

Collaborative Art: Social Impacts and Limitations

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Chilean artist, Felipe Mujica first began his relationship with the Indigenous communities of South Florida in 2019 on a research trip for a commissioned exhibition at the Perez Art Museum of Miami (PAMM). The exhibition would be a site-specific curtain installation at the museum, which occupies the ancestral homelands of the Calusa, Tequesta, Miccosukee, and Seminole people. Mujica was invited by curator Jennifer Inacio to explore the possibility of incorporating local textile traditions. As he had previously worked with some Indigenous communities, Mujica and Inacio decided to collaborate with the remaining local Indigenous peoples, the Seminole Tribe of Florida and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, as a way to create a dialogue between his art and regional material-culture practices. This led to his introduction to Reverend Houston Cypress, a Two-Spirit¹ Miccosukee artist and activist who had a pre-existing relationship with PAMM. It was through Rev. Cypress that Mujica was introduced to Miccosukee artist Khadijah Cypress, a seamstress and community sewing instructor who focuses on the creation of both traditional and contemporary Miccosukee clothing by utilizing the Seminole-Miccosukee art form of patchwork. From 2019 until 2021, Khadijah Cypress worked alongside Mujica, contributing to the development of both the fabric curtains and the programming that PAMM would eventually create to accompany the exhibit. The resulting exhibition, *The Swaying Motion on the Bank of the River Falls*, featured over twenty fabric curtains which combined the geometric drawings of Mujica with the patchwork designs of Cypress. The collaborative exhibition, which was Mujica's first major solo exhibit in the US and Cypress' first major collaboration, opened in May 2021 and ran until the Spring of 2022. The subsequent programming and promotions of the exhibit highlighted its collaborative and participatory nature. It reflected on the intentional creation of opportunities for the artist, institution, and audience to initiate mutual dialogue and to further relationships with one another as well as with the local Indigenous communities.

With an understanding of the intention of this collaborative exhibit to foster connections between social groups, spaces, and institutions, this essay will analyze the social impact of Mujica's collaborative exhibit and Cypress' contributions through the lens of a Seminole artist and art historian. In this analysis, I will focus on how collaboration and participation can further relationships between these three primary

social groups: Indigenous communities, the general audience, and art institutions. Knowing the limitations of this social impact, I will examine the dynamics of power and agency behind these relationships by breaking down the extent to which the different social groups were able to collaborate and participate. With these limitations in mind, I will conclude by offering key considerations for ensuring equity and sovereignty among the social groups involved.

Social Impacts

The most quantifiable aspect of the social impact created by Mujica's exhibit with Cypress is the inclusion of a local Indigenous artist in the galleries of PAMM for the first time in the museum's then thirty-seven-year history. This initiates a social relationship between the audience, Indigenous communities, and local art institutions in the context of a fine arts exhibit. In this setting, Mujica and Cypress' success in visually paralleling their two forms of abstraction vitally adds to this relationship. The Miccosukee practice of patchwork in this exhibit is placed away from the context of ethnographic exhibits or tourism and is presented as a form of abstraction with deliberate aesthetic values, innovative techniques, and a complex cultural history. It remains separate from the Western art canon of geometric abstraction while being equally relevant to the global art discourse. The resulting impact is the ability of the audience and art institutions to recognize Indigenous art practices outside of the hierarchies of colonization, and to encounter Indigenous contemporary artists as global artists who not only participate in but actively contribute to mainstream art communities. In my opinion, introducing Miccosukee art in this way strengthens the relationship between the general audience, art institutions, and Indigenous communities by removing the imposed parameters which limit how audiences engage with Indigenous art.

For people like me who are part of the Seminole and Miccosukee communities, encountering Cypress' work in the context of a PAMM exhibition impacts us by forcing us to challenge the contexts in which we picture our art practices and by presenting us with a representation of our culture that is both consensual and maintains Cypress' agency as an artist—something usually not expected when encountering Native culture in museums. This strengthens the bond between Indigenous communities and art institutions because it shows us that a Native artist like Cypress can navigate structures which have

1. Two-Spirit is a contemporary Indigenous-created term referring to gender expansive identities

historically exploited Indigenous art, and that art institutions are interested in not just our history, but also our contemporary art practices. Conversely, this exhibition informs art institutions like PAMM that there is a presence of contemporary Native artists in South Florida, as well as of the interest and ability of our artists to share their work on this scale.

