

# salt 11: Duane Linklater

February 27–August 2, 2015

When artist Duane Linklater first told me that he wanted to engage with the UMFA's American Indian<sup>1</sup> collection to create his *salt 11* exhibition, I was a little apprehensive about opening the UMFA's history, collection, and display practices to criticism. The colonial legacy of museums is a contentious subject. The concept of the encyclopedic collecting museum originated during an age of imperialism, when Europe was securing new trade routes and using its mercantile interests to justify new settlements on different continents. Objects from colonized lands were acquired, often through questionable means, to represent the power and knowledge of European nations. Thus, the very concept of collecting and presenting objects to represent non-Western cultures reflects a Western worldview that objectified non-Western peoples as primitive, romanticized, and lesser Others. Linklater, who is Omaskêko Cree from Moose Cree First Nation in present day Ontario and has a degree in Native Studies in addition to his art degrees, repeatedly addresses the ongoing legacy of colonialism in his multidisciplinary work, whether he is appropriating offensive racial slurs from Jay Z's song lyrics or calling attention to under-recognized American Indian artists. I was unsure how Linklater would critique this problematic legacy using the specifics of the UMFA's collection.

<sup>1</sup>Various terms, each debatably appropriate, are used to refer to the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Due to the great diversity of native cultures, it is preferred and more specific to use distinct tribal names. This essay, however, often broadly refers to all indigenous people of the Americas that were colonized by Europeans. The term "Indian" is a misnomer given by colonizers who mistook America for East India, but today more native people self-identify as American Indian than as Native American. Thus, the term American Indian, which most broadly refers to the indigenous peoples of the North and South American continents from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego, will be used in this essay.



(fig 1) TOP | Kwakwaka'wakw (Pacific Northwest Coast), *Raven Mask*, early twentieth century, pigment on wood. The Ulfert Wilke Collection, purchased with funds from the Friends of the Art Museum. UMFA1981.016.002. BOTTOM | Duane Linklater, *UMFA981.016.002*, 2015. 3D-printed sculpture. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

Linklater selected seventeen objects from the UMFA's collection that he wanted to copy. The objects, spanning more than one hundred years from 1875 to 1978, come from a range of American Indian cultures from the Pacific Northwest Coast, including the Kwakwaka'wakw, Tsimshian, and Haida, as well as from the Southwestern United States, including the Pueblo and Navajo. The Museum acquired these objects—wool weavings (9), painted masks and headdresses (4), clay pots (2), a costumed kachina doll (1), and a model wooden totem pole (1)—between 1974 and 2003 through donation and purchase from five private collectors. Linklater copied the eight three-dimensional objects using 3D scanning and

printing technology (fig 1 and 2), and he photographed the nine textiles from the UMFA's collection database as they appeared on his computer screen and then printed those images on linen (fig 3). For his *salt* exhibition, Linklater wanted to draw attention to the colonial legacy of museums by using mechanical reproductions to make visible the complex and often unseen process of the ethnographic transformation of American Indian objects.



The objects Linklater selected did not begin their lives as ethnographic objects. “They *became* ethnographic through processes of detachment and contextualization.”<sup>2</sup> Separated from their original functional, ritual, or artistic contexts and presented in a new, museum context, these objects are transformed to embody both the specific histories that produced them as well as the global histories of Western expansion that resulted in their collection, their transfer to museums, and their new function as teaching objects.<sup>3</sup> Museum contexts are, by their very nature, fragmented, presenting together, as Linklater’s diverse selection suggests, a range of objects from disparate communities and distinct time periods. While comparisons of apparently unrelated objects can yield complex, productive thought, or reveal connections between cultures, museums can provide only partial narratives. After undergoing such detachment and recontextualization, do ethnographic objects lose their original meaning and cease to be what they once were?

Two qualities unify Linklater’s selected objects: they are ethnographic objects from the UMFA’s permanent collection, and their makers are unknown. In limiting his selection to objects without noted authorship, Linklater references the history of collecting practices that reduced non-Western makers to simplistic, often stereotypical, cultural categories. While authorship is closely tied to the value of Western artwork, non-Western objects were and are collected

<sup>2</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. p 3.

<sup>3</sup> Watson, Sheila. *Museums and Their Communities*. London: Routledge, 2007. p 523

(fig 2) LEFT | Haida (Pacific Northwest Coast), *Model of a Totem Pole*, early twentieth century, wood. The Ulfert Wilke Collection, purchased with funds from the Friends of the Art Museum. UMFA1982.001.008. RIGHT | Duane Linklater, *UMFA1982.001.008*, 2015, 3D-printed sculpture. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.



