Fighting Against Indigenous Stereotypes and Invisibility: Gregg Deal's Use of Humor and Irony

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FIGHTING AGAINST INDIGENOUS STEREOTYPES AND INVISIBILITY:
GREGG DEAL’S USE OF HUMOR AND IRONY

by

Emily Mullen

B.A., Regis University, 2013

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

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This thesis entitled:
Fighting Against Indigenous Stereotypes and Invisibility: Gregg Deal’s Use of Humor and Irony
written by Emily Mullen
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Date_____________________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT

Mullen, Emily (MA, Art History, University of Colorado, Boulder Department of Art and Art History)
Fighting Against Indigenous Stereotypes and Invisibility: Gregg Deal’s Use of Humor and Irony
Thesis directed by Professor Annette de Stecher

Stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, formed according to Western notions of cultural hierarchy, as savage, exotic, and only existing in a distant past, are still prevalent in the popular imaginary. These stem from misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples that developed after contact between Indigenous peoples and European settler communities, and exist in concepts such as the noble savage, the wild heathen, or the vanishing Indian. In this thesis I argue that contemporary artist Gregg Deal (Pyramid Lake Paiute) successfully challenges and disrupts such stereotypes by re-channeling their power and re-appropriating them through his strategic use of humor and irony in performances, paintings, and murals. Through these tools, Deal is able to attract audiences, disarm them, and destabilize their assumptions about Indigenous peoples. I frame Deal’s use of humor and irony outside the trickster paradigm, drawing instead on Don Kelly’s (Ojibway) theorization of humor as a communicative tool for making difficult topics accessible, and Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of irony as a discursive strategy for simultaneously presenting and subverting something that is familiar.

In a second line of argument, I foreground Deal’s agency as an artist through analysis of his strategies to reach audiences and gain visibility for his art. Contemporary Indigenous artists are often excluded from mainstream art institutions, and can struggle to find venues to exhibit their work. I argue that Deal’s strategic use of public space and the internet to show and publicize his art is significant. It has helped him to reach audiences and gain recognition for his work. He now exhibits and performs in university and state museums. I argue that the authority
of museum space, in turn, gives him a greater opportunity to disrupt stereotypes and educate people about misperceptions of Indigenous peoples.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Gregg Deal, who graciously consented to his work and his artistic practice being the focus of my thesis and to being interviewed, and who was also always willing to answer any questions that came up while I was writing. This thesis would not have been possible without him or his amazing art.

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to my thesis committee chair Annette de Stecher, who has offered kind and unwavering support from the day I first reached out to her to learn more about the Art History program at CU Boulder. Her generosity with her time and guidance has benefited me immeasurably throughout my graduate student career, and especially during my thesis project.

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I wish to give a special thanks to my undergraduate advisor, Barbara Coleman, who first taught me to love art history. A special thanks to her, as well as to my father, for encouraging me to go to graduate school in the first place and never doubting that I could do it. Indeed, I could not have done it without the unconditional love and support of my family and friends. I would especially like to thank my mother, sister, grandmother, aunt, and partner, who have always been there for me, kept me going, and helped me in any way that they could. Last but not least, I will forever be grateful for my fellow art history students, who have been amazing friends and supporters as well as peers.
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INTRODUCTION

A Google image search under the term “Native Americans” demonstrates the pervasiveness of misconceptions about Indigenous peoples in mainstream culture today (Fig. 0.1). The image search results show nineteenth- or early twentieth-century photographs of Indigenous peoples in traditional dress, more recent photographs in the style of the historical ones, or paintings and illustrations depicting Indigenous peoples of the historical period. There are few representations of Indigenous peoples in today’s dress, engaged in everyday life and activities of the present. Most of the people in the images wear clothing made of leather, feathers, bones, and beads, they are depicted outdoors or in tipis, and the men hold bows and arrows, spears, or rifles. These images perpetuate longstanding stereotypes of Indigenous peoples according to Western notions of cultural hierarchy, as savage, exotic, and only existing in a distant past. These stem from the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples that developed after contact between Indigenous peoples and European settler communities, and exist in concepts such as the noble savage, the wild heathen, or the vanishing Indian.2

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1 In this thesis, I use the terms “Indigenous” or “Indigenous peoples,” to refer to the first peoples of North America specifically. I generally use it instead of “Native American” or “Indian” in order to be respectful and adhere to current scholarly trends in terminology usage. I occasionally use “Native American” or “Indian,” however, when quoting or paraphrasing sources that use these terms, or where it is necessary to provide clarity.

Indigenous scholar Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache) interrogates the longstanding nature of such stereotypes, and asks “…what is to be done?…how does one begin to work toward a more humane understanding?” In response to her own questions, she argues that re-channeling the power of stereotypical images towards alternative readings, or reappropriating them, is an effective means of intervening in misperceptions of Indigenous peoples. Gregg Deal (Pyramid Lake Paiute), an artist working primarily in performance art, paintings, filmmaking, and murals, is a master of such reappropriation. In this thesis I argue that his use of humor and irony to address stereotypes through his paintings, murals, and performances allows him to re-channel their power by attracting audiences, disarming them, and destabilizing their assumptions about Indigenous peoples. Secondly, I argue that his use of humor and irony is part of his broader strategy to being an artist and getting his work seen. Contemporary Indigenous artists can face difficulties in finding audiences for their work, as they are often excluded from mainstream art institutions. I argue that Deal’s strategy to show his works and performances in public space and develop an online presence through his website and social media is significant in helping him to gain recognition and an audience for his art, and entry into museum space. Deal’s methods for navigating the field of contemporary art are critical to his work, and my discussion is therefore positioned within the context of his broader approach to reaching viewers. Following the decolonizing methodologies I outline later in this chapter, I ground my study of


4 Mithlo, “A Realist View of Image Politics: Reclamation of the ‘Every Indian,’” 121, 123.


Deal’s art, his use of humor and irony, and his strategies in my interview and conversations with him.  

Gregg Deal and His Art

Deal was born in Park City, Utah in 1975, and is a member of the Pyramid Lake Paiute tribe. He received a BFA from George Mason University where he majored in painting and also completed courses in film and graphic design. He became a full-time artist and soon began to gain recognition for his work. Deal lived and worked as an artist in the D.C. area until 2015, when he moved to Colorado to become the Denver Art Museum’s (DAM) Native Arts Artist-in-Residence. Deal still lives in Colorado, but exhibits his work nationally.

While Deal covers a range of subjects in his art practice, the focus of my thesis is the work in which he addresses stereotypes of Indigenous peoples through humor and irony. I discuss his performances The Last American Indian On Earth, Ethnographic Zoo, and White Indian, his mural Reconciled, and his painting Defiant To Your Gods. Deal is perhaps best known for his performance piece The Last American Indian On Earth, which he performed at different venues between April 2013 and April 2014 (Fig. 0.2). For the performance he dressed in imitation Indigenous regalia made in China, and then strolled around Washington, D.C. and other cities, recording peoples’ reactions to his appearance. He later turned this into a video with

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7 Gregg Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.


9 Gregg Deal, e-mail message to author about dates of artworks, February 10, 2018.
a voice-over of his commentary on the process and the results. He painted *Reconciled*, a portrait of an Indigenous man in a headdress surrounded by the words “AMERICAN GENOCIDE RECONCILED THRU FOOTBALL,” on a wall on a public street in D.C. on April 6, 2014 (Fig. 0.3). This mural is one of many works in which Deal addressed the controversy of the name of Washington, D.C.’s football team, the Redskins.

During his residency at the DAM from October 2015 to January 2016, Deal created *Defiant To Your Gods, Ethnographic Zoo*, and *White Indian*. In his painting *Defiant To Your Gods* Deal depicted a girl surrounded by well-known stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples, such as sports mascots and cartoon figures (Fig. 0.4). The painting is a commentary on the pervasiveness of stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples in popular culture, as well as on Indigenous efforts to reclaim their own image. *Ethnographic Zoo* was a performance piece that he did on the plaza in front of the DAM on November 28, 2015 (Fig. 0.5). He wore the same outfit as he had for *The Last American Indian On Earth*, but rather than walking around and recording peoples’ reactions to him, this time he sat surrounded by props and signs that gave his performance the appearance and impression of a zoo, with him on display as a living


11 Deal, e-mail message to author about dates of artworks, February 10, 2018.


14 Object label, *Defiant To Your Gods*, Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO.
stereotype. Finally, on January 29, 2016, Deal did his multi-part performance *White Indian* during a museum event (Fig. 0.6). In three different acts at different locations in the DAM, he used spoken word, projected images, and live tattooing to address issues such as the appropriation of Indigenous imagery and identity, the pervasiveness of Indigenous stereotypes in popular culture, and the existence of laws that regulate “Indianness.”

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical approach is multi-faceted. I will examine how humor and irony function generally as subversive tools, and then explore how Deal uses these tools in his artistic interventions to challenge and disrupt stereotypes. I will also draw on concepts of public space and museum space in order to differentiate between the two, and consider how the different qualities of each benefit Deal in his strategies to reach an audience and communicate messages through his humorous and ironic art.


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Ryan’s *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (1999) is an important text on Indigenous artists’ use of humor and irony as a means to subvert stereotypes. He describes this strategy as a “Trickster shift,” by which he means a form of serious play aimed at shifting viewers’ perspectives by exposing them to alternatives.\(^\text{18}\) Key to this concept (and thus to his book as a whole) is the connection he sees between such practices and the Native American Trickster, a figure who, through Ryan’s synthesis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources, is presented as a living part of Indigenous oral traditions. Ryan states that the Trickster’s capacity for “curiosity, ingenuity, playfulness, earthiness, irreverence, and resilience” has long served to entertain and educate Native peoples, and that the Trickster informs the ironic and humorous practice of many contemporary Indigenous artists.\(^\text{19}\)

Ryan’s book is an important text in discussion of a particular trickster use of humor and irony by contemporary Indigenous artists, however my argument has a different focus. I draw from the work of Kristina Fagan (Labrador Métis); in her essay “What’s the Trouble with the Trickster?: An Introduction” (2010) she argues that scholars who frame the work of Indigenous artists (or authors) through a trickster lens often ignore the agency of the creators themselves. She argues that, through the way that Ryan describes Indigenous artists as being guided by a trickster spirit, “The trickster appears to be the one making artistic choices” rather than the discussed later in this section, as well as in more detail in Chapter 1. Linda Hutcheon defines irony as the transmission of a surface meaning as well as a deeper, evaluative attitude that infers a different meaning entirely. Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 11. In other words, parody involves the repetition of something with the addition of a critical edge, which allows an ironic undermining of an original presentation due to the simultaneous transmission of a different meaning. Irony is thus a key part of parody, but irony can exist independently of parody. I make this distinction because, while irony as an independent discursive strategy is a main topic in this thesis, I will also point out instances in Gregg Deal’s art where the irony he uses also involves parody; Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), xi-xii, 5-6, 14.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 5-6, xi-xiii, 3-12.
artists. Furthermore, as Deal himself argues, defining Indigenous artists’ use of humor and irony as part of a trickster practice can be limiting. As he says,

I’ve referred to some of the things I do like within a sort of trickster context, but…I think we have to be careful about how we classify those things…if we took that trickster thing out of the vernacular, how would we define Native people? How would we define their work? By adding that bit, you’re immediately…pigeonholing the concept and the conversation, because the sense of irony or humor would be true within from a Native context as much as a non-Native context, so why can’t those things exist in similar spaces and sort of have a definition that’s relatable across the board?

To foreground Deal’s agency in his strategic use of humor and irony in his art and avoid “pigeonholing the concept and the conversation,” I frame his practice in relation to functions and definitions of humor and irony outside the trickster paradigm, rather than through an Indigenous trickster interpretation.

