

Photographic Encounters in the American Desert

by Alessandra Ponte



Above and below: Desert landscape with tourists (author with friends). American South West, December, 1997-. Photo by author.



The Indians do not like to be photographed.
—Aby Warburg¹

Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. [...] Today everything exists to end in a photograph.
—Susan Sontag²

The arid territories of the American Southwest have been the real (and fictional) theatres of the mythical conquest of the West. The region is punctuated by magnificent pre-Columbian ruins, and Native Americans represent a substantial portion of the population, living in reservations, and in some exceptional cases like the Pueblo Indians, still occupying the land of their ancestors. The desert landscapes have also been, and still are, heavily used by scientists and the military to develop and test the most advanced weapons. American Indians and war technologies have generated two significant and apparently very distant forms of tourism. The first has a longer lineage, and began at the end of the nineteenth century. The second, a more recent trend, emerged in the early 1950s, and is commonly referred to as “atomic tourism.” One may argue that in both cases the objects of fascination and attraction are determined by war and its effects. Of course, this is spectacularly clear in relation to the phenomenon of atomic tourism. In the case of the encounters with the native inhabitants of the region, the history of past violence and the pain of present conflicts are less evident, if not hidden.

Paul Chaat Smith, a Comanche and an assistant curator at the National Museum of the American Indian, has recently written that in the United States, a most forgetful country “whose state religion seems to be amnesia,”³ Indian history, and in particular recent Indian history, needs to be relentlessly recalled. A significant portion of such history involves precisely the accounts of how Native Americans (and their culture) have been stereotyped and commodified in order to satisfy an ever growing and variable tourist industry. One may say that tourism has been another form of conquest and subjugation, another Indian war. In such a war, as in previous ones, American Indians valiantly developed forms of resistance that since the very beginning found as one of their privileged targets that quintessential tourist weapon: the camera.

Travelogue: 1997

I went to visit the American Southwest for the first time in 1997. I was already planning to write a book on the American desert, and had read extensively on the topic, including books dealing with the Native American inhabitants. I knew about the pueblos of the Zuni and the Hopi, of the presence of Navajo and the other tribes living in the reservations, and about the spectacular and mysterious pre-Columbian ruins. I was also aware of how, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the architecture, arts, and traditions of these peoples had been exploited, commercialized, and even transformed in order to serve the tourist industry. In addition, I was familiar with the ethnographic literature about the various tribes, from the notorious accounts of the Zuni written at the end of nineteenth century by anthropology’s first “participant observer,” Frank Hamilton Cushing,⁴ to the celebrated *Patterns of Culture* (1934), in which Ruth Benedict established her famous opposition between the “Apollonian” Pueblo cultures of the Southwest and the “Dionysian” attitudes of the Native Americans of the Great Plains.⁵ At the time, for almost two decades the work of the first American ethnographers had been under intense critical scrutiny, as part of a general process of re-assessment of the discipline. With the writings of Paul Rabinow, Edward Said, Roy Frank Ellen, James Clifford, George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fisher,⁶ anthropology’s claims to provide authoritative interpretations and convey an authentic experience of other cultures had been radically challenged. The mirror had been turned, so to speak, on the discipline, revealing a rather disturbing picture. During the same period, tourism and tourists had been extensively investigated by sociologists, anthropologists, and experts of semiotics, all intent on demonstrating the hopelessly inauthentic character of the modern tourist experience.⁷

Before even arriving in the Southwest, I was therefore prepared to enjoy the inauthentic nature of the experience and accept the limitations of a role that I considered inescapable. I was going to be a tourist, consciously part of the global phenomenon of commodified culture. I had no illusions about the possibility of acquiring a superior or detached status by qualifying myself as “traveler,” “pilgrim,” “observer,” or “sympathetic researcher.” This, I presume, was also the attitude of my companions. I was traveling with

four others, architectural critics and historians. None of us was American, and for all of us this was the first encounter with the region and its native inhabitants. We landed in Albuquerque loaded with guidebooks and cameras. Each of us had at least one camera at the beginning of the trip and, before the journey was over, we all ended up acquiring disposable Kodaks to take panoramic photos. We had the impression that panoramic photos were best suited to capture the spectacular scenery. The truth is that no apparatus can really capture such landscapes. No matter how many commercials, films, photographs, or paintings by the best artists one has seen, no matter how much one has the feeling of already knowing these places, the reality of them is going to surprise, enchant, and overwhelm the traveler. Nevertheless, like every good tourist, we took hundreds of slides and photos, and bought postcards, more guides, more books, and more slides on sale at various tourist locations, not to mention every possible kind of souvenir, from Stetson hats to bolo ties, from sand paintings to kachina dolls, as well as Navajo, Zuni, and Hopi jewelry. I don’t think we missed a single tourist shop from Albuquerque to the Grand Canyon and back.

