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Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation

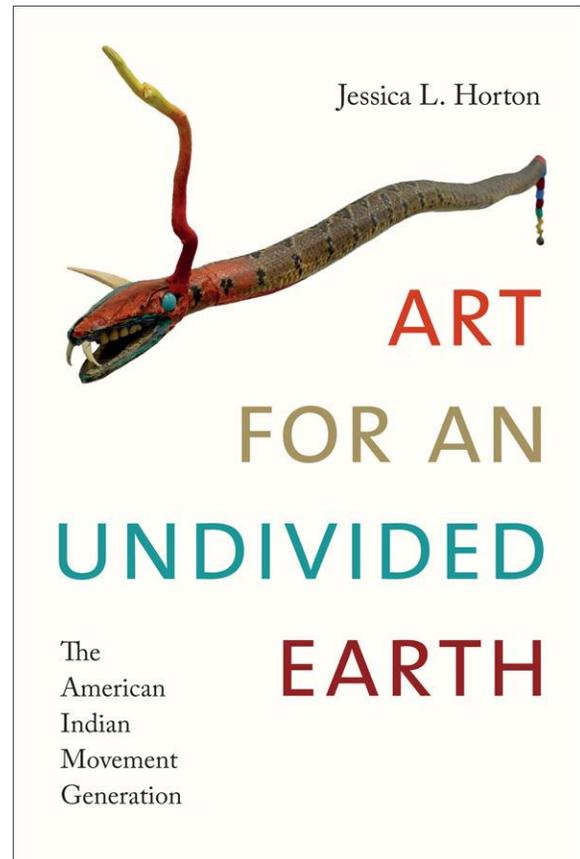
Jessica L. Horton

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Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation is an outstanding example of how the discipline-specific skills of art history—specifically, close looking as a guide for contextual analysis—can shed new light on fairly well-known works of art. Featuring the work of Jimmie Durham, James Luna, Kay WalkingStick, Fred Kabotie, and Robert Houle, Jessica Horton brings a wealth of contextual material and a compelling theoretical frame to her discussion of the influence of Native American history, culture, and politics on late twentieth-century American art.

Horton’s title concept, “undivided earth,” underscores Indigenous¹ viewpoints regarding land as well as specific histories of mobility and movement. It also more subtly introduces her resistance to temporal boundaries: “This book,” she begins, “compiles and explores connections between past and present indigenous travelers who have shared and shaped an ongoing modernity” (4)—a modernity that, she stresses, has been “fully shared with Europeans in the wake of 1492” (3). Horton’s subtitle, “The American Indian Movement Generation,” is in some ways a misleading periodization, implying a closer connection between most of the artists she discusses and the American Indian Movement (AIM) than existed in fact. To the extent that Horton takes the legacy of AIM as her ostensible starting point, it is more geared toward the organization’s development of pan-Indian identity as a constructed political position than as a gesture toward its visual politics. Coll Thrush, Emily Burns, and others in Indigenous studies have been attending to the global movement of Native North American people and objects for



some time, and Horton's study is a welcome addition to that literature from the perspective of visual art and culture.²

From the outset, Horton suggests that she has "sought to write in dialogue with artists and through the 'eyes' of artworks," and a key strength of this book is the way that it performs the very argument about material history she seeks to make (2). Horton ties this question of materiality to that of identity, opening her first chapter with a compelling statement of her intent to "dislodge identity from its stable position within recent art history in order to invigorate, rather than remove, the grounds for alliances" (17). For readers coming from Indigenous studies, such assertions hint at recent historiographical trends ranging from tribal nationalism to decolonization without confronting them directly—although a close reading of Horton's bibliography indicates she is well aware of the terrain.

The first chapter frames ideas about place, temporality, material, and identity that will preoccupy her throughout the text. The chapter also introduces Jimmie Durham (whose work with and for AIM is the strongest historical link between any of the artists discussed and the movement) in the context of the broader field of Indigenous institutional critique. This chapter productively asks what limits were confronted by artists who hoped to address Native American history and experience using materials and aesthetic strategies derived from "European cultural precepts," such as feathers, bones, and human displays (188).

In chapter two, Horton's concept of an "undivided earth" comes into its own as a critical tool for visual and material analysis. James Luna's 2005 Venice Biennale exhibition, *Emendatio*, is the focal point of her increasingly complex analysis of the relationships between archives and history, space and performance, and objects and experience. *Emendatio* took up the question of religious colonization and conversion, and in this chapter Horton elucidates the slippage revealed between religious and artistic performance in the work and the concomitant functions of performative objects in both. Horton engagingly discovers the temporal implications of Luna's work in coiled baskets by Juana Basilia Sitmelelene and others, whose loops are bound together by the persistence of material objects—an interplay from which she deduces the "reintegration of archive and repertoire" (93). Citing the German philosopher Walter Benjamin in support of this basket-derived material-historical model, Horton further performs the "undivided art history" for which she argues.