To build my argument, I will draw on Ojibway comedian Don Kelly’s analysis of humor in “And Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, Get Ready for Some (Ab) Original Stand-up Comedy” (2006) and Linda Hutcheon’s analysis of irony in Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony (1994). Although Kelly’s essay is written from the perspective of an Aboriginal man in relation to Aboriginal comedy, his general description of humor as a communicative tool that can ease audiences into thinking about topics they might usually avoid confronting sheds light on the broader properties of humor that make it useful in the context of Deal’s art. Hutcheon is a specialist in the field of cultural theory, and her analysis of irony as involving an “ironist” intentionally transmitting both a surface meaning and a deeper evaluative attitude that infers a

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21 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.

different meaning entirely is a constructive analytic approach to explain how Deal’s work functions.\textsuperscript{23}

For my conceptual framework, to examine Deal’s work in public space and museum space, I will draw on P. David Marshall’s “Introduction: The Plurality of Publics” (2016), Jen Jack Gieseking’s and William Mangold’s introduction in \textit{The People, Place, and Space Reader} (2014), and Carol Duncan’s \textit{Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums} (1995). In his text Marshal explores various understandings of the term “public,” while Gieseking and Mangold provide a general description of the term “space.” I use the work of all three scholars to clarify what I mean by “public space.”\textsuperscript{24} Duncan provides an analysis of the qualities of museums and the expectations that visitors have for them, and I draw on her scholarship to provide a foundation for analyzing Deal’s work in museum space.\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{Literature Review}

In addition to the scholarship on theories of humor, irony, and space, I draw on key authors who discuss Indigenous stereotypes, the visibility of contemporary Indigenous art in the broader art world, and the different strategies Indigenous artists use to present themselves and their work. In \textit{Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness: A Resource Guide}


Mohawk scholar and curator Deborah Doxtator provides a lengthy assessment of stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples, what these images are often associated with, and how they developed. Her text provides vital background information on the stereotypes that Deal confronts in his art. I also draw on Mithlo’s “A Realist View of Image Politics: Reclamation of the ‘Every Indian’” for her argument that reappropriation is an effective means of addressing Indigenous stereotypes.

To contextualize Deal’s use of humor and irony to intervene in stereotypes, set within his larger strategy for navigating the contemporary art world as an Indigenous artist, I will draw on texts by Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo), Ruth Phillips, and Lucy Lippard, as well as on a second article by Mithlo. In their recent article entitled “Inclusivity or Sovereignty? Native American Arts in the Gallery and Museum since 1992” Ash-Milby and Phillips examine the state of contemporary Indigenous art in the United States and Canada in recent decades. While they note that much progress has been made since the early 1990s in terms of the visibility of Indigenous art in the general art world, they also point out that this progress has been uneven at best. In “No Word for Art in Our Language?: Old Questions, New Paradigms,” Mithlo analyses various strategies that Indigenous artists have used in recent times in working around the obstacle of the limited visibility of contemporary Indigenous art in the mainstream art world. Lippard does a

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27 Mithlo, “A Realist View of Image Politics: Reclamation of the ‘Every Indian,’” 121, 123.


similar analysis in “All Six Legs,” but comes to a different conclusion.\textsuperscript{30} By drawing on both scholars, I provide a nuanced understanding of the choices facing contemporary Indigenous artists, such as Deal, today. Together, Ash-Milby, Phillips, Mithlo, and Lippard allow me to build a framework for understanding the value and necessity of Deal’s strategies for gaining audiences for his works.

**Methodology**

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012) Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith advocates for research with Indigenous communities that is grounded in ethical and respectful methodologies. Following the principles Tuhiwai Smith outlines, I take a decolonizing approach in this thesis by foregrounding Indigenous voices and perspectives.\textsuperscript{31} I draw on the work of Indigenous academics and artists, in addition to the work of non-Indigenous scholars whose work follows a decolonizing approach. Most importantly, my discussion of Deal’s work is grounded in his own words about his art. I draw on my conversations and correspondences with him, on sources based in interviews with him, and on his verbal and written statements, in videos or on his website or social media accounts.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapter 1 I provide an analysis of stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in terms of how, when, and why they formed, as well as why we care that these misperceptions still exist. This


will lead into my discussion on how they can be reappropriated and re-channeled, as Mithlo writes, in order to promote alternative readings.\textsuperscript{32} I will present the theories of humor and irony that I draw from, to argue that they are productive tools for the reappropriation of stereotypical images. Then, to contextualize Deal’s use of humor and irony within his strategies for navigating the field of contemporary art as a person of Indigenous descent, I discuss how misconceptions of what Indigenous art is result in limited visibility for contemporary Indigenous art. I will follow this with an introduction to Deal’s strategic methods for gaining an audience despite these obstacles, which I will expand on in the subsequent chapters.

My second chapter will focus on Deal’s work in public space, and how he presents himself in public as a strategy to reach viewers. I first discuss public space, what and where it is, and how working in this public space is a successful strategy for Deal. This will include a discussion on the internet as a tool for reaching more audiences than he can in person. I will then discuss two examples of Deal’s public work: \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth} and \textit{Reconciled}. I will examine them in terms of his use of humor and irony to address stereotypes, as well as the significance of their location in public space. In Chapter 3, I will present a framework for the analysis of Deal’s work in museum space, and then discuss examples of his art from his time as the DAM’s Native Arts Artist-in-Residence. I will contextualize Deal’s work by examining the qualities of museum space that separate it from public space, and discuss the benefits of exhibiting or performing at a museum. Finally, I will analyze the humor and irony in \textit{Defiant To Your Gods}, \textit{Ethnographic Zoo}, and \textit{White Indian} as well as the significance of their location in museum space.

\textsuperscript{32} Mithlo, “A Realist View of Image Politics: Reclamation of the ‘Every Indian,’” 121, 123.
CHAPTER 1

Stereotypes, Humor and Irony, and Visibility: Creating a Framework for Analyzing Gregg Deal’s Art

As the Google search I described demonstrates, stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, such as the noble savage, the wild heathen, or the vanishing Indian, are prevalent in the popular imaginary. Humor and irony can be used as productive tools for disrupting such stereotypes, which is important work, because misperceptions of Indigenous peoples are not harmless. I will first discuss the origins of these stereotypes as a framework for my analysis of Gregg Deal’s use of humor and irony to confront them. Reaching viewers is a challenge for many contemporary Indigenous artists due to their frequent marginalization by the art world, and I will discuss Deal’s methods for reaching audiences to make these interventions possible.

Symbols of Indianness

The “symbols of ‘Indianness’” that appear in the Google image search, motifs such as bows and arrows, feather headdresses, and buckskin, are as much an issue as the absence of diverse or contemporary portrayals of Indigenous peoples.1 Deborah Doxtator argues that these symbols have been invested with a range of ideas since the earliest contact between Indigenous peoples and Europeans.2 They have come to be associated with ideas of cultural hierarchy, perpetual inferiority, exciting exoticism, and inevitable demise.3 Doxtator points out that over the

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2 Ibid., 10-12.
3 Ibid., these topics are covered throughout the text – in particular, see: on the topic of hierarchy: 12, 59-60, 66, 67-68; on the topic of inferiority: 10, 12-13, 59-61, 68; on excitement and exoticism: 17-18, 20-24, 39-40, 44-45; on
centuries, these associations have been encouraged and perpetuated through Wild West shows, museum exhibitions, visual arts, literature, advertising, movies, and textbooks. She also explains that “symbols of Indianness” and their associated misconceptions have met a variety of needs for non-Natives in North America, ranging from the financial profit derived from the excitement and entertainment people get from these symbols, to justifying the taking of Indigenous land and subjugation of its inhabitants.

Doxtator argues that images have real power, and she is thus a realist according to Nancy Mithlo’s definition. A realist is one who recognizes “that images have consequences, that bias in sports imagery, children’s literature, or clothing advertisements result in psychological damage or even physical violence.” Mithlo opposes this to a mentalist approach, which dismisses these misperceptions as inconsequential compared to economic, political, or health related issues. Mithlo, herself a realist, cites a finding from the National Congress of American Indians that “Native women are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than white women.” She links this fact to overly sexualized images of Indigenous women, such as “Pocahotties” in Halloween costumes. Mithlo argues that such images “contribute to the general idea of Native women as objects – willing, available, and consumable.” On a broader level, she argues that the

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4 Doxtator, Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness, references to the sources through which stereotypes were perpetuated can be found throughout the text – in particular, see: 17, 20-22, 26-27, 36, 44-46, 56, 66.

5 Ibid., references to the needs that “symbols of Indianness” have met for non-Native peoples can be found throughout the text – in particular, see: 14, 17-18, 23-2426-17, 36-40, 44-45, 59, 64, 66.


7 Ibid., 106.

8 Ibid., 107.

9 Ibid., information from 106-107, quote from 106.

13
demeaning misconceptions of Indigenous peoples that are ingrained in American culture
“actively ‘work’ to degrade and diminish personhood.”\textsuperscript{10} She argues that reappropriation is the
best approach for dealing with these misconceptions.\textsuperscript{11} To argue for this strategy, she points out
that attempts to eradicate derogatory stereotypes and replace them with more accurate
information have not been effective, as demonstrated by the Google search and the resiliency of
stereotypes despite such efforts.\textsuperscript{12}

This raises the question, however, of what it means to reappropriate an image. Mithlo
partially answers this through a brief description of works by Indigenous artists that she sees as
effective in doing so. One example is \textit{Bambi Makes Some Extra Bucks at the Studio} by America
Meredith (Swedish-Cherokee) (Fig. 1.1). She describes Meredith’s strategy in this image as an
“ironic adaptation of historic and limiting icons,”\textsuperscript{13} and states:

The ‘gotcha’ aspect of the work is its deliberately sarcastic reference to the Santa Fe
Indian School’s genre of arts instruction, known alternately as the Dorothy Dunn School
(named after its legendary instructor) or (derogatorily) the Bambi School of Painting for
its flat, two-dimensional design-saturated style. Meredith brings the blue Bambi to life for
us to consume, contemplate, and \textit{laugh about} [emphasis added], even though the 1930s
Indian School arts instruction is known to be coercive and controlling.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, through her description of this and other works Mithlo suggests that it is the artists’ ironic
and humorous recontextualization of stereotypical images that constitutes a strategy of
reappropriation. My discussion of the use of humor and irony to demonstrate why they are

\textsuperscript{10} Mithlo, “A Realist View of Image Politics: Reclamation of the ‘Every Indian,’” 111-112.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 121, 123.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
effective in this capacity will provide a framework for understanding Deal’s use of humor and irony to reappropriate stereotypes, which I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3.

**Humor and Irony as Tools to Disrupt Stereotypes**

Don Kelly highlights elements of humor that can be used to subvert stereotypes. He draws on his experiences as a comedian to argue that humor is a powerful communicative tool, particularly for addressing difficult topics. Kelly argues that it is much more effective than serious or angry approaches, stating “If you yell at people or browbeat them into submission, they’ll tune out and walk away. But if you keep them laughing, they’ll keep listening.”\(^\text{15}\) He does this in his act, using his jokes strategically as an opportunity to convey points about Indigenous issues that people might not usually listen to. In one part of his act he describes an occasion when a woman came up to him after a show and asked him if his people celebrated Thanksgiving. He tells his audience that, in response, he said “Yeah, just last year I had a traditional Native Thanksgiving. The European guy who lives next door came over, claimed he ‘discovered’ my apartment and now he’s living in the place!”\(^\text{16}\) By taking the myth that Europeans discovered the Americas and therefore had a right to the land and comparing it to a situation the audience can identify as ridiculous, he makes a difficult topic funny and accessible. Of this joke and others like it, Kelly writes “When people laugh that means they get it. Not just the joke – they get the point. If they didn’t get the connection they wouldn’t be laughing. I’m happy to say they usually do laugh. And maybe, just maybe, one person thinks a little bit about

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\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 58.
it.” In this way Kelly creates an opportunity for audiences to listen about and contemplate issues they might usually avoid or ignore. While he is discussing stand-up comedy specifically in his text, the same principle applies to art that is humorous, as I will argue in my discussion of Deal’s work.

