

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

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This paper develops the idea of 'place-responsive' art practice drawing on the art of James Luna and others, whose object-based works emerge in dialogue with their performance practice. I consider the ways that their works take the 'traditional' medium of sculpture along the trajectory of performance art. My paper highlights the importance of the performative interaction between the artist's body and the objects subsequently displayed.

What is meant by 'place responsive' art practice as opposed to 'site specific'?

Site specific has tended to be used in reference to formalist sculpture and installation. Like many art historical terms, site specific has become an increasingly encompassing and elastic term. First emerging as a development from minimalist, installation and land art, it contributes to the expanded and contested development of public sculpture and installation. Much site specific and site responsive practice seeks to engage art with the everyday and to situate it within spaces that would enable it to engage with audiences not familiar with or inclined to visit art galleries or museums.

'Place' as opposed to 'site' offers another broad, expansive and layered point of departure for artistic engagement. 'Place' is more multi-layered in terms of its signifying potential and appeal. It encompasses cultural, sensory, historical and intuitive dynamics and is more poetic in its creativity. It allows for a more personal and autobiographic, a more elastic response, as opposed to adhering primarily to the physical particularities of a specific site.

"Let's get this out front," Luna explains, "theater is not what I am, though there are any number of similarities. Installation is very broad and that's one of its strengths. I approach it as I approach a painting. I don't think about acting. I am not a trained actor. But that's not to say that I don't script or monologue. I do, but it comes out of the art."

Like many artists, Luna eschews categorization in relation to his art. There is a strong interface between his object-based and performance practice. His insistence on this is echoed in similar statements by artists including Carolee Schneemann, who envisioned her elaborate performances as 'enlarged collages' or as extensions of her painterly practice, and Hannah Wilke in her various explorations of her evocative folded forms. The idea of the artwork comprising parts of one's body has been explored in Wilke's *Brush Strokes*, made with her hair and Franco B's abstract blood paintings. Their works, 'objects' created from performative processes directly relating to their bodies and comprising parts of themselves, are also involved in a dialogue with their wider bodies of work. Niki de Saint Phalle's shooting paintings or 'tirs' made in the '60s also embody performative elements. It was through acts of destruction that these works were created. The assemblages were shot with a pistol, rifle or cannon by herself or others, producing spontaneous effects and the dispersion of colours.

The evocative idea of the place responsive also allows for artists and their audiences to explore the notion of place as an extension of self. John Ioane's *Fale Sa* explores this idea, in his installation that is very much a dialogue with performance and sculptural/installation practice. The Polynesian idea of Fale Sa, or a sacred place, in Samoan it translates to a church, is conceived by the artist in much more personal terms. Ioane envisioned the concept as an intimate and private space for self-reflection. *Fale Sa* began its life as a performance, with the artist running through the inner city streets of Auckland to a gallery space. It engaged with temporal concerns as, at the conclusion of the exhibition, he placed into the public space hundreds of the wooden 'shells' that he had made as part of his work, in seemingly random sites around the city for anyone to pick up and take as their own.

Artists like James Luna and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's performances often rely on a range of objects, props and costumes that become artworks after the performance.

Luna's strategy of fusing private experiences with wider social issues and locating his performance practice around his body, enables him to offer a complex and often parodic reading of archetypal stereotypes. By evoking racial stereotypes and their accompanying prejudice within the medium of performance as opposed to photographic or painterly mediums, he confronts viewers with a living body and in doing so challenges them to think about the reality of living with the implications of these representations.

In 1987, Luna performed *Artifact Piece*.¹ Dressed in a loincloth, the sedated artist lay on a bed of sand, in a glass museum cabinet in the American Indian Gallery at the San Diego Museum of Man, close to the La Jolla Reservation where he lives. Alongside him were other museum cabinets containing objects of significance to the artist's everyday life, some conforming to the traditional Native American artifact paradigm, such as sacred medicine objects, juxtaposed along with other objects that pointed to Luna's 'Indian' life in the present – albums by Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis, comics, a copy of his Masters degree, his arrest record and tubes of paint. His body was also marked with labels, conforming to museum taxonomies. They documented various marks and scars on his body in the following terms,

The burns on the fore and upper arm were sustained during days of excessive drinking. Having passed out on a campground table, trying to walk, he fell into a campfire. Not until several days later; when the drinking ceased, was the seriousness and pain of the burn realized.