The airport of Albuquerque fully satisfied our desire for a theme park experience: fake adobe interiors, shops selling miniature sand paintings, dream catchers, and kachina dolls, together with restaurants serving Spanish rice and Texan fajitas. I am writing from memory (I didn’t take notes during the trip), and what I remember next is the drive to Santa Fe with a detour to visit the pre-Columbian ruins at the Bandelier monument—haunting and inscrutable in the freezing, transparent winter afternoon—and a very cold and uncomfortable first night at a Best Western Hotel.

Santa Fe

The titles of two 1997 publications, bought during the trip, evoke part of the feeling of walking the streets, visiting the museums, and shopping around the plaza. The first, *The Myth of Santa Fe*, written by Chris Wilson, a professor of the University of New Mexico living in Albuquerque, is focused on architecture and the politics of culture, and investigates the invention and “creation” of a “modern regional tradition.”⁸ Wilson’s book meticulously maps the history of the occupation of the area beginning with the so-called Pueblo Indians (sedentary people who practiced agriculture),

followed by the arrival of the nomadic ancestors of present-day Apaches and Navajos, and then by waves of Spanish and “Anglo-Saxon” colonization. After sketching a narrative of conflict, repression, and domination, but also of exchange and racial miscegenation, Wilson proceeds to demonstrate how, from the early 1900s, the city was deliberately designed to appear a romantic and exotic destination where three distinct and equally “picturesque” ethnic groups were living together in harmonious segregation. The second book, the catalogue of an exhibition, presents the systematic marketing of the entire region under the title *Inventing the Southwest: The Fred Harvey Company and Native American Art*.⁹ An article about the show, published in *The New York Times* in December 1997, remarks on how Fred Harvey, an English immigrant, set the standard for masterful cultural packaging already in 1876. The company operated the dining cars of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway, and created along the line restaurants and tourist hotels designed in a style mimicking the adobe construction of Spanish and Pueblo settlements. The company was also responsible for collecting, displaying, and organizing the sale of antique and contemporary Indian artifacts, from Navajo blankets and silver jewellery to Pueblo pottery and baskets. Native American artists were also employed to decorate the hotels and stores of the Fred Harvey Company, together with craftsmen and women practicing their art, in appropriate settings, under the very eyes of the tourists. The author of the *Times* article dryly observed that the exhibition gave the impression that both sides benefited from the encounter, without any hints of the Indians being victimized in the exchange. This feeling was echoed in a quotation from a speech given shortly after the opening of the show by Rayna Green, director of the American Indian Program at the Smithsonian Institution. The Indians of the Southwest, she said, had already “learned to play Indian from the 17th century onward, first from the Spanish.” The article, however, closes with a chilling quotation from a video about Native Americans still recalling the glory days of the Fred Harvey Company. What the company did, said a 70-year-old Zuni, was take them “from ritual to retail.”

Strolling in the plaza, peeping in every shop and art gallery, what did I experience, precisely? The atmosphere of an invented romantic Spanish colonial past was maybe too well maintained, and the artists (long marketed through artist colonies)



Taos Pueblo (our car in front of the entry point), New Mexico, December, 1997. Photo by author.



Taos Pueblo (with French art historian), New Mexico, December 1997. Photo by author.

and Indians were there, playing the tourist game in a rather dignified and ironic way. It didn't particularly disturb me: after all, I was from Venice (Italy), a city that had been surviving mainly as a tourist attraction for centuries, selling its own atmosphere of glorious art, architecture, death, and decay. I was used to sharing the narrow Venetian *calli* with masses of tourists unaware of the rules governing the navigation of the labyrinthine urban fabric, watching vegetable stalls and bakeries disappear daily to give way to souvenir shops, and explaining patiently that no, Ponte Vecchio is in Florence, what you are looking at is the Rialto Bridge and no, I don't own a gondola.