For art institutions, the introduction to Indigenous artists such as Cypress helps develop their understanding of Indigenous communities by providing a point of contact for communication. In addition, observing the participation of the audience in the exhibition allows these institutions to better understand their interest in engaging with art made by Indigenous people. The resulting interest in Cypress' art practice impacts not only the amount of exposure to Miccosukee artists by the general art community, but also the quality of exposure in terms of Indigenous agency and meaningful inclusion. Specifically, the local art community's introduction to Khadijah through a yearlong PAMM exhibition interrupts South Florida's trend of only recognizing and including Indigenous artists during the tokenizing months of October, the month celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day, and November, Native American Heritage Month. This allows Cypress' art to exist outside of the usual pigeonhole of a short-term exhibition of uniquely Indigenous artists. These short-term exhibitions limit the amount of time an audience and community have to engage with art made by Indigenous peoples, while also segregating Indigenous artists as a subcategory to be momentarily featured in an arts institution, rather than as an equitable perspective that should be centralized and normalized in the art community. Avoiding these performative month-specific exhibitions allows for Cypress' work to better evade *ethnographic entrapment*.

Ethnographic entrapment refers to a societal dynamic shaped by the colonial entitlement to "know" the Native.² In this dynamic, those in positions of perceived authority, such as exhibit curators, only seek to include Indigenous peoples if the authority can ensure that Indigenous inclusion is in some way teaching a non-Native audience about Indigenous culture. It then becomes the job of Native peoples to make themselves "known" by sharing or performing their culture as a prerequisite for being able to participate in social and political movements dominated by non-Natives. By circumventing this

dynamic, Cypress' work is allowed to exist as a piece of contemporary art that can dynamically negotiate its meaning with the audience, rather than being seen only as an ethnographic artifact that inevitably exists to be consumed by non-Natives so that the Native may be "safely" known. As a practicing Seminole artist and Art Historian in South Florida myself, I count this aspect of Cypress' exposure to the art community as a discernible change in the social relationship between our Indigenous communities and mainstream art institutions. Even on an individual level, Cypress explains the lasting impact of this kind of meaningful and intentional recognition of her work:

*The exhibit has impacted me in the art community in a big way. I've been interviewed, welcomed into groups, and gave speeches at art galleries. It's pushed me to be more open and outspoken, which I'm usually not.*³

Within the exhibit, the works are displayed in a manner that invites direct interactions between the audience and the curtains. The form and function of the curtains in the exhibition allow for both physical and intellectual engagement in order to start a dialogue between the social groups. The tactile and moveable nature of the curtains invites participation and collaboration from the audience which helps shape the exhibit. This further disrupts the sterile expectations of what it means to engage with art in a museum; the expectation of fine art as untouchable, the expectation of architecture as permanent, and the expectation of Miccosukee art as scarce and unencounterable. In addition, the audience's ability to touch the art challenges the dichotomy of Fine Art vs Craft, a binary which has long marginalized the tradition of patchwork as a form of "low art". All of this in turn contributes to forging the relationships between the three social groups, with greater exposure to Miccosukee art and the removal of biases for the audience and art institutions, with all social groups being allowed to participate in and shape the ever-changing art site.

The institutional concepts of site and location are also challenged in Mujica and Cypress' collaboration. The practice of museums presenting art in a sterile environment that decontextualizes the art objects from their specific sites of geographic origin stems from the collecting practices of Early Modern Europe. These practices sought to achieve a clean site of examination where objects could be understood and recontextualized into European categories of

2. Andrea Smith. "Native Studies at the Horizon of Death: Theorizing Ethnographic Entrapment and Settler Self-Reflexivity" in *Theorizing Native Studies*. (2014) 228.

3. Khadijah Cypress, Interview, conducted by Durante Blais-Billie (2022).

knowledge. Under this system, there was a failure to consider the importance of context in understanding art objects, and a disregard for the value of local, and often times Indigenous, knowledge systems.⁴ Through *The Swaying Motion on the Bank of the River Falls*, Mujica and PAMM's decision to collaborate with local Indigenous communities directly defies the museum practice of decontextualization of art objects by cementing the relationship between the art displayed and the geographic location of the exhibit. Mujica's collaboration thus focuses on the recognition of geographic context as paramount to the recognition of cultural context. This in turn emphasizes to the audience and art institutions that the Indigenous context of art cannot be ignored because the exhibit site exists within the Indigenous context of our ancestral homelands. The resulting social impact is the unavoidable truth that the audience and art institutions live within an Indigenous context of Seminole and Miccosukee lands, which strengthens their relationship with us by transforming their idea of Indigenous peoples from that of a distant Other, to a contemporary people who will always be integral to these lands and waters.