The third chapter takes a slightly jarring step back in time, exploring the organization and reception of the American Pavilion at the 1932 Venice Biennale as a frame for a close reading of paintings by Hopi artist Fred Kabotie. In itself, this chapter offers a compelling reading of Pueblo painting, its institutional history, and Kabotie's resistance to settler-colonial narratives of Hopi life. It is a chapter that could (and no doubt will) be used productively in the classroom, and yet it stands uncomfortably in relation to the surrounding chapters. Although it rehearses themes that appear throughout the book, it does so from a vantage point—both historically and subjectively speaking—that is at odds with the rest of the study, and which flirts uncomfortably with disciplinary tropes of the ethnographic present and the "timeless Indian." Perhaps for this reason, when Horton suggests that Kabotie's images, unlike the Ashcan circle and Taos Society paintings around them, transcend their historical moment in order to "join [her]" in 2011 Venice, her prose loses some of the fluid elegance that characterizes her writing as a whole (95).

Chapter four, organized around a discussion of Kay WalkingStick and her myriad influences and interests, revisits the question of identity politics and its legislation, allowing Horton to

expand her earlier critique of essentialist notions of Indigeneity. The discussion is engaging but unsurprising; we should worry about the state of our field if we still need to be told that, “Europeans were not the only ones to envelop that which was new and strange inside familiar, even familial frameworks” (131). In the context of her stance against identity politics, Horton takes a strongly negative view of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA), a piece of legislation that she locates in a history of racially essentialist United States policymaking intended to contribute to the economic exploitation of Native American people as well as, arguably, their genocide. Passed in 1990, the IACA sought to protect Native American artists from mass-produced “crafts” that appropriated and undercut local tourist markets that were (and are) a core source of income in many Native communities; as such, it is still a vital tool of economic sovereignty for federally-recognized tribes, despite its ideological flaws.³ The intent of the IACA was to protect Native American artists and, through its provision that tribes could affiliate artists who were not enrolled, to recognize (a limited form of) tribal sovereignty. And its economic impact, particularly in Native communities economically dependent upon tourism (as is the case, for instance, throughout the Southwest), has been significant. According to Horton, far from protecting Indigenous people and their economic interests, the IACA undermined the authority of tribes, communities, and individuals to define themselves based on cultural practices and knowledge. It is an argument that she links, albeit again only implicitly, to the broader question of tribal nationalism in contemporary scholarly practice. Her perspective on this legislation perhaps reflects the geographical specificity of her project, which focuses on urban artists who work and exhibit internationally, and entirely avoids the question of tourist markets in and around Indian Country.⁴

Horton’s fifth and final chapter upturns Eurocentric theoretical models of materiality, suggesting that Indigenous understanding of lively and agentic materials predated European theories along the same lines and accordingly informed Native American engagements with European audiences. Saulteaux artist Robert Houle’s installation, *Paris/Ojibwa* (2010), is the centerpiece of a chapter that, like the others, ranges productively across centuries of history—in this case, to make an argument that objects and audiences work together to generate genealogies of meaning. It is a familiarly postmodern argument, nuanced by Horton’s insistence that such ideas are longstanding features of Ojibwe philosophy that informed the development of an undivided modernism among undivided people. The chapter culminates in a confident model of scholarly alliance. In Houle’s work, Horton suggests, we find “a generous space for a transcultural materialism that . . . broadens the ‘we’” (183). It is the story of that broader “we”—one that encompasses materials, archives, and imaginaries alongside artists and audiences—that best explains Horton’s selection of and implicit advocacy for the artists included in *Undivided Earth*: they have created work that, if we reach out for it, rewards us with the generous, generative space of an undivided art history.

Horton returns to the question of alliances in the epilogue, this time through the lens of material agency and undivided history. She persuasively argues that Durham, in multiple works, presented stones as objects that solicit our allegiance only to reveal themselves as “unpredictable actors on their own, material terms” (192). According to Horton, this gambit is a metaphor for our responsibility, as international art audiences, to “interven[e] on behalf of nameless human lives in a scenario of neocolonial injustice” (193). Regardless of their potential for unpredictable actions in response to our interventions, I remain troubled by the suggestion that we “itinerant art audiences” should present ourselves as allies to

inanimate objects that stand in for nameless colonial subjects (190). It is a model of contemporary scholarship that coils dangerously around to the salvage anthropology of an earlier generation, as well as the paternalism of colonialism. For this reviewer, and I suspect many readers, it also uncomfortably echoes Horton's specific refusal to engage with the persistent derogation of Durham's claims (which have been varied and often factually inaccurate) about his own identity among Native American artists and scholars.

