Review of Bill Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, Duke University Press, 2015. 232pp. 978-0-8223-5994-4

https://www.dukeupress.edu/edgar-heap-of-birds

Having completed a book about contemporary indigenous art within a few months of reviewing Bill Anthes's *Edgar Heap of Birds*, I appreciate certain shared challenges. In writing the first monograph on the multidisciplinary practice of the accomplished living Cheyenne artist (b. 1954), Anthes must answer to a vast image archive predicated on the opposite meanings of "indigenous" and "contemporary," narrate a tide of dispossession without resorting to victimisation, foreground Native epistemology while critiquing cultural essentialism, craft sentences to satisfy tribal elders, biennial curators, and academic reviewers, and cast an art historical net wide enough to include Barbara Kruger and the Bighorn Medicine Wheel. While Anthes does justice to the overt political dimensions of Heap of Birds's oeuvre, more surprising is his treatment of its subtle ceremonial grounding. While spiritual practices linked to sacred homelands are a central concern in interdisciplinary Native Studies, "ceremony" has no comparable standing in conversations about global contemporary art. In selecting it as a key theoretical term and organising principle for the text, Anthes invites consideration of how an embodied Cheyenne understanding of renewal may enter and alter the sprawling and largely secular institutions of contemporary art, even—or especially—when it goes unseen.

Indeed, a quick scan across four decades of Heap of Birds' practice does not immediately reveal the sacred as a priority. The artist is best known for his outdoor installations of metal signs that mimic the spare and authoritative aesthetics of government bureaucracies. Anthes opens with the controversy surrounding *Beyond the Chief*, a public artwork that Heap of Birds temporarily installed on the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign campus in 2009. Two years earlier, the university retired a stereotypical Indian mascot, Chief Illiniwek, from their sports fields in response to mounting criticism from Native activists and peer institutions, while retaining their teams' name, the Fighting Ilini. Twelve commercially printed steel panels greeted visitors with "FIGHTING ILLINI" in disorienting backward-facing type, followed by the affirmative "TODAY YOUR HOST IS" and the name of a tribal nation. While the Peoria, Kickapoo, Meskwaki, and nine others listed by Heap of Birds were displaced from their traditional Illinois territories by colonisation, the signs highlight ongoing Native claims to this cleared ground and in doing so, unsettle the foundations of US property and law. As Anthes emphasises, *Beyond the Chief* characteristically makes hidden histories of dispossession visible in order to generate public debate, while asserting a symbolic form of indigenous sovereignty in the present tense.

While the installation is but one instance of the artist's repetitive use of signs—it belongs to the *Native Hosts* series begun in 1988—Anthes takes care to underscore the distinctive formal qualities and historical engagements of individual works, as well as the unique contexts in which they are erected and received. In the case of *Beyond the Chief*, instances of vandalism and theft indicate the particular potency of Heap of Birds' intervention on a divided campus and alert us to audiences' roles in constructing and contesting meaning. Analogous methods of detailed description, contextualisation, and attention to the dialogical nature of artworks characterise all high-level art criticism today. Nonetheless, art historian Jane Blocker's endorsement on the back of the book rings true: "So often we fail to look carefully at or describe the works of Native

American artists in depth, but tend instead to look *through* them to some plane of political meaning to which they presumably grant passage." Anthes effectively reverses this approach by unpacking Heap of Birds' practice at the directive of the artworks, rather than usurping their specificity within catch-all truisms about colonial injustice and reconciliation. This task is made easier by how loudly and clearly the signs proclaim their political commitments, bolstered by the artist's own eloquent commentary.

Anthes takes additional steps to position Heap of Birds's practice in distinction to other artists' and critics' tendency to value "relational" artworks for initiating open-ended and nonhierarchical dialogue with audiences presumed to be "equals." Especially instructive is a comparison of Heap of Birds's admonishments to "remember" and "honor" with the passive voice and inclusive "we" of Lawrence Weiner's (b. 1942) well-known sign works, embodying the latter artist's conviction to use the imperative amounts to a form of linguistic tyranny. Likening Heap of Birds's work to "sharp rocks," Anthes argues that they reconfigure a Cheyenne warrior's responsibility to protect his community by engaging in semiotic, rather than physical, warfare—an approach that reasserts indigenous social and political priorities in the face of colonial assimilation. Here and elsewhere, Anthes makes good on his promise to emphasise Heap of Birds's challenge to the discourses and institutions of contemporary art in a manner allied with the strongest feminist and decolonial work, rather than "lobbying for [his] inclusion in a familiar history" (127). Even more could be done to unpack the relationship of this warrior tradition—one that could easily slide into popular stereotypes about Plains masculinity—to the presumed moral authority of the "artist-as-outsider" that scholars such as Grant Kester, Claire Bishop, and others have discussed within broader debates about contemporary relational art.[1]