Taos Pueblo

Freezing cold, thespian sky, intense, fierce light, and clouds throwing unexpected shadows. Primal profiles of buildings and mountains, wood fires perfuming the air with the aroma of piñon and sage. We were stopped at the entrance by a polite man: there was a fee to pay for the use our cameras, and we were told to ask permission to take photos of the inhabitants. Very few people were around, most of them indoors, their attitude unaffected and remote, welcoming tourists in uncluttered adobe interiors transformed into shops. We were the only visitors that day. We wandered around without expressing much, almost speechless in fact. We didn't photograph the inhabitants of Taos, and when I go through the pictures taken during that visit, the only human figure to be seen against the stunning landscape is that of a solitary French historian.

I was very aware of the many architects who had preceded us on such a pilgrimage, like Rudolph Schindler, who, in 1915, confided to Richard Neutra: "My trip to San Francisco and among Indians and cowboys are unforgettable experiences. That part of America is a country one can be fond of, but the civilized part is horrible, starting with the President down to the street-sweeper."¹⁰ Schindler considered Pueblo architecture the only true indigenous architecture he had seen in the United States, claiming they were the "only buildings which testify to the deep feeling for the soil on which they stand."¹¹ Upon his return to Chicago he proposed a design for Dr. Martin of a country house in adobe construction in Taos. The house was never built, but the "lesson" of Pueblo architecture remained a considerable if subtle presence in the development of Schindler's

California modernism. His friend Neutra shared a similar attitude. He saw adobe architecture for the first time reproduced in 1923 at the Museum of Natural History in New York and praised Pueblo Indians for being "the people who influenced the modern California building activity."¹² Their feelings are interesting in contrast to the one of their contemporaries, the great American "master" Frank Lloyd Wright, who feared "Indian or Mexican 'hut' builders." For all his love for the "organic" and poetic vision of buildings as "shelter," in Wright's opinion, architecture, like music and literature, was beyond the Hopi. For him the native way of building was not even sympathetic to the environment: "The Indian Hopi house is no desert house with its plain walls jumping out to your eyes from the desert forty miles or more away."¹³ I was also thinking about Aldo van Eyck and his ethnographic investigations of the architecture of the Dogon of Western Africa and the Amerindians of New Mexico, which he visited in 1961, and I was trying to remember if any of them made remarks about photography.

What came to mind was a chapter, tellingly titled "The Inscrutable," from Reyner Banham's *Scenes in America Deserta*. Like us, he came for the first time to Taos Pueblo in winter and found the place deserted, the central plaza empty. Like us, he concentrated his "photographic attention" on the "memorably strong and elementary buildings" as "so many, many architectural visitors have done." And then, in an arresting passage, Banham explained how he found it impossible to take a picture:

Trying to pursue surviving photographic light, I probed the terraces through the zoom lens until I suddenly came upon a scene that I could not bring myself to photograph. High on the terraces there was a white-robed figure, looking almost like a Roman statue, who appeared to be addressing the westering sun. I knew nothing about the priests of Taos at the time; his garb was unexpected and his action inscrutable. I felt, overwhelmingly and in a way that was new to me, that I had seen a piece, a small corner, of a culture that felt more alien, unknown, than anything I had encountered before. The sense of having come up against a glass wall through which seeing was possible but comprehension

was not [...] has never really gone away ever since.¹⁴

At the time I didn't know precisely in what climate Banham wrote this extraordinary statement. *Scenes in the America Deserta* was published in 1982, more than a decade after his first encounter with the native inhabitants of the Southwest. I felt his was the only acceptable stance, against a depressing panorama of more than a century of well-meaning travelers ready to embrace Indian culture and offer their own questionable and self-serving interpretations.