According to Linda Hutcheon, irony can also create opportunities for confronting people with issues they might normally avoid, and possibly even demonstrating to them an alternative way of seeing. She argues that irony is not a “limited rhetorical trope” or “an extended attitude to life” as is commonly believed, but rather is a “discursive strategy” that can be deployed verbally as well as visually. In her model, irony involves an “ironist” (the person practicing irony) intentionally transmitting both a surface meaning and a deeper evaluative attitude of it that infers a different meaning entirely. This transmission requires a receiver, whom Hutcheon labels the “interpreter.” It is this requirement, she argues, that makes irony risky. Not only is there a possibility that the intended interpreter could fail to recognize the irony, but even if they do recognize it, they could interpret it differently than how it was intended. Hutcheon notes that a failure on the part of the interpreter to recognize the irony can often be prevented if the ironist signals its presence through “conflictual textual or contextual evidence or by markers which are socially agreed upon,” such as quotation marks around a text, or a wink. Regarding the danger of misinterpretation, Hutcheon states that some of the risk lies in irony’s “transideological” nature, that irony is not inherently subversive, and can be used in the service of a variety of

19 Ibid., 11.
20 Ibid., 11, 21.
interests. She argues, however, that it is precisely this quality that attracts some marginalized groups to ironic strategies of communication. Regarding the perspective of those marginalized groups that are proponents of the use of irony, Hutcheon states:

In this view, irony’s intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests – it uses their very language as its said – is its strength, for it allows ironic discourse both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood) and also to ‘relativize the [dominant’s] authority and stability,’ in part by appropriating its power. This intimacy, then, is what makes irony potentially an effective strategy of oppositionality.

In other words, irony can create an opportunity to transmit a message by allowing the ironist to attract sustained attention through presenting something that is familiar. The ironist can then use the time they have gained to refute whatever that is. In the case of misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples and artists’ interventions against these misrepresentations, a stereotypical image can serve as the familiar and enticing element, while the way that an artist/ironist frames it can allow him or her to reappropriate the image by simultaneously supplying an alternative reading or understanding of it. Deal uses this strategy frequently in his work.

**The Politics of Humor and Irony in Gregg Deal’s Art**

Deal often employs stereotypical understandings of what Indigenous peoples are thought to look like in an ironic fashion in his art by presenting stereotypical images as his “something that is familiar.” He uses them to attract potential viewers’ attention, and thus buys himself time to communicate (often with humor) an alternative understanding of stereotypes as false and harmful. As Hutcheon writes, “irony always has a ‘target,’” and Deal’s targets are people who

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22 Ibid., 31.

23 Ibid., 30.
believe in the popular misconceptions of Indigenous peoples as inferior, savage, exotic, or extinct. Deal holds Indigenous stereotypes up to the light and draws attention to how people perpetuate them, and how they behave because they believe in these stereotypes. He makes the fallacy of these stereotypes evident through the absurdity of the situations that arise.

Hutcheon points out that irony is sometimes thought to have victims rather than targets due to the exclusion and embarrassment it can cause. She describes the relationship between an ironist and his or her audience as “political in nature,” quoting scholar L. Chamberlain to argue that it is political in the sense that it “invokes notions of hierarchy and subordination, judgment and perhaps even moral superiority.” By hierarchies, she means the divisions irony creates between “those who use it, then those who ‘get’ it and, at the bottom, those who do not.” Deal’s use of irony and humor can work to highlight some peoples’ lack of knowledge about Indigenous peoples. This positions him and those who know above those who do not. This could create potential embarrassment for viewers, even for those who understand his use of irony.

As Hutcheon argues, however, “there are many situations in which it might actually be prudent and tactful to use indirect forms of address like irony.” I argue that addressing Indigenous stereotypes is one of those situations, because people are often unaware of, and unwilling to discuss, the inherent racism in them. Dwanna L. Robertson (Muscogee) argues that

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25 Ibid.


28 Ibid., 15.
“racism against American Indians has been normalized and institutionally legitimized, thereby rendering it invisible.”29 Racist actions such as “playing Indian” at Halloween or using distorted caricatures of Indigenous peoples as mascots are not recognized as racist.30 Robertson further argues that people are usually resistant and unsympathetic to anyone trying to reveal and change the legitimized racism directed at Indigenous peoples.31 By indirectly bringing up this issue through his use of irony, however, Deal buys time to make the racism against Indigenous peoples visible, and shows audiences their complicity in it. I argue that this move is necessary for truly addressing the prevalence of misconceptions of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, by tempering his irony with humor, he laughs with people, not at them.

**Contextualizing Gregg Deal’s Use of Humor and Irony**

In addition to addressing the invisibility of racism against Indigenous peoples, Deal also faces another challenge: to gain visibility for his work in the mainstream art world. Deal’s strategies to present himself and his art, to be seen, involve negotiating the general lack of recognition given to contemporary Indigenous art. This lack of recognition often results from misunderstandings about what Native American art is. Art by Indigenous peoples is generally only thought to be authentic, to be real “Indian art,” if it shows little or no influence from Western European culture, if it looks like it was made in the time before contact or close to that


30 Ibid., 114-115; 123-125.

31 Ibid., 129.
While historical Indigenous artworks such as baskets and pottery might frequently find their way into museums, galleries, and collectors’ homes, contemporary Indigenous works that engage with Western visual arts traditions often have low visibility in the mainstream art scene.

While there has been some change in recent decades, Kathleen Ash-Milby and Ruth Phillips argue that the visibility, or invisibility, of contemporary Indigenous art is still an issue. There are more practicing Indigenous artists today than in the early 1990s, as well as more exhibitions of their work at larger and more eminent institutions than ever before, however these changes have been uneven. Although artists such as Brian Jungen (Dane-Zaa/Swiss) and Jeffrey Gibson (Cherokee/Choctaw) have had major solo exhibitions at mainstream art institutions, the success of a few Indigenous artists in the broader art world is not a sign that the issue of the visibility of contemporary Indigenous art has been solved. The practice of collecting and exhibiting contemporary Indigenous art remains sporadic or nonexistent at many institutions. It is this context of the limited visibility of Indigenous art in the broader art field that makes Deal’s approach to being an artist so significant, as he has found his own ways to gain an audience.

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34 Ibid., 11.

35 *Brian Jungen* toured from the Vancouver Art Gallery to New York’s New Museum in 2005 and *Jeffrey Gibson: Said the Pigeon to the Squirrel* was at New York’s National Academy Museum in 2013. This was explained on the same page that Ash-Milby and Phillips argue that the success of some artists does not mean that the issue of visibility has been solved: Ash-Milby and Phillips, “Inclusivity or Sovereignty? Native American Arts in the Gallery and the Museum Since 1992,” 36.

36 Ibid., 12.
**Liminality**

Deal’s strategies to gain visibility are related to how he presents his art and how he presents himself as an artist. Importantly, he identifies himself as a contemporary artist who happens to be Indigenous, rather than as a Native American artist specifically.37 In “No Word for Art in Our Language: Old Questions, New Paradigms,” Mithlo argues that Indigenous peoples who foreground their identity as an artist over their identity as an Indigenous person are rejecting their culture in a move that can, at its most extreme, equate to assimilation, self-colonization, and a failure to give a voice to the lived experiences of Native American populations.38 I suggest that Lucy Lippard’s argument in “All Six Legs” offers a more nuanced perspective on how Deal presents himself. Lippard describes “the best contemporary Native artists” as strategically moving about in a “liminal zone” between constricting labels often presented as mutually exclusive, such as being an Indigenous person or being an artist.39 Like Lippard, Deal argues that the labels often assigned to artists of Indigenous descent, or indeed any artists from marginalized groups, are limiting. He states

Most Native artists and in particular even women or people of color in the art world are often times pigeonholed into a place that is about their identity and not about their merit as an artist, and while I think identity is very important in sort of informing the work that you do...this idea of creating a label that immediately puts you into a niche takes away from the value that you bring as an artist and white males don’t have to go through that and so I’ve maintained that I’m Native and I’m an artist – the two are not mutually exclusive and while my subject is often decidedly Indigenous that’s more about as a contemporary artist my experience in my life...40

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37 Gregg Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.


40 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
When Deal situates himself as a contemporary artist instead of as a Native American artist, he challenges the limitations that surround the label of Native American art, rather than rejecting his culture. He presents himself as drawing on his life experiences in his art, just as any other contemporary artist does.

As a Pyramid Lake Paiute tribal member, many of Deal’s life experiences are related to his indigeneity. He says that, just like any Indigenous person, he has had to deal with a lifetime of passive aggressive and racist comments that have stemmed from popular misconceptions of Indigenous peoples. While working at the National Museum of the American Indian for a brief time after it first opened in the early 2000s, for example, a museum visitor asked Deal if he lived in a tipi – solid evidence that to some, Indigenous peoples are not considered to be a part of contemporary life. When he addresses stereotypes in his art, then, he is drawing on a lifetime of being perceived and treated according to these misperceptions.

Deal’s use of humor and irony in his art is also drawn from his life experiences, for, as he says, humor and irony are very much a part of Native culture and experience. He describes Indigenous peoples’ existence in America as ironic in itself, in that it is “a contradiction to the very narrative of what America stands for.” Even as American culture has claimed to stand for freedom and personal rights from the beginning, throughout its history the U.S. has denied Indigenous rights, killed Indigenous peoples or forced them onto reservations, and broken treaties legally protected by the Constitution. In relation to this, Deal states “Native people are really funny, and they’re funny because you have to be…there’s been so much trauma and so much loss that humor is used as a coping mechanism to try to deal with those things in a way that

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41 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.

42 Ibid.
is healthy and better than just being sad.”

He explains “to have work that sort of has that ironic edge, that sort of, you know, biting humor, I think is normal. It seems normal to me, because it’s very much a part of Native culture.”

In keeping with his strategic decision to identify as a contemporary artist rather than as a contemporary Indigenous artist, Deal argues that his use of humor and irony should not be viewed through the lens of his Indigenous identity, as something that is strictly a trickster practice. As discussed in the introduction, describing Indigenous artists who use humor and irony only within the trickster paradigm can not only take away from the agency of these artists, but also limit conversations about their art to an Indigenous context. Deal says, “if we took that trickster thing out of the vernacular, how would we define Native people? How would we define their work? By adding that bit, you’re immediately - you know just like saying a Native artist or Native arts – you’re immediately pigeonholing the concept and the conversation.”

As Deal argues, describing all Indigenous artists who use humor and irony through a trickster interpretation can limit the reception of their work, in a similar way that the term “contemporary Indigenous artist” can limit artists to a distinct category and reception.

By drawing on his experiences as an Indigenous person, but simultaneously arguing for his position as a contemporary artist, Deal positions himself in a liminal zone between two

43 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.


47 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.