(fig 3) ABOVE | Navajo (Southwestern United States), Transitional style serape, 1890–1899, wool. Gift of Thomas G. McAllister. UMFA1993.005.001. RIGHT | Duane Linklater, detail of *UMFA1993.005.001*, 2015. Inkjet print on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.



according to less strict standards and protocol. But every object has an author, collaborative or otherwise, and it can be difficult, even impossible, to know when or how this key information was lost from the object's provenance. At the first transfer of ownership? The third? Museums only accession legally acquired objects into their collections, but, as postcolonial theorist Moira Simpson points out, "such decisions have been made on the basis of Western legal systems and concepts of ownership, with scant regard for indigenous peoples' concepts of individual or communal ownership and right over objects or knowledge."<sup>4</sup> Is one person authorized to sell or gift a community's property? How do varying cultural concepts of property, authorship, and art affect the fairness of a transaction? How does the power relationship between the oppressed native and the dominant colonizer influence the roles of giver and receiver? The museum community must make these important questions visible by posing them to visitors, and artists like Linklater are actively engaging questions like these in their work.

In 1986, artist James Luna (Luiseño and

Mexican-American, born 1950) performed *Artifact Piece* (fig. 4), an early critique of the way contemporary American culture and museums have presented American Indians as essentially extinct. The absence of noted artists that plagues most American Indian art collections contributes to a false sense that American Indian cultures are dead and exist only in memory. But, unlike a marble bust extracted from a 200 AD Roman Empire archaeological site, most American Indian objects were collected within the last few centuries from people and cultures that still exist today. In the San Diego Museum of Man's gallery on the Kumeyaay Indians, Luna installed himself in a museum display case. Accompanied by everyday objects like political buttons and recordings of Jimi Hendrix—which, like the artist himself, were identified by museum labels—the artist presented a vision of a contemporary, dynamic culture that offered an alternative

<sup>4</sup> Simpson, Moira G. *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. p 192.



(fig 4) James Luna (Luiseño and Mexican-American, born 1950), *Artifact Piece*, 1986, performance at the San Diego Museum of Man. Courtesy the artist.

perspective to the museum's otherwise historical presentation of a long-lost way of life. *Artifact Piece* questions the concept of an authentic, inevitably historic, Indian by pointing out that a contemporary American Indian perspective is often missing from museum displays. Likewise, Duane Linklater's engagement here with a historic collection reminds viewers that Western culture's decree to keep and present certain American Indian objects while ignoring or destroying others may reveal less about indigenous cultures than about Western perceptions of such cultures.

Linklater's copying process physically expresses the loss of information that occurs as American Indian objects transform into Westernized ethnographic objects. Rather than manually reproducing the objects with skill and precision, he uses mechanical filters to produce copies that might be described more accurately as translations. The technology for 3D scanning and printing is still new, and though heralded as the future of object reproduction, it lacks high resolution and flexibility. Linklater's 3D-printed objects, printed in the off-white plastic resin that is standard, are drained of color. The intricate details of the original objects, evading the

scanning process, are smoothed and simplified. Similarly, his photographic copies of the Navajo textiles forfeit the crisp geometry of the original designs and are instead simplified and blurred by large pixels. The texture and depth of the textiles are lost, the original warp and weft pictorially flattened and reproduced on top of a new linen warp and weft. Linklater's copies, perhaps like their ethnographic counterparts, are dulled reminders of their original referents.

Linklater's process welcomed error and embraced chance. He never viewed the original artworks in person. Instead, he used the Internet to bridge a 2,000-mile physical distance, virtually experiencing the objects through data rendered in pixels on his computer screen. Then, he engaged the technological weaknesses of reproduction tools by choosing to photograph the textiles as they appeared on his computer screen instead of utilizing printable high-resolution image files. He chose to work with the University of Utah's fledgling 3D printing facility in the J. Willard Marriott Library instead of a high-capacity industrial facility that could have rendered the objects in greater detail. Hence, Linklater's objects are missing plastic and have plastic where they should not. Both the pixilation of his textile copies and the simplified ornamentation of his three-dimensional copies are a result of overstretched technologies. Linklater's deliberately poor copies question our assumption that reproductions are truthful copies of an original. The data lost in this imperfect process echoes the names, stories, purposes, and meanings that are erased during an object's cultural translation and ethnographic transformation in a museum. We assume museum presentations are factual and unbiased, but Duane Linklater's installation encourages us to see the historical filters that shade exhibitions and our receptions of them.



(fig 5) Duane Linklater, *Tautology*, 2011-2013, neon, transformer, enamel on aluminum, Edition of 5 + 2 AP. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

When cultural theorist Walter Benjamin wrote in 1936, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art,” he was speaking specifically about the celluloid reproductions of film and photography, but his concept extends to our digital age. The photograph, or the technique of mechanical reproduction, devalues authenticity, substituting mobile copies for unique existence. Considering photography’s impact on modern art, Benjamin concluded that “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.”<sup>5</sup> By working with scanning lasers, digital cameras, and their respective printing apparatuses to mechanically reproduce objects, Linklater is harnessing the political power of photography.