Having been married less than two years, the sharing of emotional scars from alcoholic family backgrounds (was) cause for fears of giving, communicating, and mistrust. Skin callous on ring finger remains, along with assorted painful and happy memories.²

Luna's objects parodied other displays in the Native American Gallery which, like many museum exhibits, contextualised native peoples and cultures as relics from the past, with

¹ Luna also performed this work at the *Decade Show* in 1990 at the Whitney Museum.

² Linda Weintraub, Arthur Danto and Thomas McEvilley, eds. *Art On the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society. 1970s-1990s*. Litchfield: Art Insights Inc, 1996, p.100.

no indication whatsoever of their existence or experience in the present. Ironically, in close proximity to Luna was an exhibition of photographs by Edward Curtis, whose mission was to document Indian people before they ‘vanished’. Lippard contends that his photographs featured “Indians dressed up and posed to document their own ‘disappearance’”.³ In Curtis’s monumental series *Portraits from North American Indian Life*,⁴ he writes,

Alone with my campfire, I gaze about on the completely circling hilltop, crested with countless campfires, around which are gathered the people of a dying race. ... I feel that the life of these children of nature is like the dying day drawing to its end; only off in the West is the glorious light of the setting sun, telling us, perhaps, of light after darkness.⁵

While *Artifact Piece* drew on specific Native American histories, it also had wider relevance in relation to issues of museums display and re-enactment of indigenous peoples, and the fraught arena of cultural encounter and engagement. Strategically, Luna chose to offer no explanatory information to museum visitors that explicitly stated his intentions. By not making clear the mechanisms of his performance in a didactic fashion, a realm of possibilities in terms of viewer reactions emerged, including shock, surprise, voyeurism, fascination and intrigue. Many viewers assumed that the artist was a diorama – “He almost looks real”⁶ – and were shocked to find a living and breathing body on closer inspection. Offering his body as a site of introspection regarding the plight of Native Americans, both past and present, Luna effectively engaged in a counter-discourse with the other museological displays.

Luna has continued to develop performances that involve the staging of his body with various props to illustrate and enact a collapsing of past/present binaries to highlight a continuum of issues relating to the commercialisation and consumption of Native

³ Lippard, 1990, p. 198.

⁴ Between 1901 and 1930, Edward Curtis photographed Native Americans from more than eighty tribes. His images—more than 40,000—came to define America’s popular vision of Native American culture.

⁵ Edward Curtis quoted in Lucy Lippard, ed. *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans*. New York: The New Press, 1992, p. 23.

⁶ Elizabeth J. Sacca. “From Curiosity to Vision” in *Schools Arts*. Nov 1996, v 96, n 3, p. 14.

American bodies and cultural practices. They also enact painful and traumatic historical legacies that have been silenced in the vast majority of mainstream discourse.

Take a Picture with a Real Indian is a performance installation work in which, at the opening, Luna dressed in different outfits signifying 'Indianness', including dressing in a loin cloth, a feather and bead costume as well as in European style pants and polo shirt. An audio announcement stated 'take a picture with a real indian' as the artists moved around the space. For the duration of the show, three life-sized photographic cut out images of Luna, dressed in Plains Indian ceremonial attire, a loin cloth and trousers and a shirt, were offered as an alternative to the presence of the artist himself. Audience members were encouraged to select the Indian they wished to be photographed with and then pin the Polaroid shot to the wall behind the work. The taking of photographs as part of a performance was also employed by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena in their work *Two Amerindians Visit* to highlight the ways in which images of Native peoples are captured and the subjugating effects they can create.

