

Artifact Piece, Revisited: Erica Lord at the National Museum of the American Indian, April 3-5, 2008

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Jennifer Stampe, Museum Studies, New York University

In April, Erica Lord performed *Artifact Piece, Revisited* at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center, in New York City. In reprising James Luna's work *The Artifact Piece*, first presented in 1987 at San Diego's Museum of Man, Lord asks us to reassess relationships among Native American peoples, museums, and anthropology now, after twenty year's work at repatriation, collaboration, and Native self-representation. In addition to returning to issues of stereotype and expropriation raised by Luna, Lord broached several concerns not apparent in Luna's work, including the position of Native women in the popular mind and the role of consumption and commodification in identity-production. In his performance-as-installation, Luna, a member of the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians, lay stretched out on a bed of sand in a horizontal glass case, dressed in a loincloth and surrounded by personal effects and official documents, including his divorce decree and high school diploma. The work performed Native presence: against the prevalent idea that American Indian people vanished under European domination or were reduced to those traces found in static exhibit halls, Luna lodged himself in the museum as a living, animate, disruption of established power relations. As Jean Fisher put it in a 1992 *Art Journal* article, Luna's work did not simply threaten to return a controlling gaze: rather, she wrote, the presence "of the undead Indian of colonialism . . . and the possibility that he may indeed be watching and listening disarms the voyeuristic gaze and denies it its structuring power" (Fisher 1992:48-9). *The Artifact Piece* thus came to exemplify a postcolonial critique of museums and anthropology that troubled long-standing assumptions about the relationship between "us" and "them."

Lord's *Artifact Piece, Revisited* was mounted at NMAI with Luna's cooperation, in conjunction with an exhibit of his *Emendatio*, a piece commissioned by the Smithsonian for the 2005 Venice Biennale. In Lord's hands, the physical disposition of the work did not differ much: it consisted most fundamentally of the artist's body on display, surrounded by artifacts from her life made museum objects through anthropological commentary. This included a text panel giving the ethnographic particulars about her species (*Homo sapiens*), culture (Athabaskan/Dena), and region (Alaska). But where Luna's work relied upon the threat that the museum-goer's gaze might be returned, Lord's depended more substantially on inviting that gaze and the viewer's desire. Labels mounted in the case with her called attention to her pedicure (identifying her painted toenails as a component of a ritual for attracting a mate), her endomorphic body type and wide hips (suitable for childbearing), and her pierced ears and nose, specifying that while these were not traditional, they did allow her to wear ornaments acquired through traditional practices of gifting and trading. In this way, Lord called attention to ways that constructions wrought by the gaze are not only raced but

gendered, such that Native American women find themselves in different relation to museums and anthropology, as well as popular culture, than that experienced by Native men. The larger issue here, the phallogentrism of the museum gaze, is a subject that goes much remarked in discussions of contemporary art and in the literature on exoticism but is comparatively absent in Native American studies. Lord provides us with a way to begin to attend more completely to the multiple desires and pleasures active in museum display.

In his work, Luna drew attention to his scars, explained in label text as the remainders of injuries suffered while drinking. Alluding to Luna, Lord noted her scars and bruises, but attributed them to biking and skateboarding accidents sustained in the course of what she termed an active lifestyle. This small difference between passive, depressive drinking and active, healthful—if dangerous—biking, suggests a world of change: where Luna takes up, and even embraces, stereotype in order to confront it, Lord refuses stereotypical associations, aligning herself with an ethnically unmarked, and perhaps unexpected, community of X-sporting youth. In a similar move, Lord wore a buckskin dress, described in label text as made of “traditional materials, moose and deer hides” and “previously used in the ritual of costuming for the popular American holiday of Halloween.” With this, Lord drew attention to multiple vectors of appropriation, suggesting that “playing Indian” is a Native pursuit as much as a non-Native one.

This concern with the malleability of identity was announced in the small display cases at either end of the installation. One case held a blonde wig, high heels, and huge gold hoop earrings, it also referred nostalgically to old photographic technologies, with a vintage folding camera and framed pictures of Lord’s friends mugging in a photobooth. The juxtaposition of these objects suggesting that ethnic or cultural identification is performative, just as we now expect gender to be. Also on display here were copies of a book by Barack Obama, the catalogue for Luna’s *Emendatio*, Wim Wenders’ film “Paris, Texas,” the Clash’s album “London Calling,” Atmosphere’s “God Loves Ugly,” and a Pixies t-shirt. These objects are sources of inspiration that are not particularly “Indian” (neither are they non-Indian, as Lord warns us); it is notable that several of the objects sit comfortably in a sort of hipster canon, and are enthusiasms likely shared (even nostalgically) by other 30-year old artists. This case was mirrored by another at the other end of the exhibit containing a beaded buckskin dress and pictures of Lord as a child and with her family. This arrangement proposes that contemporary Native American identity depends upon a fluidity enacted through social practices marked as traditional and based in kin relations, but also through those of consumption and commodification, those markers of modernity. It heralds a shift of focus from an understanding of Native-ness as grounded in socio-political place to one concerned with changing and multiple sites of identification. In addition, Lord’s invocation of consumption refers usefully, perhaps despite itself, to the different lives and choices available to differently-positioned Native American people. Lord’s work depends in part upon her privileged and mobile position as an artist: this is a position that she mobilizes to trouble demands that ethnically-marked artistic expressions be “representative” or “authentic.”