In addition to symbolizing ethnographic transformation, the low-resolution aesthetic of Linklater’s new objects is highly political. In 2009, artist

Hito Steyerl proposed a new evaluation of image quality. “Apart from resolution and exchange value, one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread. Poor images,” she explains, “are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly.” Low resolution, she posits, implies speed, accessibility, mobility, and freedom. Updating Benjamin’s concept of the lost aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, Steyerl adds that “by losing its visual substance [the low-resolution image] recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the ‘original,’ but on the transience of the copy.”<sup>6</sup> If the aesthetics of poor images symbolize the revolutionary power of rapid, grass-roots, mass circulation, Duane Linklater’s objects have

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 217-251.

<sup>6</sup> Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *eflux journal*, Issue 10, November 2009, online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/> (last visit December 2014)



(fig 6) Duane Linklater, installation view of *It means it is raining*, ICA Philadelphia, June 25–August 17, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

a revolutionary message: the legacy of colonialism continues to oppress today, unrecognized by many in our pop songs, coveted fashion accessories, and educational institutions.

In addition to highlighting the structures and limitations of museums and engaging the power of the low-resolution copy, Linklater's *salt* exhibition also continues his personal and political practice of relating to and honoring the work of other indigenous artists. Over the last two years, Duane Linklater has brought attention to the work of many earlier indigenous artists through acts of appropriation. Twice, he has incorporated the work of Benjamin Chee Chee (Ojibwa, 1944–1977), an artist who ended his troubled life early in an Ottawa jail, directly into his own solo exhibitions. In 2013, Linklater's neon artwork *Tautology* (fig 5) appropriated a stylized bird form from Norval Morriseau's (Anishinaabe, 1932–2007) famous painting *Androgyny* (1983). This past summer, for his exhibition *It means it is raining* (fig 6), Linklater carefully hand removed layers of paint from the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia to unearth a 2002 photographic installation by Kimowan

Metchewais (Cold Lake First Nation, 1963–2011) that had been painted over.

Copying authentic art objects is an artistic strategy with a rich tradition in Western art history. Consider Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia*, which borrowed Titian's 1538 composition for *Venus of Urbino* or Pablo Picasso's appropriation of African tribal forms in his paintings. Shortly thereafter, photography contaminated "the purity of modernism's separate categories, the categories of painting and sculpture," divesting them "of their fictive autonomy, their idealism, and thus their power." Art historian Douglas Crimp points to the silk screening of photographic images on canvases by Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol in the 1960s as the "first positive instances of this contamination"<sup>7</sup> that gave "way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images."<sup>8</sup> This pivotal change, brought on by the capabilities of photographic reproduction, undermined the previously paramount concepts of originality and authenticity and signaled a new postmodern art. These new ideas and challenges to modern art crystallized in the late 1970s and 1980s with The Pictures Generation, a group of artists who blatantly copied images from popular and high culture to emphasize the power of the image in a hyper-mediated world. The Pictures Generation chose well-known subjects, denying the authority of well-known artists. While referencing this history of copying images and authentic objects as a critical strategy, Linklater, in his deliberate selection of objects with no known artists, redirects authority back to the original indigenous artists, once wiped from history, by drawing attention to this unjust

<sup>7</sup> Crimp, Douglas. *On the Museum's Ruins*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993. p 77.

<sup>8</sup> Crimp, 56.



(fig 7) LEFT | Madeline Tafoya (Santa Clara Pueblo, 1912–2002), *Pot with Bird Design*, earthenware. Gift of Kent C. Day. UMFA2003.10.20. RIGHT | Duane Linklater, *UMFA2003.10.20*, 2015. 3D-printed sculpture. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

absence of critical information. Trained in art schools indebted to Western art history and participating in the Western-centric contemporary art world, Linklater uses the accepted and understood tool of copying to critique a biased system.

Linklater’s objects, though copied from other objects, are new creations. They are made of new materials, with plastic where it should not be and museum mounts masquerading as new appendages. New scar-like seams indicate that the objects were printed in sections and soldered together. Smoothed lines and curves replace crisp detail. The textiles bear new abstract compositions, inspired by original Navajo designs but created anew through technological translation. Flat, pictorial images exist in place of original textures, which were compressed in the physical and digital space between the UMFA’s database, the artist’s computer screen, his camera lens, and the printer. Linklater’s new artworks honor the makers of the original works and shed light on how collected objects transform, losing—but also gaining—information, in museum contexts.