Beyond mapping the artworks' clear political preoccupations, the book's deeper argument centres on the role of Cheyenne ceremony in quietly shaping Heap of Birds approach to the contested ownership of land and history. Anthes anchors this thread of inquiry in a succinct yet moving description of his attendance, at Heap of Birds's invitation, of an Earth Renewal ceremony (popularly known as the Sun Dance) on the artist's home Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation in Oklahoma. During the four-day-long ceremony at midsummer, Heap of Birds and other participants sacrifice themselves through feats of physical endurance in order to "make the world new again each year" (19). Yet the Earth Renewal is rarely referenced in any direct manner in the artist's work. Following Anthes description of this event, which occupies a mere two-and-a-half pages of the introduction, he engages with ceremony less as content than as a theoretical preoccupation and an organising principle for the text. Ceremony, we might conclude, is not an *object* in Heap of Bird's practice—nor Anthes' book—so much as a structuring logic that remains for the most part invisible. (One notable exception is Heap of Birds's *Wheel*, an outdoor sculpture that takes the form of a Plains medicine wheel addressing the trauma of the Sand Creek Massacre, which was permanently installed at the Denver Art Museum in 2005 and discussed at length in chapter three).

Anthes focuses on the non-progressive temporal-spatial order of the Earth Renewal, which takes the form of a "spiral that reaches outward and back to the center simultaneously" (28). He argues that returning to an Oklahoma hilltop each summer grants Heap of Birds a unique vantage point on the much-debated "temporal turn" in global contemporary art. The latter is sometimes discussed as the critical cancellation of canonical modernists' preoccupations with progressive

forward movement, or as the sense of a perpetual present engendered by the spread of neoliberalism and the promise of technological instantaneity. Heap of Birds's practice rather attests to the uneasy coexistence of pluralistic "habits of thought" that refuse to resolve into a singular, shared cosmology—a possibility theorised by scholars such as Terry Smith and Keith Moxey, who Anthes names as allies. The artist's use of the present-tense to access indigenous histories unique to particular places, patterning of words and forms according to the ceremonially significant number four, and use of global travel as an opportunity to symbolically repatriate the stories of indigenous travelers before him, are examples that locate particular times, places, and peoples along the spiral formation introduced in the first pages of the book. Subsequently, Anthes eschews a chronological structure in favor of four distinct yet interconnected essays. Respectively titled "land," "words," "histories," and "generations," each chapter takes a journey that ultimately circles back to the enduring themes of Heap of Birds's life work.

The "spiral" approach shared between artist and author is subtly transformative. As many before me have noted, the reduction of indigenous spirituality to symbols and objects renders it divisible, exchangeable, and hence, commodifiable. Likewise, sacred materials can become severed from political and historical forces and pushed into the premodern mist. These dual processes have informed an enduring cultural complex in which antimodernists, new age religionists, fashionistas, and many a non-Native artist have sought access to indigenous secrets in search of "universal" truths, redemption from capitalist alienation, saleable symbols of the exotic, or sympathetic associations with the oppressed (as was the case when French-Moroccan artist Latifa Laâbissi recently performed *Self Portrait Camouflage* at MoMA PS1 wearing only a faux Plains-style headdress, drawing outrage from Native critics).[2] It would be all too easy for Heap of Birds to use his own heritage to reclaim profit from the circulation of ceremonial signifiers—and who would blame him, given the vast history of cultural appropriation? Anthes, for his part, might adopt a classic ethnographic approach, offering cultural interpretations of this or that symbol or event. Such an approach might secure the superficial acceptance of artist and author in the annuls of contemporary art (which boasts an "anthropological turn" among others), but would leave its basic institutions untouched.

It does not follow that Heap of Birds—or for that matter, anyone writing about him—can avoid participating in the cultural and economic logic of capitalism, given how thoroughly this system has permeated the history of colonisation and the globalisation of contemporary art alike. There are no "outsiders" here. Yet by treating ceremony as a model for intellectual and embodied ways of inhabiting the world, making art, and producing allied scholarship, rather than announcing it as consumable content, Heap of Birds and Anthes join forces to demonstrate that the much-discussed market is not the *only* logic structuring relationships between subjects and objects, places and histories. Capitalist cosmologies sit alongside, and in irreducible entanglement with, surviving and adaptive indigenous worldviews. In the uneasy dance between them we find "the crux of [Heap of Birds's] contemporaneity" (21).

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Notes

[1] For a succinct summary and critique of this literature, see John Byrnes, "The Yes Men: Art and the Culture of Corporate Capitalism" in *Keep It Slick: Infiltrating Capitalism with The Yes Men*, edited by Astria Suparak, Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University, 2009, pp. 19–22.

[2] The literature on appropriations of Native spirituality and culture is vast. See, for example, Michael Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* Harvard University Press, 2004. See also *Native Appropriations*, a popular blog by indigenous scholar Adrienne Keene, focused on contemporary popular culture and the fashion industry, http://nativeappropriations.com/. For detailed analyses of the controversy surrounding Latifa Laâbissi's performance, see Christopher Green, "Against a Feathered Headdress: A Tale of Two Performance Festivals and Native American Voices," *Hyperallergic*, Jan. 17, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/352026/against-a-feathered-headdress-two-performance-festivals-native-american-voices/; Crystal Migwans, "The Violence of Cultural Appropriation," *Canadian Art*, Feb. 7, 2017, http://canadianart.ca/features/violence-cultural-appropriation/.