Limitations

Although the exhibition and subsequent programming were able to create a discernable change in the quality and extent of the relationships between the groups involved, many of the limitations of social impact stem from the nature of the participation and collaboration asymmetrically benefitting the general audience and art institutions over the Indigenous communities. These limitations are most evident in one of the intentions set by exhibition marketing and programming: to provide the audience with opportunities to learn about Seminole and Miccosukee culture. While this intention in a way furthers social understanding for the audience, it remains a limitation as it places Indigenous communities back into the dynamic of ethnographic entrapment.

A major limitation for this exhibition, was the lack of familiarity between PAMM and the wider Seminole and Miccosukee communities. While Indigenous artists and art appreciators knew of PAMM, it was not a museum well-known or well-visited by our peoples. In addition, while PAMM staff knew of community leaders such as Rev. Houston Cypress and institutions like the Seminole Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, they did not have a pre-existing relationship with our general communities nor our textiles artisans. Prior to this,

the PAMM Director of Education, Marie Vickles had been creating respectful and consensual pathways to bridge this divide between Indigenous peoples and the museum, but even so by the time of the Mujica exhibit, these relationships were not yet cemented. In this regard, a major limitation was the lack of interest in collaboration from the Seminoles and Miccosukees. Throughout the stages of this exhibition and its programming, obtaining social investment from the wider Indigenous communities remained a hurdle for Mujica and PAMM. Despite participation through program involvement and consultation by community members such as Rev. Houston Cypress, Khadijah Cypress, and myself, forging relationships and communication between PAMM and key community groups such as our elders or youth proved difficult due to timeline expectations, pandemic safety, and community interest constraints.

Through such programming which seeks to educate the audience on Seminole and Miccosukee culture, can a Seminole person experience nuanced or engaging participation when they are relegated from being an agent in the discussion to the silent subject being discussed? In programming which seeks to engage the audience by calling to attention the ways the Miccosukee can be known, how is the Miccosukee audience meant to participate intellectually beyond facing the dynamic of ethnographic entrapment which requires them to act as authorities, teachers, and performers? This dynamic invites the general audience and art institutions to confront their biases, learn about new paradigms, and start new dialogues within their groups—all while Indigenous people are not only presented with their own normative knowledge, but must watch as it is analyzed and discussed as the featured topic of temporary programming. The impact here is hindered by the pre-existing failures of PAMM to meaningfully engage Indigenous peoples in a way which does not require them to perform or educate.

Moreover, the location of the exhibition and the related museum programming are also asymmetrically accessible, benefiting the general audience and art institutions, but not the Indigenous communities. This failure can be attributed to two reasons: the physical distance of PAMM from the Seminole and Miccosukee communities, and the corresponding nature of the location—within a Euro-American art institution which has historically excluded Indigenous peoples. In American culture,

4. Peter Mason. *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic*. (1998) 3.

the fine arts institution is a site which structurally others Indigenous peoples. Eurocentric categories of art neither account for nor make space for Indigenous practices of visual culture or the Indigenous knowledge that defines them. Furthermore, contemporary Indigenous artists are marginalized in fine arts institutions through ethnographic entrapment and the barriers of entry resulting from the systemic racism within many collecting institutions. The history of collecting institutions as a tool of imperial authority and the aftermath of operating within the systems of colonialism requires museums to analyze their capacity to accommodate Indigenous peoples in ways which are meaningful and respectful, before they can expect Indigenous peoples to feel like they are accessible or even welcoming to them.