Linklater’s new political objects inspired research that revealed new information about the UMFA’s American Indian collection. One of the objects that he copied is a small black pot with an incised bird design (fig 8). The museum label identified this pot to be made by an unknown Santa Clara Pueblo artist. However, a closer look at acquisition paperwork revealed that the pot was originally attributed to the artist Madeline T. The Signature field on the UMFA’s electronic database lists “[in pencil on bottom] Madeline T. Sto\_\_\_\_ana” but this information was never transferred to the Artist field. Perhaps the missing information seemed too vague to officially declare an artist, but today, a quick Internet search yields fascinating results. Madeline Tafoya (1912-2002) was a noted Santa Clara artist who specialized in traditional Santa Clara black and red pottery. She often signed her pots “Madeline T., Santa Clara, Pueblo” or simply “Madeline T. Sta. Clara.” An “a” was mistaken for an “o,” an “r” for an “n,” and the “cl” faded; it is not hard to make the logical jump. Similarly, new research revealed that the Kwakiutl Chief’s Headdress that Linklater copied actually came from another Pacific Northwest Coast people, the Cowichan. Moreover, the term Kwakiutl refers to just one village; Kwakwaka’wakw, the more accurate term for the larger nation, is preferred. I am grateful that we can incorporate this more accurate information into our presentation of American Indian objects.

Rather than pointing a finger at a problematic past that cannot be changed, Linklater’s nuanced intervention sparks a dialogue between the museum, its collection, and its audience that will continue to identify lost information while being transparent about the interpretive effects of a museum context. Colonialism, and its lingering presence in Western thought, has played a significant role in shaping the collections in museums as well as in shaping the public’s

perceptions of museums. As Moira Simpson frankly put it in her book *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era*, "it is a colonial legacy that museums must deal with today."<sup>9</sup> Over the past three decades the museum field has been working to address this problematic legacy. Like *salt 11: Duane Linklater*, one strategy that museums have enlisted is to bring together ethnographic collections with contemporary art to critique contentious colonial histories. In doing this, artists like Linklater and museums like the UMFA hope to deconstruct the embedded lens of Western ethnographic vision for their audiences.<sup>10</sup>

Considering this unique ability of museums, historian and anthropologist James Clifford understood museums as places of contentious and collaborative interactions in terms of anthropology's concept of the *contact zone*. Contact zones are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today."<sup>11</sup> In his 1997 article *Museums as Contact Zones*, Clifford's primary purpose was to encourage museums to loosen "their sense of centrality and [see] themselves as specific places of transit, intercultural borders, contexts of struggle and communication between discrepant communities" and to take on a "contact perspective" that "views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization."<sup>12</sup> Duane Linklater's *salt* project strengthens the UMFA's contact perspective by making the colonial ties of its American Indian collection more transparent.

Art has become "one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life,"<sup>13</sup> and museums are the most public sites "for transforming difference in discourse, for making it meaningful for action and thought."<sup>14</sup> Collecting institutions

with encyclopedic collections like the UMFA occupy a unique position, allowing visitors to draw connections between the local and the global as well as the past, present, and future. New museology has reoriented the museum away from presenting itself as a definitive center of research and has downplayed the role of collecting. Instead, emphasis has shifted to the museum as a center of multi-vocal dialogue and question-based learning. In our postmodern and potentially post-colonial era, museums must embrace the key concept that "knowledge is fundamentally relative," and that "the nature of reality is dependent on the perspective from which it is observed."<sup>15</sup> The specter of colonialism looms large in collecting museums, but, as Duane Linklater reminds us, an open dialogue about a problematic past can reveal the great plurality of perspectives that inform our reality.

### **Whitney Tassie** **Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**

<sup>9</sup> Simpson, 2.

<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out that art historian Hal Foster, in his seminal essay *The artist as ethnographer?*, questions the possibility of addressing the museum's colonial legacy, particularly when working with contemporary artists, without continuing to speak from the dominant position. Instead, Foster advocates moving beyond the dichotomy of self / other by emphasizing the immense complexity of the relations between researcher and subject—which will always be unequal. Similarly, postcolonial theorist Trinh Minh-Ha advocates for a strategy she refers to as *speaking nearby*. She maintains that in ethnographic representations we cannot speak *about* or *for* the Other, and that any attempts to lend the Other a voice remain illusionary. Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996. P 307. Minh-Ha, Trinh. "Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* 52 (Spring 1990), pp 76-98.

<sup>11</sup> Pratt, Mary Louise. "The Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*. New York: MLA. 1991. p. 34

<sup>12</sup> Clifford, James. "Museums as Contact Zones." In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. James Clifford, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1997. p 213.

<sup>13</sup> Marcus, George and Fred Myers. *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. P 1.

<sup>14</sup> Marcus, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Boast, Robin. "Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited." *Museum Anthropology* 34, 2001. p 58.