48 Ibid.
options that the larger art world sees as incompatible: being a contemporary artist or being an artist whose indigeneity informs his work. Deal’s strategy of presenting himself on his own terms is more of a long-term struggle or process than something he has already achieved. In creating work that is related to Indigenous issues, his work is automatically seen as being tied to his identity, and he still contends with the ongoing exclusion of contemporary Indigenous art from mainstream art institutions. In the following chapter I will examine Deal’s use of humor and irony to attract audiences to his work and encourage them to see stereotypes in a new light, and how he makes his art visible to potential viewers through his strategic use of public space and the internet. This will pave the way for my exploration of his use of humor and irony in the space of art institutions in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 2

Getting a Seat at the Table: Gregg Deal’s Work in Public Space

Gregg Deal’s use of humor and irony to intervene in stereotypes is only productive if people see his work. I argue that Deal’s strategy of using public space to make his art visible to potential viewers, as well as his use of the virtual public space of the internet to extend his reach, is significant. The term public space has complex meanings, as I discuss. This will contextualize my examination of Deal’s uses of public space and the internet, in conjunction with humor and irony, to attract audiences for his art despite the continued limited visibility of contemporary Indigenous art in the mainstream art world. This, in turn, will serve as the framework for my analysis of specific examples of Deal’s works in public space for which he used humor and irony to address stereotypes: *The Last American Indian* and *Reconciled.*

Creating a Stage and Attracting Attention in Public Space

When public is used as an adjective, such as when discussing the public life of an individual, it often means visible, as in that it can be seen by others. It can also mean open, as in freely accessible and usable by all, such as with public libraries, baths, or squares. It is these two understandings of public, as associated with visibility and openness, that I draw on here. I use the term “space” as it is defined in relation to “place.” Place is often generally understood as

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2 Ibid.
“bounded and specific to a location.” When I use the term “public space,” then, I am referring in general to wherever people are visible to each other, and where there are no restrictions to access.

It's qualities of visibility and openness make public space valuable to artists such as Deal, who have to contend with the limited visibility of contemporary Indigenous art. Deal inserts himself into public space as a way around this issue. He describes this insertion as following the model of street art, which he explains as “taking art and putting it out in public, for public consumption, and not really asking permission…sort of spitting in the face of these institutions, these power structures, that decide who gets to belong and who doesn’t, and putting work out there that’s just simply out there…creating my own stage.”

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5 My use of the term public space as associated with visibility and openness is the understanding I draw on in the context and scope of this thesis. There is extensive scholarship and debate concerning public space, or the public sphere, and who has access to it. A key text in this area is Jürgen Habermas’ The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. In it, he describes a specifically bourgeois public sphere “as the sphere of private people come together as a public,” and where they stand as separate from government authority and engage in debate with it through “people’s public use of their reason.” Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, 27. However, in “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser argues that his conceptualization of the public sphere, which “stresses its claim to be open and accessible to all” (63), in fact excludes women and members of marginalized groups who are often not allowed the same kind of access, voice, and presence as white men of the dominant class. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Social Text, no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80. doi:10.2307/466240, 63-65, 63-65. Understandings of public space, in the context of Deal’s work, are further complicated by the fact that many of the locations where he performs or displays work are on the traditional territories of Indigenous nations.

The internet, too, is useful for creating one’s own stage. Mohawk artist Skawennati suggests that the internet is particularly useful for Indigenous artists, stating:

The World Wide Web has offered us the possibility to shape our own representations and make them known....On the Internet, we can publish for a fraction of the cost of doing so in the old media; we can instantly update what we publish in order to respond to misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and misreadings; and we can instantly propagate our message across a world-spanning network. And we don’t need to fight through any gatekeepers to do so.\(^7\)

Deal has taken advantage of the opportunities presented by the internet, using it to create and maintain a website displaying his work with links to related press, as well as to spread the word about works in progress and finished art through social media.\(^8\) Through his strategic use of public space and the internet, Deal is able to make himself visible to audiences he would not have access to if he waited for acceptance into mainstream art institutions.

Creating opportunities to be seen by people, however, does not necessarily achieve the goal of attracting peoples’ attention to one’s work. This is why Deal’s use of humor and irony in his art is so important. As I discussed in the last chapter, both are productive in terms of helping an artist to garner sustained attention, thereby giving them time to transmit messages. Humor makes difficult topics accessible, and irony takes advantage of familiar messages to buy time for communication.\(^9\) This supports my argument that discussions of Deal’s use of humor and irony

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\(^8\) Evidence of Deal’s online presence can be found through his website at [http://greggdeal.com/](http://greggdeal.com/), and through such social media accounts as [https://twitter.com/greggdeal](https://twitter.com/greggdeal), [https://www.instagram.com/greggdeal/](https://www.instagram.com/greggdeal/), [https://www.facebook.com/greggdeal](https://www.facebook.com/greggdeal), [https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart](https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart).

and of his overall strategy to reaching audiences are inseparable, because it is through both that he makes himself and his work visible despite the continued marginalization of contemporary Indigenous art. For art in which he is addressing stereotypes, this means that he can generate opportunities to transmit his own messages regarding misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, as he does in *The Last American Indian On Earth*.

**The Last American Indian On Earth**

*The Last American Indian On Earth* is a two-part work consisting of a long-term performance that took place between April 2013 and April 2014 and a video that he released in 2016. Deal originally proposed the performance to several galleries, but when his proposals were not accepted he decided to perform in public space. He performed mostly in Washington D.C. with brief forays into other cities such as New York and Santa Fe. Deal walked around on city streets and in malls, grocery stores, and other public places doing everyday activities such as shopping, sightseeing, and eating. As he did so, he wore a large headdress, a breastplate, a breechcloth, and black leggings (Fig. 2.1). As Deal says in the video, “The whole outfit’s fake.” Deal assembled it from pieces he ordered from China, and embellished it with a pair of tennis shoes he painted to look like moccasins and a black handprint he painted across his face.

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10 Gregg Deal, e-mail message to author about dates of artworks, February 10, 2018.

11 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.


He intentionally used all of these “symbols of Indianness” to turn himself into an embodiment of popular misconceptions of what Indigenous peoples are thought to look like. He wanted to see how the people who saw him would react, and he captured their reactions in photographs and on film. The video component of *The Last American Indian On Earth* contains footage of some of these reactions, interspersed with a voice-over of Deal’s analysis of the stereotypes that become evident through peoples’ responses to his appearance, his discussion of the process of the project as a whole, and the results.\(^\text{15}\) He documented peoples’ reactions with the goal of making visible the widely held, entrenched misperceptions about Indigenous peoples and how people sometimes interact with Indigenous peoples because of these misperceptions.\(^\text{16}\)

Deal was successful in this goal; during the year that he performed *The Last American Indian On Earth*, he captured on film people unequivocally demonstrating their alignment with stereotypical misunderstandings of Indigenous peoples as inferior, savage, exotic beings of the past. Deal describes *The Last American Indian On Earth* as “the wild West,” stating “People [could] say and do whatever they wanted, and people did do and say whatever they wanted.”\(^\text{17}\)

For instance, some of the people he interacted with expressed surprise that there was a “real Indian” still in existence and walking around in public, responded to his appearance with “Indian war cries,” and in general treated him disrespectfully.\(^\text{18}\) A number of the viewers treated him in a way that he describes in the video as dehumanizing. Many tried to touch the feathers on his headdress when he wasn’t looking, placed an arm around him and took a selfie without saying a


\(^\text{17}\) Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.

word to him, or asked personal questions despite the fact that they were strangers. It was as if he were an object to be touched, photographed, and investigated without regard for how he felt about anything.\textsuperscript{19}

The humorous and ironic elements in \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth} helped Deal to gain peoples’ attention and make the issue of stereotypes about Indigenous peoples more approachable. Deal intentionally embodied a stereotype by dressing in a particular way. Stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples often fascinate and excite those who believe them to be true representations. Through the enticing “symbols of Indianness” in his performance, Deal was able to attract an audience, buying himself time to refute the negative concepts that symbols such as headdresses, face paint, and breastplates are generally associated with. This makes his entire performance ironic for, as Linda Hutcheon argues, irony involves transmitting a surface message (often one that is familiar and alluring) along with a deeper message that infers an entirely different meaning.\textsuperscript{20} In this case, Deal presented himself as a stereotype, but with the intention of undermining it.

Hutcheon also points out, however, that irony depends on an interpreter picking up on and understanding the deeper message that the ironist is trying to transmit. She further argues that ironists can assist in this process through signaling the irony’s presence in some way.\textsuperscript{21} In the case of the performance part of \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth}, Deal sometimes used word signs to this end. Furthermore, these signs often added a comedic element to his performance. For instance, on Columbus Day, he stood in front of a Starbucks holding a piece of

\textsuperscript{19} Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018; Deal, \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth}, http://greggdeal.com/The-Last-American-Indian-On-Earth-1.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
cardboard that read “Native Americans Discovered Columbus” (Fig. 2.2). While this short statement may not necessarily have led viewers to realize that Deal was ironically embodying a stereotype, his pithy and humorous reversal of the widely accepted misperception that North America, and therefore Native Americans, were discovered by Columbus likely encouraged passersby to look and think twice.

Deal employed other signs, such as one reading “Thank the Creator for Johnny Depp” that he held as he stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. (Fig. 2.3). The film in which Depp played the Lone Ranger’s Native American sidekick Tonto, *The Lone Ranger*, came out the same year that Deal started the performance part of *The Last American Indian On Earth*. Deal’s statement of thanks is ironic, for Depp’s portrayal of Tonto perpetuated some of the common stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, and Deal is actually expressing ingratitude. In a later performance, *White Indian*, which I discuss in Chapter 3, Deal called attention to these misperceptions, stating in an ironic fashion that Depp is made Indian through “His inability to speak proper English, [his ability] to be stupid and witty at the same time, to occupy a canned idea of human and a canned idea of savage at the same time. He is a contradiction unto himself, the last of his lost tribe.” In other words, Depp perpetuated the harmful stereotypes of inferiority and the vanishing Indian through his portrayal of Tonto. Deal’s ironic sign expressing (in)gratitude for Depp, then, creates a connection between his own performance and derogatory stereotypes, and does so in a way that he makes humorous through his heavy irony. Between the

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popular culture reference and the comedic nature of his sign, Deal provided a way to make contemplation about misperceptions more approachable for viewers.

Given the clear lack of knowledge of Indigenous peoples that viewers often demonstrated in interactions with Deal, however, it seems likely that many of the people who saw his performance did not grasp the irony of it, in spite of his signs. This is what makes the video component of *The Last American Indian On Earth* so important: in it, Deal is able to make the irony of his performance unmistakable. When Deal first started his performance it was only documented through photographs taken by his wife and video taken by a friend. Deal says, however, “…we quickly began to realize that the video was volatile and almost completely unbelievable unless you’re looking at it with your own eyes. But with just a few seconds of video, I knew this was bigger than the photos, or even just a standalone performance piece.”25 After meeting a graduate student who was working on his M.A. in photojournalism, Deal was able to take his project to the next level. He agreed to collaborate with the student for his thesis project, and in return Deal gained access to high-end cameras and video equipment, and someone to use it all.26 The video *The Last American Indian On Earth* consists of a mixture of his early photographs and footage with that from the student. Deal strategically arranged it all with additional images and his own commentary to make it clear that his performance was ironic; he makes the ridiculousness of believing in stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, and acting on these beliefs, obvious.27


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. Deal often uses language, through text or spoken word, in conjunction with images or performance, to make the irony of his performances and works clear to viewers. This privileging of text and word to convey the layered meanings of his works raises the question of how images transmit meaning. Roland Barthes addresses this in “Rhetoric of the Image.” In it, he analyzes an advertisement that consists both of an image and text. Through his analysis, he demonstrates that images signify (or connote) various meanings that viewers can interpret in their own
The video starts with a simple presentation of the title of the piece, “THE LAST AMERICAN INDIAN ON EARTH,” which has the same alluring effect as Deal’s outfit did during his performance.²⁸ It alludes to popular stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, in particular the romanticized misconception of the vanishing Indian. The effect is heightened when early twentieth-century photographs of Indigenous people start flashing across the screen.²⁹ Deal soon breaks the spell, however, pointing out that the images were taken by Edward Curtis, who “felt he needed to document the ‘vanishing race,’” and “paid Natives to pose, often dressing them in items to perpetuate identity through costumes and headdress he deemed fit.”³⁰ In relation to this, Deal’s decision to dress to fit popular misperceptions of Indigenous peoples could be seen as a parody of Curtis’ own habit of dressing Indigenous peoples to fit stereotypes, as he repeated the method, but with the intention of dismantling rather than building on the stereotypes.