Horton introduces Durham as "related to Wolf Clan Cherokee," erroneously reiterating that he was born in Arkansas, and represents without any interpretive frame the artist's first-person narratives of cultural experience and subjectivity (21). As Cherokee scholar and artist America Meredith has exhaustively documented, the repetition of these lies about Durham's heritage reinscribes the colonial erasure of Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty, as non-Native academics persist in citing one another's errors rather than archival documents or the Cherokee people who refute Durham's statements directly.⁵ Extensive recent discussion of Durham's claims postdated the publication of Horton's book (indeed, she notes that she was working on the retrospective exhibition that reignited the debate while this book was in production)—but as curator Anne Ellegood noted, it is a longstanding controversy that first gained mainstream attention in the wake of the IACA almost thirty years ago. Moreover, those with whom she consulted regarding the exhibition—including Horton—concurred that "it was time to move past it."⁶ Such an assertion would make sense if Horton, Ellegood, and others were not seemingly invested in defining Durham as a Native American artist, almost always including his outright lies about his biography in the process. Claims to Indigeneity generally, and Cherokee identity specifically, have their own history and play their own role in the modernist histories that Horton traces. Her uncritical acceptance of Durham's intentionally misleading statements about his identity threatens to derail attention to her fascinating and valuable text. Perhaps most regrettably, by failing to take up this opportunity to address the problems of those histories—particularly as they intersect with the politics of the AIM generation—Horton misses a key opportunity to demonstrate the value of her overarching claim about undivided history to those for whom it matters most. Moreover, Durham's work would—and could—stand on its own material and iconographic merits, and still lead Horton down the same productive paths.

The debate over Durham's heritage and legitimacy has a paradoxical tendency to obscure the broader critique it performs of the fields of American art history and contemporary art criticism: that Americanist scholars have disproportionately attended to Native American artists whose work addresses itself to Euro-American modes, media, and aesthetics. This has historically resulted in some stunningly insightful work—indeed, much of the foundational work in the field was in this vein, and it was done by pioneering art historians working against their training in a Euro-American art-historical tradition that relegated Native American art history to anthropology.⁷ Recognizing that the institutional canon of Native American art is a reflection of the history and demographics of the discipline should, however, make us even more

skeptical of its validity. In other words, we should be wary of the tendency to recenter Euro-American experience and contexts at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty in the work—or, more accurately, we should be attuned to the fact that our discipline still tends to aggregate and privilege such stories, reinscribing colonialism as the primary frame for Indigenous lives.

The volume does interesting and necessary work, even though it does not clearly meet its own mandate to “trace the profound impact of AIM on subsequent aesthetic practices” (11). Moving back and forth between historical moments, continents, media, and meanings, Horton convincingly locates the contemporary artists at the heart of her book within a centuries-long global history of interaction and cultural exchange. In fact, Horton’s refusal to adjudicate Durham’s heritage is perhaps another gesture toward precisely this move. In such a reading, her reliance on his words, rather than her own claims, shifts any reading of art from a “divided” history, where Native American and non-Native perspectives occupy an uneasy, oppositional binary, to an “undivided art history” in which actors within modernity are participants in a shifting stream of relations with nation-states, cultures, and each other (128).

Notes

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- ¹ Horton, along with many art historians, does not capitalize Indigenous. Preferred practice among Indigenous, Native, and First Nations people is to do so, and so I do throughout this review.
- ² See, for example, Emily C. Burns, *Transnational Frontiers: The American West in France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018); Coll Thrush, *Indigenous London: Native Travelers at the Heart of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art, 1700–1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).
- ³ See, for example, Kealey Boyd, “World’s Largest Native American Art Forgery Ring Distributed \$12M of Fakes,” *Hyperallergic.com*, February 8, 2019: <https://hyperallergic.com/483700/worlds-largest-native-american-art-forgery-ring-distributed-12m-of-fakes>.
- ⁴ The value of the IACA for Native artists and their tribal governments is illustrated by the lawsuits they continue to file pursuing its enforcement. Among many other cases, the Navajo Nation reached an agreement with retailer Urban Outfitters in 2012 as a result of IACA prosecution, and in August 2018, Nael Ali became the first person jailed for violating the Act (rather than fined).
- ⁵ America Meredith, “Why It Matters That Jimmie Durham Is Not a Cherokee,” July 7, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/jimmie-durham-america-meredith-1014164>.
- ⁶ “Curator Anne Ellegood on Understanding the Complexities of Jimmie Durham’s Native Identity,” August 2, 2017, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/blog/2017/07/curator-anne-ellegood-on-understanding-the-complexities-of-jimmie-durhams-native-identity>.
- ⁷ Janet Berlo has done much of the best of this work—and has also cogently critiqued it. See, for example, Janet Berlo, “Anthropologies and Histories of Art: A View from the Terrain of Native North American Art History” in Mariet Westermann, ed., *Anthropologies of Art* (Williamstown, MA: The Clark Institute, 2005), 179–92. Berlo was Horton’s dissertation advisor, and *Art for an Undivided Earth* is closely based on her dissertation; see Jessica Horton, “Places to Stand: Histories of Native Art Beyond the Nation,” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2013).