

Interventions: Native American Art for Far-Flung Territories.* Judith Ostrowitz. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. 240 pp.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Hutchinson

As the title of this well-researched and intelligently argued book implies, *Interventions: Native American Art for Far-Flung Territories* examines art produced by indigenous North Americans for consumption outside of their own communities. Judith Ostrowitz's goal is not simply to document ways in which Native culture producers have engaged mainstream notions of art. Instead, she focuses on work that demonstrates a fluency in systems of meaning from both local and global contexts and that uses cross-cultural contexts to assert ideas about the nature and value of indigenous identity of importance to both audiences. Ostrowitz's use of the term "territory" imbues cross-cultural communication with a sense of spatial movement, and she is clearly committed to the notion of sovereignty that is essential to contemporary indigenous cultural activism. Like many using the term, however, she uses it to describe *both* the control of traditional lands and the strategic intervention in a less geographically bounded cultural space.

Two metaphors provide the template for her analysis. The first is military. The artists and cultural activists she examines are continually described as "tacticians" "deploying" cultural information. This critical language keeps in view the guarded relationship indigenous communities have with mainstream culture, even as they strategically engage with its interest in art and material culture. Ostrowitz's second metaphor is linguistic. Her analyses trace the bodies of knowledge necessary to fully understand the significance of a project, but she acknowledges that fluency in only one or some of the visual "languages" present may still provide a meaningful interaction.

The book is organized around five chapters that analyze projects—some produced as fine art and others in the broader realm of visual or material culture—which assert Native territoriality in transcultural spaces. The first describes several projects aimed at the creation or preservation of Northwest Coast carving on public lands such as parks and the grounds of museums and universities during the second half of the 20th century. As Ostrowitz shows, while these projects moved carving away from the locations in which the significance of style and iconography as claims to territory and lineage was understood, carvers have continued to insert locality in their work. Ostrowitz's second chapter reviews the design process behind the National Museum of the American Indian, which opened its museum on the Mall in Washington, DC in 2004. Several critics have studied the complex ambitions and mixed results of this project; Ostrowitz focuses on the project's commitment to finding a unified visual language that would communicate the commonality of all Indian peoples. This goal resulted in the selection of abstract forms that could be linked to values understood as shared by diverse Native groups but also related to developments in mainstream museum architecture. Her reading traces the rich streams of meaning on which the building and its interior spaces draw; equally important, however, is her

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assertion that the complex messages the designers hoped the building would communicate may be too subtle for most visitors to grasp.

In her third chapter, Ostrowitz looks at how artists reassert the protocols of imagery that have been appropriated by non-Native cultures. The chapter begins with a look at Tlingit imagery in the Batman story *Legends of the Dark Night*, and goes on to discuss how the development of Celebration—a modern event featuring dance groups from across the Northwest Coast and drawing both a local and a global audience—spurred the renewed interest in asserting the rights to wear clan imagery. Using the work of Arjun Appadurai, Ostrowitz sees this development as an example of imagining Native community in the face of the dislocations of globalization. The Northwest Coast is also the location for much of Ostrowitz's fourth chapter, which interrogates the significance of territoriality in the work of fine artists who engage visual strategies drawn from the mainstream art world. The heart of this chapter is an examination of the influence of Western modernist formalism on Northwest Coast art, particularly through the writings and teaching of non-Native artist and art historian Bill Holm. Ostrowitz argues that Holm's emphasis on formal issues suppressed other kinds of messages that had been significant in the work he studied. As she notes, contemporary Native artists from around the country—such as James Luna (Luiseño), Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora), and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne)—have been turning this trend around, using the methods of the conceptual and installation art worlds to call attention to issues of sovereignty.

Ostrowitz's final chapter investigates the issue of sovereignty in the world of electronic media. Through her case studies, she demonstrates how the web can both serve and undermine claims to territoriality. On the one hand, by creating highly-controlled sites of access to cultural representation, Native artists can offer global audiences virtual admission to tribal territory that does not constitute actual trespass. At the same time, she warns that the vast and anonymous audience in cyberspace means that works that demand too much knowledge can run the risk of being misinterpreted and even reinforcing stereotypes. For example, she explains that the subversive nature of reappropriations of stereotypical imagery by contemporary Native artists may be lost on viewers who encounter their work on the website CyberPowWow, where it is distanced from the locational contexts that could help structure the viewer's reaction (p. 152).

Ostrowitz has particular expertise in the art and culture of the Northwest Coast, and the examples drawn from this region are particularly compelling, in part because they draw on extensive interviews and time spent in the region. At the same time, some readers may be looking for more connections beyond this region and, indeed, beyond indigenous America. For example, regarding an installation piece made by Jolene Rickard, which references traditional Haudenosaunee ceremonial practices threatened by changes in agricultural practices, Ostrowitz writes “the work may be sabotaged by its own intertextuality... Who may know about the corn and the problematic suggestions of outsiders to introduce hybridization and, simultaneously, about the history of installation art?” (p. 138). A similar question might be asked of the audience for Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, whose work is grounded in the particular conditions of the West Bank or for many other participants in the world of so-called “global contemporary art.” Ostrowitz' engagement with broader critical discussions of globalization in the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah, Homi Bhabha, and Arjun Appadurai, as well as to Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, offer an important foundation for such connections. *Interventions* merits our attention not only as

a work on Native American art but also for its contribution to the broader question of how cultural actors assert themselves on a world stage without sacrificing their commitment to community values.

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