PAMM, as an asset holder, programmer, marketer, and documenter, did far more than just control the site of the exhibition; it held the power to define participation and collaboration within the exhibition and programming. This hierarchy limits participation of the Seminole and Miccosukee community as the institution asymmetrically defines the terms of participation and collaboration. While Mujica and Cypress set the system of collaboration between one another as artists as well as the participatory nature of the moving curtains, PAMM, as the institutional authority, held intellectual control over the terms of onsite participation—such as how frequently Indigenous voices would be platformed by the institution, what methods of communication were considered valid and authentic, and control over general access to the site of the exhibition through their admissions practices. Through this, PAMM only allows the Native communities to participate and collaborate if the resulting social exchange remains within PAMM's expectations and, ultimately, within their control. To touch again on the ethnographic entrapment of PAMM's programming, even if Seminole and Miccosukee people did want to engage by sharing their culture, the aspects of Indigenous culture they wished to share must be translated to fit into the normative structures and expectations of PAMM. The Indigenous participants and collaborators must then always adjust their work, narratives, and voices to cater to the art institution and, by extension, the colonial society it serves so that the knowledge shared is digestible. In setting the boundaries of participation in cultural and intellectual dialogue to only exist within Eurocentric methodologies, access to participation by Indigenous peoples is reduced.

The limitations of the museum are touched on by Robin Boast in his work *Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited*. When discussing the ability of the museum to act as a contact zone, a space where multiple cultures clash and create meaningful dialogue, Boast writes of what he learned through an Indigenous collaboration:

*Clifford was showing me that contact zones are not really sites of reciprocity. They are, despite the best efforts of [non-Indigenous collaborators], asymmetric spaces of appropriation. No matter how much we try to make the spaces accommodating, they remain sites where the Others come to perform for us, not with us.*⁵

In such a restrictive structure set by museums, I would assert that the institution ultimately seeks the performance of Indigenous participation and collaboration, rather than the opportunity for meaningful Indigenous inclusion. Thus, the museum becomes a site of performance for Indigenous peoples, and remains a site only visited for the sake of performance. Ever since the exhibition *The Swaying Motion on the Bank of the River Falls*, the extent of Seminole and Miccosukee participation and engagement on-site at PAMM has been contained to event-specific instances of community members attending the exhibition opening and in-person programming, as an act of respect and support for Cypress and the other tribal members included on event panels. Beyond these examples, Seminole and Miccosukee participation and visitation to PAMM was not impacted in any long-lasting ways. Even in speaking to my community members at these events, there was little interest in engaging with other PAMM exhibits or programming. The relationship between the Seminole and Miccosukee community and art institutions, from the perspective of our community, was not discernibly deepened in this sense. The connotation of the fine arts institution for us remains as a site that we are invited to visit, but where we do not feel truly welcomed to belong. Even during the run of *The Swaying Motion on the Bank of the River Falls*, the absence of Indigenous peoples within the walls of PAMM was evident, with the only lasting Indigenous presence being the patchwork on the hanging curtains. The fine arts institution, where we must conform to institutional expectations and cater to the white-gaze in order to participate, remains a largely unprioritized site in the battle for Indigenous liberation.

5. Robin Boast. *Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited*. Museum Anthropology (2011) 63.

Considerations

Despite these limitations, I believe that the following considerations can help in ensuring the collaboration and participation of Indigenous communities in meaningful ways which symmetrically further our relationships with other social groups. The first and most paramount consideration in collaborating with Indigenous communities is the prioritizing of co-creation with Indigenous peoples. Co-creation allows Indigenous communities to be involved in both the visioning and the execution of the project. Through this, Indigenous peoples gain more authority in defining the terms of collaboration and participation, while also having collective ownership over both the assets shaping the exhibition as well as its resulting outcomes.⁶ This idea of collective ownership encourages museums to step away from their role of authority. It is important to remember that consultation and receiving approval and surface level input over the plans and goals already set by an institution, is distinctly different from co-creation. Co-creation does not assume, it holds each stakeholder at the same level of decision making and authority, and most importantly, it holds equal levels of interest and significance for each group involved.

Another key consideration is the dedication of significant time. This time refers to both the duration of an exhibit for increased accessibility and exposure, as well as the time it takes to develop the exhibit to ensure that relationships with the Indigenous communities are not unnaturally rushed to achieve a museum's agenda, or bound to a timeline which exists outside of the control of Indigenous peoples. By allowing these relationships the time to develop before engaging in a programming which invites Indigenous participation, the limitations of the institution can be reduced due to increased trust and transparency between the two groups.

Though these considerations cannot account for all the asymmetrical hierarchies of power left by colonialism, they are intentional steps in protecting Indigenous sovereignty which remain widely underutilized by art institutions.

6. Con Christeson, Roseann Weiss, Pacia Elaine Anderson. *Artists at the Community Development Table: Resource Guide*. 9. (n/d)