Deal goes on to argue that Curtis perpetuated stereotypes through taking the stories and images of Indigenous peoples and distorting them to fit his idea of what they should be, and that others continue that process today. He states “In truth, there are people in this world that, when confronted with our image, cannot help themselves.”³¹ As proof, the video flashes to a short clip
of a marching band being led by a girl wearing a short, sparkly gold dress meant to look like buckskin, and a fake headdress (Fig. 2.4). The incongruity between the ridiculous outfit, Curtis’ old photographs, and Deal’s serious statements provides a moment of comic relief, and the combination of all three makes it clear from the beginning that Deal is refuting popular misconceptions and misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples.

This provides context for viewers to understand the rest of the video in which, after explaining that it is based on a performance where he intentionally embodied a stereotype and documented peoples’ reactions to it, Deal provides examples of these interactions. He begins by introducing footage of such interactions with the words “when you let those cameras roll – Americans, they do not disappoint!” This is an amusing and ironic statement, given the disappointing nature of the scene that follows. In it, two women watching his performance in front of the Lincoln Memorial ask him condescending and personal questions about his physical features and his family. Through the nature of the video up to that point, where Deal made it clear that he set out to capture on film peoples’ lack of knowledge of Indigenous peoples as demonstrated by their reactions to his embodiment of a stereotype, viewers are provided with enough context that they can see the irrationality of the women’s behavior. Just in case it is not clear, Deal also provides an analysis of it, stating:

This, my friends, is what dehumanization looks like. The older woman states with great surprise that I look like any other American, the assumption being that somehow we’re not human, and she’s surprised to see an Indian up close, and that Indian is in fact a human being. She then begins to weigh and measure my features, and questioned the percentage of Indian I am as though trying to decide if I am Indian enough to matter. Her counterpart then begins to ask how I can relate to my other half if I identify as Indian, as though relating to each other as human beings is an impossibility. 

33 Ibid.
Dehumanization is certainly not a light nor easy topic, but Deal is an expert at breaking such tension through moments of levity. He follows the above statement with a light-hearted scene wherein a group of people asks him to take a picture with them. Many members of the group are wearing florescent yellow tops, and after agreeing to stand with them for the photo, Deal slyly asks “How’s it glowin’?” *The Last American Indian On Earth* is full of moments like this, where he tempers the seriousness of his analysis of how people treat him with humor. Some of it takes the form of images or short clips of him holding signs such as those discussed earlier (Fig. 2.2, Fig. 2.3), bombing a couple’s wedding photos (Fig. 2.5), or even riding through D.C. on a tiny scooter with his fake headdress waving in the wind (Fig. 2.6). As another example, Deal shows a clip of a woman insisting that he tell her his “Indian name.” When she refuses to accept his reply that it is Gregg, he supplies her with the name Walking Eagle. This conversation is only part of a longer exchange, and before explaining to viewers why he gave her this name, Deal notes that during their conversation “She’s cooing, leaning on me, and touching me – a good illustration of how Natives in general are objectified.”34 He then discloses to viewers of the video that the name is actually an old joke from the Native comedian Charlie Hill, who liked to say that “The only time an eagle walks is when it’s too full of crap to fly.”35 Moments like this balance out the serious nature of the topic of the video, the problem of the persistence of negative stereotypes and related behaviors towards Indigenous peoples, and make it more approachable for viewers. This is more effective than browbeating people into submission, as Don Kelly

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35 Ibid.
argues, in the sense that they might be willing to contemplate the issue at hand rather than shutting it out.  

Deal’s ironic reappropriation of stereotypes in his performance helped him to reach his goal of proving that there is an issue with how Indigenous people are often viewed and treated, and his balance of humor and serious analysis in the video contributed (and continues to contribute) to educating people on this issue. This is not to say, however, that the performance served only as a means for obtaining raw footage. In fact, *The Last American Indian On Earth* started to create a stir long before Deal published the video component of it. This is likely because, as mentioned earlier, Deal uses the internet to his advantage. During the course of the year that he did his performance he maintained an active presence on social media, posting clips and photos in real time along with information about where he was performing. He built up an online following, and fans even began showing up at his posted locations to watch.  

Through his perseverance with the performance over an entire year, and likely in relation to his efforts in promoting *The Last American Indian On Earth* online, Deal eventually garnered attention from the press as well. He appeared in *The Huffington Post* in September of 2013 in an article entitled “Performance Artist Explores Stereotypes In ‘The Last American Indian On Earth,’” and then in *The Washington Post* the following February in “‘Last American Indian’ finds challenges in performance art.” Both articles offer an overview of the project and some of the reactions that Deal had encountered, as well as a few photographs.  


Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.

article also provides details on his life and career. Through such publicity, Deal was able to reach a broader audience than he already had in person and through his internet activity, and thus grow his reputation and following. This, in turn, likely contributed to him receiving press attention for other public works through which he addressed the existence of Indigenous stereotypes, such as Reconciled.

Reconciled

Deal painted Reconciled on a wall in Northeast D.C. in April 2014 as part of an annual mural jam held in that area for street artists and graffiti writers (Fig. 2.7). The mural depicts an Indigenous man wearing a feather headdress, with bright red and white banners above and below his head reading “American genocide reconciled thru football.” To the left of the figure’s head, in gold lettering, are the social media hashtags “#CHANGETHENAME; #NOTYOURMASCOT; #CHANGETHEMASCOT; #HONORTHETREATIES.”

While Reconciled is a stationary painting, several parallels can be drawn between it and The Last American Indian On Earth. Just as he did in the latter work, Deal placed the stereotypical image of an Indigenous person wearing a headdress in public space to gain peoples’ attention, and simultaneously refute common stereotypes of Indigenous peoples through the


words he used to frame the image. With *The Last American Indian On Earth* this framing took place through the verbal component of the video, while Deal actually wrote the words on the mural in the case of *Reconciled*. However, the pieces are similar in that Deal’s words make the irony of the respective pieces clear. In *Reconciled*, the bold words “American genocide reconciled thru football” cannot be missed, and, together with the hashtags, signal that there is more to the painting than just the enticing image of a man in a headdress.

With the banners and the hashtags, Deal tied the mural to the debate over the name of D.C.’s football team, the Redskins, in an ironic, darkly humorous way. In particular, he was challenging the fact that many in favor of the team continuing to use this name argue that it honors Indigenous peoples, and was voicing his support of the opposing side that wants the name and the mascot changed. He says, “obviously American genocide…the mass killing of Indigenous people in the 14, 15, 16, 17, and 1800s, is not funny, but the idea of that somehow being reconciled through men in tights tackling each other is funny, because it’s just completely ludicrous.” 41 Through his use of irony and humor, Deal used the attention he drew from the stereotypical image of a Native man in a headdress to communicate that the name of D.C.’s football team is not an honor, and should be changed.

While *Reconciled* may seem to be mostly about campaigning against the name of the football team, it also undermines common stereotypes of Indigenous peoples. In particular, it intervenes in the misconceptions that they have died out, or that those who are left do not live modern lives. As Deal says, “Americans are so far removed from their understanding of what an Indigenous person is, to the degree that most Americans believe that Natives are dead, that they don’t exist anymore, that we are in an uphill battle of trying to reclaim something that people

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41 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
don’t even believe we exist to reclaim.” By tying his mural to a contemporary and ongoing debate that Indigenous peoples are heavily involved in through the hashtags #CHANGETHENAME, #NOTYOURMASCOT, and #CHANGETHEMASCOT, Deal showed that they are still around today to fight for their own representation and perspectives. Deal further demonstrated this through his use of the hashtag #HONORTHETREATIES, which connected his mural with the group Honor the Treaties, who were dedicated to supporting artists addressing a broad spectrum of Indigenous issues and helped to pay for some of Deal’s materials for the mural. Moreover, simply through using social media hashtags that demonstrated the presence of Indigenous voices online, Deal made it clear that Indigenous peoples are fully engaged in contemporary society and contemporary technology.

Furthermore, just as with The Last American Indian On Earth, Deal’s use of social media gained additional attention for Reconciled beyond that he received from passersby. Some of the publicity he received, however, was likely related to the fact that he had already started to make a name for himself with The Last American Indian On Earth. This is evidenced by an article in Indian Country Today that was published the day after Deal painted Reconciled. The article “What Does Football Have to Do With Genocide? In Washington, DC: Plenty,” was an interview with Deal regarding the relationship between Deal’s work and the debate over the Redskins. Deal was introduced to readers as an artist and activist who worked in public, such as in his performance The Last American Indian On Earth. His work in public space was clearly,

42 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.


therefore, already starting to pay off in terms of being able to grow and continue building on his reputation. Deal attracted further media attention through his Twitter activity in relation to \textit{Reconciled}, which landed him on “Beyond 140,” “an interview series…where we seek out intriguing tweets and ask the author to tell us what they can’t say in 140 characters.”\textsuperscript{45} This was done on The Stream Official Blog, which was run through the news network Aljazeera America.\textsuperscript{46} As with \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth}, the fact that Deal created \textit{Reconciled} in public space and extended his reach through the internet allowed him to reach viewers and make a name for himself and his art, regardless of the continued exclusion of contemporary Indigenous art from mainstream art institutions.

\textbf{Getting a Seat at the Table}

Deal might not have been able to cultivate his reputation as a contemporary artist if he had decided to forgo doing \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth} after being rejected from multiple galleries, or if he had not done public projects such as \textit{Reconciled}. He notes that artists of color who have not been able to “get a seat at the table” often counter such rejection through creating their own spaces, and that that is what makes working in public space so important to him; it allows him to “get those things out that I would not otherwise have a venue to get out.”\textsuperscript{47}

\texttt{washington-dc-plenty/}


\textsuperscript{47} Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
He also points out that doing so, in turn, can help one to get an invitation to the table through creating a name for oneself. This has certainly been the case for Deal, who now performs and exhibits in art institutions as well as in public, and for whom *The Last American Indian On Earth* and *Reconciled* are just two works among many that have received press attention. From a discussion of his work in public spaces, I move to discussion of his work in a public institution. While the focus of this chapter was his work in public space, the next will be dedicated to an examination of Deal’s work at the Denver Art Museum.

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48 Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
CHAPTER 3

Authority and Weight: Gregg Deal’s work in Museum Space

During his time as the Native Arts Artist-in-Residence at the Denver Art Museum (DAM), Gregg Deal completed several works that address Indigenous stereotypes, using strategies of humor and irony. These include his painting *Defiant To Your Gods* and the performances *White Indian* and *Ethnographic Zoo*.¹ I argue in this chapter that the qualities of the museum space, where visitors enter with specific expectations, make it an important venue for Deal in his efforts to intervene in common misperceptions of Indigenous peoples. I will first contextualize Deal’s work at the DAM by examining what separates museums from public space. I then provide a brief overview of the relationship between museums and Indigenous (mis)representation in the past and the present, leading to my discussion of *Defiant To Your Gods*, *White Indian*, and *Ethnographic Zoo*.

**Museum Space as Separate from Public Space**

In Chapter 2 I discussed public space as that which is freely accessible, where people can see and be seen. The space of public museums differs from this understanding of public space in important ways. Museums are open to the public and offer a space shared by the general public in a way that people do not share the private space of their homes. Museums thus seem to meet the definition of public space as associated with openness and visibility that I have used up to this point. However, in the context of the accessibility of space to people who want to use it to

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display art, museums would not be considered freely accessible. There is a process of
gatekeeping; museum boards and curatorial staff make decisions about who is represented in a
museum and who is not. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the exclusionary nature
of many mainstream art institutions has meant that contemporary Indigenous artists in particular
experience limited visibility in these spaces. In relation to my discussion of Deal’s work, then,
art museum space is not the same as the open public space where he made himself and *The Last
American Indian On Earth* and *Reconciled* visible.