Luna's *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* pokes fun at the tourist's demand for an authentic Other that essentially relies on century old conventions – ceremonial dress and objects and performance. This has effectively fixed many Native Americans into a repetitive cycle of representations in order to attain the economic benefits. One outcome of this practice is that it can create an imbalanced view in relation to indigenous cultures, which often are only marginally represented in the wider media. It can also perpetuate a kind of touristic primitivism that does not acknowledge their role and presence in the present. By encouraging viewers to make a choice between three different images of the archetypal Indian, the noble savage and the assimilated native, they become active participants in completing the work and they implicate themselves within its dynamics. In the process of making their choice and having their image photographed alongside their designated 'Other' they participate in a century old colonial tradition. The parody that features in the work re-presents this practice and highlights its constructed nature.

As part of Luna's performance *In My Dream*, the artist, a diabetic, ate packets of sugar sweeteners, salt and tomato sauce before pulling out his glucometer and injecting himself with insulin. It also featured him riding an exercycle dressed in faux 'Indian' regalia while smoking and drinking, as scenes from the movies *The Wild One* and *Easy Rider*

played in the background. The futility and comic pathos of his efforts to ‘move forward’ alongside iconic cinematic images of rebellion and heroic defeat speak of the plight that many Native Americans find themselves in. This is a position also highlighted in Luna’s image and text work *I’ve Always Wanted to be an American Indian*, in which he juxtaposes images of places and people living at the La Jolla Reservation, with statistics relating to the high levels of unemployment, diabetes and violence there. ‘Do you still want to be an Indian?’ he asks, at the end.

The History of the Luiseno People: La Jolla Reservation, Christmas, 1990, features Luna driving to a shop, purchasing beer and going home. He sits in front of his television and then, while continually drinking and smoking, calls various friends and relatives (including his ex-wife and girlfriend) at Christmas. The piece, which was first performed in a gallery in 1990, became an exhibition that featured a beer can fixed to the top of a fake Christmas tree. Like his *AA Meeting/Art History* a parody of James Earle Frazer’s *End of the Trial*, Luna suggests a clear continuum between historical colonial imperialism and the plight of Native Americans in the present.

Emendatio was presented at the 2005 Venice Biennale by the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. The work’s title is a Latin word, translated as ‘the act of altering for the better’. It offers a parodic reflection on the supposedly well-intentioned missionary, part of a wider colonial infrastructure. *Emendatio* comprised a performance along with an exhibition in a chapel, paying homage to Pablo Tac, a Luiseno Indian who, in 1834 traveled to Rome to receive religious instruction, studied there for seven years but died at the age of nineteen, never to return home. Tac is credited with creating the first grammar of his native language. *Emendatio* featured Luna engaged in faux ritualised ceremonies, creating a sacred circle consisting of stones, tins of Spam, insulin bottles and syringes. The artist took on various performance personas including a shaman. As in other performances, he produced an insulin reader and proceeded to inject himself in the stomach. The art/life interface is immediately apparent, as is the conviction of his attempts to highlight the living and contemporary Native American body within the multi-faceted and fraught theatre or ‘place’ of the stereotype.

Jane Blocker suggests that the performative act of injecting himself with insulin due to his diabetes, represents a fixing of his body within a surveillance society; his body

illustrating Foucault's claim "that in the culture of discipline, the body becomes an object perpetually offered for examination." Blocker maintains that Luna is "controlled because he is subject to repetitive examinations by a device that stands for white ingenuity and authority. Such stereotypes essentialize Indian identity as either savage or civilized, descended from pastoral shepherds or warlike plunderers." These sentiments, which locate the 'native body' within a discourse of technology and a consumption saturated world are echoed in Amelia Jones' writing about Luna's installations, in particular her notion of the post-human. She draws on Donna Harroway's idea of the cyborg to discuss his installation practice. These readings of his work offer valuable contributions, providing complex contextual and theoretical layers to his art practice. They also tend to dislocate it from the embodied and performative agency that he and other artists exploring similar issues interrogate.

The embodied and culturally loaded exploration of self and place, creates a dynamic performative arena between the artists' body, its loaded signifying potential and the objects that remain. The act of performance charges and animates the space and the objects, and allows for a multi-layered and often ambivalent site or place of reception.

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