pipe out of material that is not usually used to make a pipe. As I try to put the pieces of tubing together and make a pipe, I talk about putting a story together. I talk about Native people "making do" with our languages. I continue the scene by speaking about examples of learning:

In Juneau [Alaska] an elder there talked about NW coast dancing: "Up there, when we dance, we don't put on costumes, we put on regalia. When we dance, we don't get up there and act like animals—we become them." The simplicity of this statement spoke volumes to me and I understand the "specialness" of the abilities that I have been given as gifts from Him, our Creator. I take everyday things we see and use and make them sometimes into serious things. Turn their use and meaning around, try to do things different, but similar to how I put a story together.



FIGURE 5: *The pipe ritual.*

I was messing around with some pipes and pipe fittings that were waiting to be used to repair the sink in the house, and a “peace pipe” appeared! It was a wonderful play on words and raised an awareness in me—something I saw and to which I responded. We Indians do this all the time. Making do with what we have. In our cultures now, we make do with our languages that many of us don’t have anymore. “Make do” is one of those sayings we use to speak about having to do without. It can be a beautiful thing because it’s not a pipe, but looks like a pipe and maybe in tough times this could be used as a pipe. I once listened to some spiritual leaders from Montana confess, “Hey, this is all we got left. We are in a grey area, a shortage of spiritual leaders and medicine. We keep it going, we are making do as we are a group that has learned to put something together.”

I look to the audience and say, “It is not a pipe but it looks like a pipe and if we believe and need to, this can for this moment be a pipe.” Jazz Indian-fusion music begins to play on the sound system: Jim Peepers’s “Witchi Tia To,” his version of a peyote song, accompanied by tenor saxophone. Then I offer the pipe as we would do a real pipe to the four directions, touch the floor, or earth, and light the pipe. I stand in the circle of a stage overhead light . . . lift the pipe to the heavens and pause as the music and lights dim.

In *Futuristic Retro Ritual* I play with the concept of a ritual projected into the future while having its greatest significance in the past.

CLOSING

My work as a performance and installation artist saved my life. It has given me a voice and place in contemporary art. My work unveils perspectives on issues related to identity, ritual, memory, and history that even I did not fully understand. Because my work is in the public sphere, I have reclaimed a space and I am fully aware that this space I have entered is not mine but for all Indian people and people of color who need to be heard and more importantly, need to be seen. The ride for me has not stopped; I am as busy as I have ever been. With the fame and hard work have come better gigs, and with technology, the ability to reach a larger audience. Beginning with *Artifact Piece* and continuing with *Futuristic Retro Ritual* today, I hope my work shows that I come from a real place.

EXIT

I pause, retrieve my jacket and scarf, put on a cowboy hat, and walk center stage with my back to the audience. I apply bright red lipstick and become a grotesque clown of sorts. Then, I slowly turn my face to the audience. As I step off the stage, I make karate dance gestures and move toward the stage light clipped to a music stand. Then I say, starting softly, then more loudly, “Mr. DeMille, Mr. DeMille! I am ready for my closeup.” With this homage to a Hollywood classic movie, I begin to turn and walk away, but then turn around one final time to tip my hat, and I exit. Van Morrison’s “Into the Mystic” plays as the night and performance come to a close.



FIGURE 6: *The farewell.*