In another distinction between public space and museum space, relevant to Deal’s work,
people approach museums with specific expectations they do not have for public space in
general. Carol Duncan argues in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, “museum space
is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in
this case, for contemplation and learning.”

Museum visitors expect a didactic experience, that
while inside they will learn from what is presented, and that their minds will be expanded as a
result. Duncan attributes this expectation to the fact that museums in general are understood to
be purveyors of objective knowledge. This, she argues, is a result of museums being considered
to belong to the “realm of secular knowledge” as opposed to religious knowledge in a dichotomy
that arose from Enlightenment thinking’s undermining of church power and influence. Secular
knowledge is understood to be verifiable, rational, and objective, and therefore authoritative.
Whether or not this is true, since museums are considered to be on the secular side of the
dichotomy, they are assumed to present unquestionable truths for the edification of those who

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3 Ibid., 10-12.
enter their doors. To contextualize my analysis of the impact on viewers, to see Deal’s work in museum rather than public space, I will discuss the relationship between this understanding of museums as authoritative spaces of objective learning and popular perceptions of Indigenous peoples.

**Indigenous Peoples and Museums**

Through their status as educational authorities, museums have long contributed to misconceptions of Indigenous peoples in North America. In *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices*, Karen Coody Cooper (Cherokee) writes “Museums, along with other venerable institutions...have long engaged in defining American Indians. Too often the information, presented to the public as scholarly fact, has instead been self-serving, biased, inaccurate, and/or incomplete.” She explains how, up until the late twentieth century, these institutions played a major role in nurturing a general public understanding of Indigenous peoples as inferior, as part of nature, and as having mostly or

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4 Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 7-8. Duncan argues that museums are perceived as sites of objective knowledge, but in fact the information they present is highly mediated. She questions the sharp divide between secular and religious knowledge, and museums’ claim to present unquestionable truths as strictly secular sites. She writes, “Once we question our Enlightenment assumptions about the sharp separation between religious and secular experience – that the one is rooted in belief while the other is based in lucid and objective rationality – we may begin to glimpse the hidden – perhaps the better word is disguised – ritual content of secular ceremonies” (8). This is in reference to her argument that art museums are ritual sites in that they involve a special kind of attention, performance, and purpose. They arrange their space and their objects to transform visitors by guiding them through a narrative in a particular order and fashion. Duncan further argues that this narrative does not include everybody. She writes: “Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual – those who are most able to respond to its various cues – are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms. It is precisely for this reason that museums and museum practices can become objects of fierce struggle and impassioned debate. What we see and do not see in art museums – and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it – is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity” (8-9). Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 8; Ibid, 10-13; Ibid., 8-9.

completely disappeared after they were removed from their homelands to make way for settlers.\textsuperscript{6} Natural history museums perpetuated these misunderstandings through exhibitions that equated Indigenous peoples with the flora and fauna they also had on display, and that failed to make a connection between past and present ways of life for Native Americans.\textsuperscript{7} Similar problems could be found in most history museums, which usually sought to tell a one-sided story of heroism on the part of national or local heroes, with the result that Indigenous peoples were often either left out of the story or positioned as villains who attempted to impede advancement. Then, after a final appearance in a sanitized version of how Indigenous peoples were removed from their lands and sent away, they were not usually mentioned in the museum narrative again.\textsuperscript{8} In art museums, most images of Indigenous peoples were made by non-Indigenous artists, and perpetuated stereotypes of savagery, exoticism, and disappearance through the way that the artists portrayed their Indigenous subjects.\textsuperscript{9}

However, museum exhibition practices in relation to Indigenous peoples have undergone significant shifts in recent decades. For instance, many museums now make collaboration with Indigenous communities and museum professionals an essential element of their curatorial practice, to center Indigenous voices on questions of Indigenous representation in museum space. This involves opening and maintaining lines of communication between museums and communities, sharing decision making power over the form and content of exhibitions, and ensuring that museum displays reflect Indigenous voices and perspectives. This move towards collaborative practices has been the result of a number of complex factors including the attention


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
finally given to Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, self-representation, and respect during the civil rights era, the increasing number of Indigenous museum professionals and scholars, and the growing trend in museums and their related academic fields towards recognizing multiple histories and perspectives beyond those of the West. As Ruth Phillips writes in *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, we seem to be entering into a second museum age where museums, rather than just being educational sites that focus on “the triumph of the West,” are starting to embrace “local histories, unknown historical actors, evocations of personal memory and experience, and multiple perspectives on major historical events.”

The process of decolonizing museums to make them spaces of accurate and equitable representation for Indigenous peoples is ongoing, and occurs at different rates in different institutions. Kathleen Ash-Milby and Ruth Phillips point out that contemporary Indigenous art is still absent from many mainstream art institutions. Furthermore, the presence of contemporary Indigenous art in a space does not automatically mean that the institution in question is concerned about accurate and equitable representation for Indigenous peoples. However, in museums that do actively try to decolonize themselves, their position as educational authorities can now be advantageous to Indigenous peoples rather than detrimental. For instance, in

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museums where Indigenous artists, curators, and communities have an authoritative voice in curatorial decisions, they can intervene in stereotypes by presenting their own voices on their histories, cultures, and contemporary lives, and their presentations are given weight and attention through their presence in a space where people expect to receive accurate educational information.

Ash-Milby and Phillips discuss several museums that do work to include Indigenous art in meaningful ways. The DAM is one of them. Ash-Milby and Phillips commend them for collecting contemporary Indigenous art, incorporating it in their exhibition programming, and generally working towards including it in long-term ways. One way that the DAM has done so is through their Native Arts Artist-in-Residence Program. The program began in 2012; it “showcases and celebrates the work of contemporary native artists, highlighting the ongoing creativity and artistic diversity of the American Indian community with an aim towards engaging museum visitors through each artist’s creative processes.” Deal became a Native Arts Artist-in-Residence at the DAM through an invitation, which I suggest he received as a result of making a name for himself through his public art. Through his use of humor and irony to engage museum visitors in his painting *Defiant To Your Gods*, as well as his performances *White Indian* and *Ethnographic Zoo*, Deal used his residency to address misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, and his effort was given added weight and authority by the venue, at the DAM, in museum space.

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15 Gregg Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
Defiant To Your Gods

*Defiant To Your Gods* is an 8 foot by 12 foot acrylic painting that covers three wood panels (Fig. 3.1).\(^{16}\) Deal finished it early in his residency and it hung in the DAM’s American Indian gallery in the North Building until late 2017.\(^{17}\) The background of the painting is solid white, aside from a grey strip along the bottom edge, with the effect that the colorful symbols taking up three-quarters of the image stand out sharply against the plain surface. These symbols consist of representations of Indigenous peoples from popular culture, derived from movies, cartoons, sports team logos, and advertisements. In the top left corner of the work, the top half of the chief from Disney’s *Peter Pan* floats next to a sign reading “Wigwam Beauty Shoppe: try our scalp treatment.” Further down Pocahontas, hair blowing in the wind, is partially overlapped by Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians. The Reskins logo can be seen at the far right of the painting, partially covering a tootsie roll pop wrapper portraying a Native figure in a headdress aiming a bow with a star-tipped arrow. These and many other recognizable images fill up much of the space of Deal’s painting, with accompanying words scattered throughout reading “Wagon Burner,” “Pocahottie,” “Redskins,” and “You don’t look Indian enough.” Standing in front of it all in the center of the work, her hands raised to either side of her, stands a smiling girl in a white t-shirt.

The relationship between this work and stereotypes is clear; all of the images and words are connected to misperceptions of Indigenous peoples as inferior, savage, exotic, and from the

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\(^{16}\) Gregg Deal, Instagram post about receiving *Defiant To Your Gods* back from the DAM, and giving some information about the piece itself, *Instagram*, posted December 27, 2017, accessed March 27, 2018, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BdOIXFfDrUe/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BdOIXFfDrUe/).

\(^{17}\) Deal, e-mail message to author about dates of artworks, February 10, 2018; Erin Cousins, “Native Arts Summer Residency Program Kicks Off with Gregg Deal,” *Denver Art Museum*, May 5, 2017, accessed March 27, 2018, [https://denverartmuseum.org/article/native-arts-summer-residency-program-kicks-gregg-deal](https://denverartmuseum.org/article/native-arts-summer-residency-program-kicks-gregg-deal); [https://www.instagram.com/p/BdOIXFfDrUe/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BdOIXFfDrUe/); I also saw the work on view at its location when I visited the DAM on September 9, 2017.
past. For example, the chief in *Peter Pan* only communicates through sign language and broken English, as if he is incapable of more sophisticated speech. The references to “scalp treatments” and wagon burning allude to understandings of Indigenous peoples as blood-thirsty, violent beings who attacked settlers moving west by covered wagon and removed the scalps of their enemies. The facial expressions of the mascots and cartoon figures are exaggerated and contorted. The Pocahontas figure in conjunction with the word “Pocahottie” calls to mind how scantily clad and sexualized she is in the Disney movie. The overall lack of any contemporary technology or attire suggests that Indigenous peoples are not a part of contemporary existence. Furthermore, the diversity of sources that this plethora of images come from, in combination with the statement “You don’t look Indian enough,” mirror the ubiquity of misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples in the popular imaginary as well as expectations that they must fit these stereotypes if they are to be recognized as Indigenous.

As in many of Deal’s art pieces, it is the stereotypes that serve as the foundation for the irony in this work. The images that make up *Defiant To Your Gods* serve as the familiar messages that draw viewers’ interest; they bring out the fascination often felt by people in relation to images of Indigenous peoples, and also interest through their connection with well-known movies, cartoons, or sports teams. Furthermore, through the large scale of the work and the contrast between these symbols and the stark background, these images can be recognized at a distance. In this way, Deal’s parodic repetition of these images can draw sustained attention for the work by attracting passersby, thus buying him time to transmit the ironic message that gives the images their critical edge.

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The irony in *Defiant To Your Gods*, however, may not be immediately apparent to the average viewer. For instance, as the title of the work suggests, the girl in the middle of the painting, who is Deal’s daughter, is standing in defiance of the images surrounding her. Viewers would not know the title, however, and at first glance it is therefore not immediately clear what the relationship is between her and the symbols. Viewers might wonder if her arms are raised in a gesture of confusion, or perhaps in an indifferent shrug. She could be interpreted as holding the images up, or condoning them with her smile. Alternatively, the symbols could be interpreted as crushing her from above, or as suspended in the moment before she lets them fall to the floor.

For those not accustomed to understanding stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples as harmful misrepresentations, the painting alone might not strongly enough signal the presence of irony. Viewing the painting alone, it might be difficult for viewers to pick up on the fact that Deal’s intent is to undermine the stereotypes by depicting the girl’s defiance.

It is the painting’s wall label that makes the irony clear. Along with providing museum patrons with the artist’s name, tribe, and date of birth, as well as the title of the work, the year it was completed, and the medium, it also supplied a short statement about the painting. It read:

> Created during a Denver Art Museum Native Arts Artists-in-Residence program, this painting shows a young native girl standing defiantly amid stereotypes from American popular culture. ‘These images are still thrust upon us, still hurt our communities, and affect the way our children view themselves. There is an effort to redefine these things, fight and take control of our own images and Indigenous identity,’ says artist Gregg Deal.\(^{19}\)

The title and the wall label text came together with the painting to make it clear that Deal and his daughter are opposed to the stereotypes represented in the work. Had he created this image in public space, where it would not have been supported with an informative label, there is a higher chance that the irony would have been missed or misinterpreted. In the context of an art museum,

\(^{19}\) Object label, *Defiant To Your Gods*, Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO.
however, where patrons expect to contemplate objects and learn, works of art are often accompanied by didactic material. Deal’s subversion of stereotypes through irony in Defiant To Your Gods is given more weight through its presence within the authoritative context of a museum, and the standard museum practice of providing text labels. In this case, the label makes it unequivocally clear that stereotypes of Indigenous peoples like the ones in the painting are false and harmful, and that the girl’s smile is a rebellious one; she is not accepting the misrepresentations or shrugging in indifference, but rather standing confidently opposed to them.