Taos

I knew about the town of Taos through the writings of the ailing "over-civilized" intellectuals and artists who had escaped there in between the two world wars to seek solace and renewal in the purified, dry desert air, and in the rituals performed by "primitives" still living at one with Nature and the Gods. Here came the capricious and willful American heiress Mabel Dodge Luhan to seek "Change with a capital C," as she wrote in *Edge of Taos Desert*, the fourth and last volume of her autobiography. She came to join her third husband, the painter Maurice Sterne, who wrote her a prophetic letter in November of 1917: "Dearest Girl, Do you want an object in life? [...] Save the Indians, their art-culture—reveal it to the world [...] That which Emilie Hapgood and others are doing for the Negroes, you could, if you wanted to, do for the Indians, for you have the energy [...] and, above all, there is somehow a strange relationship between yourself and the Indians."¹⁵ And indeed she devoted her immense vigour, money, and credit to save "her" Indians, spending the rest of her life at Taos, building, together with her new husband, the Pueblo Indian Antonio Luhan, a mythical adobe house designed to become "a kind of headquarters for the future [and] a base of operations for *really* a new world plan."¹⁶ There, the new and "whole" Luhan managed to attract and enlist to her cause an astounding number of leading figures of the post-war American and European intelligentsia: the painters Andrew Dasburg, Marsden Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe (who later set up her own house at Abiquiú); photographers Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Laura Gilpin; stage designer Robert Edmond Jones, choreographer Martha Graham, and others. A sojourn with the Luhans inspired Willa Cather

to write the thoughtful and delicate *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and Mary Austin also came, which led her on a trajectory that changed her life. A writer already familiar with the semi-arid country of south-central California and with the Paiute and Shoshone Indians, Austin arrived in Taos in 1919 and visited frequently, studying northern Pueblos and becoming involved in a famous controversy about the ownership of Indian lands. In 1924, she settled permanently in Santa Fe, helping to organize the Spanish Colonial Arts Society for the promotion and preservation of the Hispanic artistic tradition and eventually organizing her own home as an operative centre for the foundation of a new America. The arid Southwest was to be the setting "for the next fructifying world culture" because its climate could shape an ideal "American" community: egalitarian, environmentally conscious, a producer of "adequate symbols in art," and still practicing meaningful religious rituals. Progressive social reformer John Collier, another early visitor to the Mabel Dodge Luhan house in Taos, stayed on to become the "greatest Indian Commissioner" in the history of the U.S., and launched his crusade to defend the lands and rights of the Pueblos with an essay entitled "The Red Atlantis," joining an ever expanding circle that promoted a cultural nationalism rooted in regionalism. Anthropologist and folklorist Elsie Clews Parsons, another friend of the Luhans, fought along the same lines to preserve Native American art, rituals, and social organization as an alternative to a deracinated and neurotic Anglo-Saxon civilization. She also took advantage of the friendship of the Indians to publish information about their cults that they wished to keep secret, following on the footsteps of many ethnographers before her.

Even D.H. Lawrence came to Taos, lured once again by Luhan, fleeing a Europe devastated by mechanized war, to establish his utopia (Rananim) and immerse himself in the "oceanic" feeling of the primitive. His was an ambiguous, uneasy, encounter: the "old red forefathers" were devoted to a "cult of water-hatred" and never washed "flesh or rags." Their drumming and dancing resonated in the deepest recesses of his over-sophisticated European soul, evoking an ancient shared communion with the gods and nature, but signaled, at the same time, the impossibility of its recovery for civilized man. At the conclusion of the depiction of his first experience of Navajo ritual dancing, Lawrence wrote: "I have a dark-faced,



Approach to Shiprock, New Mexico, December 1997. Photo by author.



Goosenecks, Utah, December 1997. Photo by author.