Before legislation governing repatriation was passed in the US, *The Artifact Piece* confronted collecting practices that removed sacred and other objects from Native hands and put human remains in storage and on display. Now, the 1989 National Museum of the American Indian Act

and the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act are beginning to look like mature pieces of legislation. [1] Lord's treatment of them is not entirely laudatory: an exhibit panel on NAGPRA specified that the institutional response to repatriation legislation has been uneven insofar as "some [institutions] are reluctant to comply, while others are anxious to work with Native communities." At NMAI, staff members have responded to and worked with Native advocates, going together beyond the mandates of repatriation legislation to develop innovative, cooperative collections care practices; in a broader history of murky transactions, this institution's repatriation program has been comparatively transparent and successful. Thus, the critique of NAGPRA staged at NMAI is somewhat discordant. I understand that Lord intends to perform *Artifact Piece, Revisited* at the University of Alaska Museum of the North, in Fairbanks, where she will be positioned among displays that include her own family's belongings—and arrangement that would give the performance a good deal more resonance. In any case, and given the celebratory rhetoric with which repatriation efforts are normally treated, Lord's suggestion that work remains to be done is welcome.

But as installed at NMAI, *Artifact Piece, Revisited* lost the element of surprise that was crucial in Luna's performance. Where Luna performed among the Museum of Man's collection of Kumeyaay objects such that unsuspecting museum-goers happened upon him, Lord was stationed apart from other exhibits in the Diker Pavilion. In an otherwise dark room, Lord and her paraphernalia were lit with spotlights and positioned some distance from the exhibit *Beauty Surrounds Us*, also installed there. During my visit late Friday afternoon, museum-goers bypassed this exhibit, beginning by viewing Lord's body in the center of the installation—as if attending a funeral or wake—before looking at the attending displays. (Overheard at the entry security station: "Is that woman in the casket still here?"). Notably, most of those in the room then were NMAI staff members or Lord's friends, waiting to greet her at the end of the day's performance. As conceived by Luna, the piece relies on a naive museum visitor who is unfamiliar with museum politics in general and concerns with repatriation or self-representation in particular. The actual audience of this work suggests that this naivety may be less in evidence twenty years after Luna's piece (or, no small matter, since the publicity that accompanied the opening of NMAI on the National Mall in Washington, DC several years ago).

In the end, Lord's performance left me wondering about the conception of anthropology it addresses. Lord's concerns usefully engage with anthropological interests that fall under the rubric of globalization, including diaspora, mobility, identity, and consumption: these are all more prevalent concerns at present than the salvage ethnography of the museum period or the acculturation studies of the more recent past. However, these contemporary objects of anthropological study are rarely much in evidence in museum exhibits. *Artifact Piece, Revisited* thus calls to our attention an ongoing need to construct a practice of anthropology in museums does not only to collaborate with Native communities but also educates various publics about changing anthropological understandings, including those concerning the constructed-ness of identity, from its multiple sources. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History has recently interviewed applicants for curatorial positions in Globalization and in North American Ethnology. Let's hope these fields will not be understood to be discrete or mutually exclusive: Lord's *Artifact Piece, Revisited* insists that they are not.

Erica Lord is the 2008 Eric and Barbara Dobkin Fellow at the School for Advanced Research. See [for a statement about Artifact Piece, Revisited](#), [photos of the performance of it at NMAI](#), and [more about Lord's work](#).

References

Fisher, Jean. 1992. In Search of the "Inauthentic": Disturbing Signs in Contemporary Native American Art. *Art Journal* 51(3): 44-50.

Notes

1. [The Smithsonian Institution's repatriation program is not governed by NAGPRA but by the NMAI Act, which established the institution by transferring ownership of the Heye collection to the Smithsonian and provided for the dispensation of human remains and funerary objects. Amendments passed in 1996 govern the return of sacred objects and cultural patrimony.](#)