White Indian

Deal also did two performance pieces during his residency at the DAM: White Indian and Ethnographic Zoo. Through them he addressed stereotypes and turned peoples’ expectation to learn in museum space to good advantage. While he used humor and irony in both to draw attention to the inaccuracies and harmful nature of Indigenous stereotypes, they differed significantly in their execution. White Indian, a three-part piece presented to DAM patrons, involved spoken word accompanied by projected images or carefully planned out actions.20 Ethnographic Zoo, on the other hand, took place in front of the museum, and in it Deal relied only on props and costuming to make his point to random passersby, there was no verbal component or set audience.21


Deal performed *White Indian* as part of one of the DAM’s Untitled Final Friday evening events.\(^{22}\) This was the concluding work of his residency at the museum, and was well attended.\(^{23}\) *White Indian* was in three parts, *The White Indian, Indian POP!*, and *Indian Pedigree*, each taking place in a different location in the DAM. *The White Indian* was both ironic and humorous, and through it Deal used parody in his presentation of what he calls “the American sub-culture of White Indians.”\(^{24}\) He projected a series of images on a screen while standing in front of it, reading aloud a text he had written for the occasion (Fig. 3.2). Many of the images were of white men playing Indigenous characters in movies or advertisements, or white men who took on supposedly Indigenous characteristics through their interactions with Indigenous peoples. His text, a form of voice-over, was his critical description of the role each actor played.

In his monologue, Deal labeled Johnny Depp in the role of Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* as “The Quirky and Probably Crazy White Indian,” describing Depp as

> the white Indian so crazy that no one wants him. He says incredible insightful things to no one, wears dead animals on his head and paints himself just enough to hide the pink of his skin. But this isn’t what makes him Indian, no. His inability to speak proper English, [his ability] to be stupid and witty at the same time, to occupy a canned idea of human and a canned idea of savage at the same time. He is a contradiction unto himself, the last of his lost tribe.\(^{25}\)

He characterized Daniel Day-Lewis in *The Last of the Mohicans* as

> The fervent self-assured white Indian: he knows that he is a majestic being. He knows you are looking at him. He knows that his intensity helps him look Indianer than you. He

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\(^{22}\) Untitled is a monthly creative event that the DAM has been holding in the evenings on the final Friday of certain months for 10 seasons – Lauren Hegge, “A New Year! A New Untitled!: Get the Scoop on the 2018 Lineup,” *Denver Art Museum*, January 11, 2018, accessed March 27, 2018, [https://denverartmuseum.org/article/new-year-new-untitled](https://denverartmuseum.org/article/new-year-new-untitled); The Last American Indian On Earth’s facebook page, accessed March 27, 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart/](https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart/).

\(^{23}\) The Last American Indian On Earth’s facebook page, accessed March 27, 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart/](https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart/).

\(^{24}\) The Last American Indian On Earth’s Facebook page, [https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart/](https://www.facebook.com/greggdealart/).

is the best of both worlds. He is white and Indian at the same time. He will give you intense romance, and savagery and hair in your mouth while trying to make out with you like the cover of any Indian/white woman’s romance novel could ever give you. He [gives] amazing back rubs, and [tells] you stories of fighting other Indians leaving the battle unscathed because he is perfect.26

Most of Deal’s performance consisted of assessments like these, where he labeled various “White Indians” as belonging to particular categories, and elaborated on these categories through his descriptions of the way the characters enacted them.

Deal provided the humor and irony for The White Indian through his verbal descriptions and how he framed them, in contrast to his performance in The Last American Indian On Earth, where he provided it through his attire. This was possible because the performance took place in a museum, a learning context where visitors come to be educated and would be more likely to listen to Deal’s entire spoken word component than random people passing him on a street would be. In The White Indian, when Deal said that Depp was “made Indian” through such qualities as his poor ability to speak English, his simultaneous wittiness, craziness, and stupidity, and his status as the last member of his lost tribe, or that Day-Lewis is “Indianer” than you because he is as intense a lover as he is a savage fighter, he uses parody through his descriptions made critical by an ironic edge. He helped to prevent misinterpretations of this irony by signaling its presence through how he began his performance. He started with the words:

Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to WHITE INDIAN! Welcome to the amazing, mystical, all knowing, enlightened, and lightened great white savior. He’s savage, yet civilized. He’s one with the earth, but makes a good living, he understandings sweat lodges, and yet understands nothing! This man is a chosen man, chosen to walk among you, to trample among us, unknowing, unrealized, unrecognized and understated. He exists humbly, suffers worse than any Indian, and knows what being an Indian takes more

than any Indian that was ever Indian in the history of Indians.\(^{27}\)

With these words, Deal set up the audience to interpret *The White Indian* as ironic and humorous as well. With his opening phrase of “Ladies and Gentleman” and his description of the “White Indian” as amazing, mystical, and all knowing, Deal’s performance took on the feel of a circus side-show act, as if he were a huckster, luring people into a tent to see some bizarre, magical creature that everyone knows is not real: in this case, a White Indian. In this way, Deal encouraged viewers not to take the White Indian characters he described seriously, but rather to see them as laughable fabrications. This interpretation was further encouraged by Deal’s intentionally absurd conclusion to his opening statement, the assertion that the White Indian “knows what being an Indian takes more than any Indian that was ever Indian in the history of Indians.”\(^{28}\) As he says:

> when you step away from sort of the offense that is taking a non-Indian and taking all the attributes of being Native and placing it above the actual Native…[it] ultimately sort of demeans the Native, you know, and their existence, because you’re basically saying ‘yeah it’s cool that you can do these things, but it would be cooler if a white man could do these things because we do it better.’ And when you get away from the offence of the stereotype and sort of the significant racist underlinings of that, it’s really weird, and its really silly and kind of strange, and I think exploiting that is important, because…[it can] serve as an opportunity to discuss the power structures and the social injustices that come through things like film and literature, and photography…\(^{29}\)

The second part of Deal’s three-part performance, *Indian POP!*, was significantly less comedic. His focus was on images of Indigenous peoples in popular culture in general, and how they inform not only non-Indigenous perspectives on what Indigenous peoples are supposedly like, but also Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on themselves. As in *The White Indian*, Deal used


\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
images in conjunction with his own spoken words for *Indian POP!*, which were projected onto a wall behind him as he spoke (Fig. 3.3). This time, however, he discussed and showed images of Indigenous peoples not just from movies, but also from on cigarette packages, baking goods, sports equipment, and even Halloween costumes. His accompanying words were for the most part serious, highlighting the tension between actual Indigenous realities and the expectations foisted on Indigenous peoples by popular culture. For instance, he said “While we journey our human lives, we must navigate the land mines that hold shadows of who [we] are expected to be, not who we actually are.”\(^{30}\) There is no humor or underlying subversive message here; through his land mine metaphor, Deal very clearly communicated that society’s expectations can be destructive to Indigenous peoples’ identities.

The third act of Deal’s performance, *Indian Pedigree*, was about colonial policies of blood quantum and was entirely serious. These policies decree that individuals can only identify as Native American for legal and governmental purposes if they possess a specific amount of Native ancestry and have a certificate degree of Indian blood (CDIB) that has been authenticated both by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and their tribe.\(^{31}\) Blood quantum is, in Deal’s words “how Indigenous people are counted and measured in their Indianness.”\(^{32}\) For *Indian Pedigree* Deal once again read out loud from a written text, but rather than showing a series of images, he had his arm tattooed with his tribal ID number and the fractions making up his blood quantum. In other words, numbers proving his enrollment in a tribe and showing the amount of Native blood


running in his veins (Fig. 3.4). As this occurred, he continued to read his text. He described related critical issues, such as the sub-human status of Indigenous peoples in the eyes of the government as indicated by them maintaining that they have the power to determine someone’s worth and right to be Indigenous through their own methods, such as keeping track of blood quantum. Deal did not joke about these issues, or present them through irony as in many of his other works. Instead, he let some of his anger and frustration at the way Indigenous people are treated rise to the surface, as in such statements as “in this country, nothing is more official, and more regulated in pedigree than Horses. Dogs. And Indians.”

As White Indian progressed through its three phases, Deal replaced his indirect humor and irony with straightforward confrontation of how Indigenous peoples are perceived, expected to act, and valued. This could be seen as a risky move for, as Don Kelly argues, serious approaches to difficult topics can sometimes cause people to shut out what is being said and walk away. However, Deal’s observers were not passersby catching a brief glimpse of his performance while they were on their way to the grocery store. The viewers had chosen to attend an event where Deal was the main focus. He did not need to use irony to capture their attention or humor to sustain it, he already had it. The White Indian did serve as a humorous and approachable introduction to Deal’s theme for the evening, the prevalence of misconceptions of Indigenous peoples, and the dehumanizing, destructive consequences of this. Having an audience

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that expected to be educated and have their minds expanded because they were at a museum, however, allowed Deal to move past humor and irony without as great a fear of losing his audience.

**Ethnographic Zoo**

*Ethnographic Zoo* was a four-hour performance piece. Deal staged the performance on the plaza in front of the DAM, thus performing in a liminal, in-between zone not belonging entirely either to public or museum space (Fig. 3.5). The plaza was public in that it was a space that was open to anyone, and within which individuals would be visible to each other. However, Deal performed only a short distance from the DAM’s main entrance, and his performance was endorsed and advertised by the DAM because he was their Native Arts Artist-in-Residence (Fig. 3.6). He was therefore associated with museum space, and for those passing through the plaza who recognized the connection between him and the DAM, his work likely would have been understood simply as an outdoor exhibit no less educational or worthy of contemplation than those inside the museum’s walls. By performing in this liminal space, Deal was able to reach more potential viewers than just those who entered the DAM, but his performance was likely often also accorded the same authority it would have had within the museum’s walls.

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38 The official page from the DAM providing information ahead of this event is no longer accessible on their website, but Deal posted their promotional photograph for the event on his Instagram: Gregg Deal, post about *Ethnographic Zoo, Instagram*, posted November 27, 2018, accessed March 27, 2018, [https://www.instagram.com/p/-mD-CLf7p/?taken-by=greggdeal](https://www.instagram.com/p/-mD-CLf7p/?taken-by=greggdeal).
For the performance, Deal wore his *The Last American Indian On Earth* outfit, complete with breast plate, breech cloth, leggings, and headdress that were mostly made in China.\(^{39}\)

Instead of walking around in public space doing such activities as shopping and sightseeing as he had in D.C., however, he was stationary. Deal sat in a chair within a square-shaped area enclosed by stanchions, passing the time by watching a movie or listening to music.\(^{40}\)

Significantly, the movie he watched was *Dances with Wolves* and the music he listened to was the soundtrack from *Pocahontas*, two popular films that perpetuate Indigenous stereotypes.\(^{41}\)

Furthermore, plain black-and-white signs at each corner of his enclosure read “Do Not Feed The Stereotype,” or “Do Not Tease The Stereotype” (Fig. 3.5, Fig. 3.7). Finally, a larger sign posted at one corner of the performance area described Deal as an Indigenous Stereotype, or *Indianus Americanus*, from “In and around American and/or Western Culture” (Fig. 3.8). The sign showed a picture of Deal dressed in the same attire as for the performance and smiling and waving at viewers, while a section of text taking up the bottom half of the sign read:

The romanticized concept of what is and is not authentically ‘Indian’ has been around since first contact (1492). Popular culture informs this notion of identity to such a degree that Westerners are quick to use this authority to tell Indigenous people when they fail to measure up. In this Human Zoo, we see the stereotype, the ultimate image of what Western Culture believes is truly representative of Indigenous people. He is defined firstly by his majestic headdress, and then his other Indian embellishments. The viewers of this display are not interested in where these things originate, only that they exist in a consumable and exotic state. Unfortunately, Stereotype starts to understand that he must consider the meaning of his existence amid the changing tide of cultural awareness. And while the voyeuristic aspects of the zoo are commonplace in film, literature, and advertising, we now have the rare opportunity to see Stereotype in his natural habitat,


\(^{40}\) Ibid.

openly contemplating his existence.\footnote{Gregg Deal, post about \textit{Ethnographic Zoo}, \textit{Instagram}, posted November 24, 2015, accessed March 27, 2018, \url{https://www.instagram.com/p/-e2rN1Jf3M/?taken-by=g Gregg Deal}.}

Through the signs stationed around his enclosure, Deal’s performance replicated zoos, where text panels are placed outside cages to educate viewers about their inhabitants and request that they not feed or tease the animals. In this case the animal in the cage was Deal, performing as a living Indigenous Stereotype.

As with \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth}, Deal’s use of “symbols of Indianness” in his attire for \textit{Ethnographic Zoo} attracted people and thus served as the foundation for the irony of his performance, the surface meaning to be refuted by his underlying message. In \textit{The Last American Indian On Earth}, however, the goal had been to capture peoples’ reactions to him on film, so that they could later become part of Deal’s video. When people became interested in Deal’s appearance and came closer to investigate, they usually still did not pick up on the irony of what he was doing. With \textit{Ethnographic Zoo}, however, individuals who felt compelled to examine Deal more closely were confronted with the signs around him, which strongly indicated the presence of irony in his performance. Even if viewers did not stop to read the biggest of the signs, which laid out the fact that Western culture imposes stereotypes onto Indigenous peoples and thus expects them to look and act a certain way, the signs reading “Do Not Feed The Stereotype” and “Do Not Tease The Stereotype” made it clear that there was irony in \textit{Ethnographic Zoo}. By referring to him as a stereotype, as he sat dressed in “symbols of Indianness” and watching or listening to music from films that have helped to inform popular misconceptions of Indigenous peoples, these signs made his underlying message of disapproval for these things apparent.
As with *Defiant To Your Gods*, then, the museum convention of providing signage for whatever is on display facilitated viewers of Deal’s work in picking up on and correctly interpreting the irony; that is not the only thing they did, however. Some viewers could have found the incongruity of seeing a human being on display like an animal at the zoo, complete with a parody of standard zoo informational panels, humorous. Some of these people, then, might have been more willing to contemplate the issues Deal highlighted and made clear through the signage for his performance, such as the perpetuation of misconceptions of Indigenous peoples through literature, advertising, and film.

There was a deeper and darker layer of meaning to the connection between Deal’s performance and zoos, however. In a post on the DAM’s website, he makes it clear that he was alluding to actual Ethnographic Zoos, or Human Zoos – exhibitions of non-Western peoples that became popular in the nineteenth century. He states:

> It was during this time that tribal people from Africa, the Philippines, the Americas, and other exotic places were put on display, museumized, studied, and gawked at. The level of sub-humanity implied with such curation perpetuates the ‘othering’ of these brown people, rendering them something that cannot exist in western ‘civilized’ society. Something that is different, scary, and savage. Something that still exists, even if only embedded into the fabric of dominant culture…Our Indianness is based on the American anachronism of what we should be, not what we are. It’s about feathers, buckskin, long hair and red tinted brown skin...As a result, we are still fetishized, exoticized, studied, and gawked at. The only difference is that we are no longer on display in our museums, but instead on your television, on the silver screen, in literature and advertising.”

On a deeper level, then, Deal’s performance was not just about using irony to point out that popular understandings of Indigenous peoples are actually misconceptions, but also to point out

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that peoples’ belief in, fascination with, and application of these stereotypes to Indigenous peoples is dehumanizing. He drove this point home by comparing the way people relate to and understand Indigenous peoples today to the way they did when Indigenous peoples were placed in Human Zoos in the past.

There were multiple levels on which people could engage with *Ethnographic Zoo*, whether they simply read the signs saying “Do Not Feed the Stereotype” or “Do Not Tease The Stereotype,” read the entire informational panel that highlighted the pervasiveness and harmfulness of Indigenous stereotypes, made the connection between Deal’s performance and actual Human Zoos on their own, or were interested in learning more about the performance and sought out his blog entry on the DAM’s website. The irony of the performance was made apparent on all of these levels through Deal’s written words, just as was the case with his quote on the label for *Defiant To Your Gods*, and his spoken component in *White Indian*. In all three cases, the fact that the works were created, exhibited, or performed within (or in association) with museum space meant that viewers were more likely to see his painting or performances as a learning opportunity, and were therefore more willing to invest time in listening to or reading the words through which he refuted the stereotypes being presented. These messages were also given more weight through the authority often associated with museum space. As these examples from Deal’s work during his residency at the DAM show, the qualities of museum space make it valuable for artists seeking to address important issues through their art.
CONCLUSION

In Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness: A Resource Guide, Deborah Doxtator asks “How have attitudes towards Indian people changed? Do people still carry in their minds the idea, even if it goes unsaid, that Indian culture is ‘primitive’ and incapable of survival in a twentieth century environment? Are some people still looking for the disappearing Indian?”1 As Gregg Deal demonstrates in his work, and as I have discussed here, misconceptions of Indigenous peoples are still an issue today. These stereotypes are not easily dispelled. As Nancy Mithlo points out, attempts at intervening in stereotypical images and understandings of Indigenous peoples by increasing the amount of accurate information on Indigenous peoples that is available to the public, or by eradicating the stereotypical images, have not been effective.2 Furthermore, as Dwanna L. Robertson argues, people in general are often unwilling to listen to anyone pointing out that stereotypes of Indigenous peoples are racist and untrue, because these stereotypes have become so ingrained.3 It makes sense, then, that Mithlo advocates for the reappropriation of stereotypes as opposed to more direct methods of addressing them.4


4 Mithlo, “A Realist View of Image Politics: Reclamation of the ‘Every Indian,’” 121, 123.
As I have shown, Deal is skilled at reappropriating misconceptions of Indigenous peoples through his use of humor and irony in his art. To various degrees in different works, he has taken advantage of the properties of these tools to create opportunities for communicating on the difficult topic of stereotypes and making it more approachable. Furthermore, through his skillful use of humor and irony, he manages a fine line between putting people in a victim role, and laughing with them as they understand the point he is making about their misperceptions. In this way, he has directed viewers towards an understanding of stereotypes as false and harmful. The works I discussed, though varied in form, content, and duration, were all connected through this goal of reappropriation.

As I have also demonstrated, contextualizing these works within Deal’s overall strategy for reaching audiences is important. His use of humor and irony to intervene in popular misconceptions of Indigenous peoples would have come to nothing if Deal had been discouraged by the continued lack of visibility for contemporary Indigenous art in the mainstream art world. By performing or painting in public places Deal took the matter of finding audiences into his own hands. He thus reached potential viewers he might not otherwise have had access to, an effect he multiplied through documenting his art on social media. These efforts, in turn, helped him to gain media attention for his work, thus allowing him to reach still more people. His public works and online presence, then, have both helped in the past and continue to help him today with building up his reputation as a contemporary artist. As he says, working in public space and creating a name for oneself can help marginalized artists to “get a seat at the table” in the art world. In Deal’s case, one such opportunity came in the form of an invitation to become a Native Arts Resident at the DAM. Just as with in public space, working in museum space offered

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5 Gregg Deal in discussion with the author, January 4, 2018.
Deal certain advantages, albeit different ones. With *Defiant To Your Gods*, *White Indian*, and *Ethnographic Zoo*, he was able to count on peoples’ expectation to be educated because the works were in (or connected with) museum space, and the messages he conveyed through each were likely given extra weight through the authority often associated with museums.

My thesis contributes to the field of contemporary Indigenous art by exploring an alternative to trickster interpretations of Indigenous artists’ use of humor and irony. I foreground the agency in Deal’s work in two ways, first through an analysis of his use of humor and irony as an effective means of communication with a broad public audience, and second, through my analysis of his strategies to gain recognition, visibility, and a place in arts institutions. By looking at humor and irony in this way, I contribute more generally. I have offered an examination of how humor and irony can be used to foster communication and change through art, as well as of how such art can function in different kinds of spaces.

In the scope of this project, my analysis of how humor and irony function in a subversive manner and in different contexts, has been through study of a selected group of Deal’s artworks. Other avenues of research remain. For example, it would be informative to learn more about viewers of Deal’s work, the extent to which their understanding of stereotypes of Indigenous peoples shifted, and whether or not these shifts were related to their perception of the humor and irony in his art. In the end, however, Deal addresses stereotypes in his art for more than the sake of his potential audiences. He also does it for himself and for his children. He says:

…the art, to me, it plays such an important aspect in me being able to say something, and to say it right, and to say it meaningful, and to help create a dialogue…The truth is that we don’t own our identity…but we should be allowed to own our identity. My art is so much about that, it’s so much about owning the identity and taking it and appropriating the stereotype so that I can regurgitate it back, and it’s empowering, because it’s a part of who I am and it’s a part of where I stand.⁶

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 0.1. Google Image search with term “Native Americans.” Conducted by the author on March 17, 2018.

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mural in the Indigenous Mural Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder. It will be in the Visual Arts Complex, in a public and educational space.
Figure 0.3. Gregg Deal, *Reconciled*, April 6, 2014. Mural. Photograph by Dakota Fine. 
Figure 0.4. Gregg Deal, *Defiant To Your Gods*, November 2015. Acrylic paint on wood panel, 96” x 144.” [http://greggdeal.com/Visual-Art](http://greggdeal.com/Visual-Art).
Figure 0.5. Gregg Deal, *Ethnographic Zoo, Instagram*, November 28, 2015. Performance. Photograph by @nativeartdenver. [https://www.instagram.com/p/-o3_njpfxU/?taken-by=greggdeal](https://www.instagram.com/p/-o3_njpfxU/?taken-by=greggdeal).
Figure 2.4. Gregg Deal, *The Last American Indian On Earth*, 2016. Video. Video Still. 
Figure 2.5. Gregg Deal, *The Last American Indian On Earth*, 2016. Video. Video Still. 
Figure 2.7. Gregg Deal, *Reconciled*, April 6, 2014. Mural. Photograph by Dakota Fine. 
Figure 3.5. Gregg Deal, *Ethnographic Zoo*, November 28, 2015. *Instagram*, November 28, 2015. Performance. Photograph by @nativeartdenver. [https://www.instagram.com/p/-o3_njpfxU/?taken-by=greggdeal](https://www.instagram.com/p/-o3_njpfxU/?taken-by=greggdeal).
The romanticized concept of what is and is not authentically “Indian” has been around since first contact (1492). Popular culture informs this notion of identity to such a degree that Westerners are quick to use this authority to tell Indigenous people when they fail to measure up. In this Human Zoo, we see the stereotype, the ultimate image of what Western Culture believes is truly representative of Indigenous people. He is defined firstly by the majestic headdress, and then his other Indian embellishments. The viewers of this display are not interested in where these things originate, only that they exist in a consumable and exotic state. Unfortunately, Stereotype starts to understand that he must consider the meaning of his existence amid the changing tide of cultural awareness. And while the voyeuristic aspects of the zoo are commonplace in film, literature, and advertising, we now have the rare opportunity to see Stereotype in his natural habitat, openly contemplating his existence.

The Ethnographic Zoo

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Primary Sources


——. E-mail message to author about dates of artworks. February 10, 2018.


**Secondary Sources**