bronze-voiced father far back in the resinous ages. My mother was no virgin. She lay in her hour with this dusky-lipped tribe-father. And I have not forgotten him. But he, like many an old father with a changeling son, he would deny me. But I stand on the far edge of their firelight, and am neither denied nor accepted. My way is my own, old red father; I can't cluster at the drum anymore."¹⁷ This impossibility was explored in its most grotesque ramifications in *Brave New World*, the ominous science fiction novel written in 1932 by Aldous Huxley, before his own visit to Taos, on the basis of a number of conversations with Lawrence. The book depicts a future society ordered in castes of laboratory-produced individuals, conditioned to like the work they are destined to perform, made happy by the government-distributed drug *soma*, and practicing compulsory, orgiastic, and meaningless sex. Only on a reservation in New Mexico, surrounded by barbed wire fences, are a few thousands Indians left to live a "savage life." Two tourists from the "civilized" world visit the reservation to observe with mounting disgust the filthiness and squalor of the Indians' existence. Puzzled and repulsed by the lack of hygiene, the sight of women actually giving birth, familial relations, and hideous ceremonies—Huxley here offers a quite fanciful portrayal of regional religious ceremonies, mixing Navajo rituals with the Hopi Snake Dance and the Spanish Penitentes' practice of self-flagellation—the tourists rescue one of the "savages" to bring him to the civilized world as an object of curiosity. The novel ends with the suicide of the rescued savage, unable to fit into the technologically controlled, consumerist, "happy" society that he finds inhuman and revolting.

I found the well-meaning, paternalistic, but eventually exploitative and even racist attitudes of these early-twentieth-century intellectuals disillusioned with western culture much more disturbing than the straightforward commercialization of entrepreneurs like Fred Harvey. Nevertheless, the former left quite a mark on the region and its houses; the landscape they described, painted, photographed, has become a major tourist attraction. One can visit Mabel Dodge Luhan's house, Ghost Ranch, where D.H. Lawrence lived with his wife Frieda, the chapel where his ashes are supposedly preserved, the residence of Georgia O'Keeffe in Abiquiu, and Brett House (the home of the painter Dorothy Brett, the only member of Lawrence's utopian community), which at the time of our visit had become an upscale

restaurant. Tourist brochures publicized the "stunning O'Keeffe country," and invited you to plan excursions to "D.H. Lawrence's haunts" in and around Taos. We did, of course retrace some of their footsteps, and I remember visiting the Kit Carson Home and Museum, and the house and studio of one of the co-founders of the Taos Society of Artists, the painter Ernest Blumenschein. But what I remember most about the town of Taos is the overwhelming New Age atmosphere. Later I learned that already at the beginning of the eighties the number of alternative healers proposing mental and physical therapies (about one hundred) matched the number of artists residing in the town. Most of the New Age healers took inspiration from Indian and Hispanic practices and subscribed to the legend that mystical, restorative forces were at work in the area—and a lot of them, of course, were Jungians. This was something I knew about. A lot of scholars concerned with the American Southwest refer to the heavy presence of Jungians in Taos.¹⁸ In 1972, for example, architectural historian Vincent Scully, in his monumental *Pueblo: Mountain, Village, Dance*, observes: "Taos attracts Jungians, especially, like flies to compost, and indeed everyone who is attracted to the mystery of humanity's buried thoughts."¹⁹

Carl Gustav Jung was one of the early visitors to Taos, a big catch of the infatigable Mabel Dodge Luhan, herself a Jungian. Jung went to sit at the feet of the priests of Taos Pueblo to gather a new perspective on the psyche of "the white man," and more material to support his theory of the archetypes and of a collective unconscious. Despite the apparently disparaging remark, Scully himself seems to follow in Jung's footsteps by proposing a parallel interpretation of Indian rituals and Greek tragedy. In the preface to his volume on the Pueblo, Scully presents the research, largely based on ethnographic literature, as the prolongation of his study for *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture*, a book he published in 1962. The analysis of the Pueblos, writes Scully, "grew directly out of my previous work in Greece, whose landscape the American Southwest strongly recalls, not least in the forms of its sacred mountains and the reverence of its old inhabitants for them. Only in the Pueblos, in that sense, could my Greek studies be completed, because their ancient rituals are still performed in them. The chorus of Dionysus still dances there."²⁰ Reyner Banham, in *Scenes*

in America Deserta, describes Scully's efforts as "the most splendid and disastrous of all paleface attempts to focus on 'the Indian phenomenon.'"²¹ Scully's "flights of fancy," explains Banham, were to some extent acceptable in the case of Greece, where he went equipped as a scholar trained in a classical tradition greatly indebted to Greek civilization. With regard to the Pueblo and their culture, which Scully knew only in "translation," he was utterly missing the mark by attempting the comparison between "polis" and "pueblo." In this controversy, I found myself on the side of Banham, even if Scully provides at least an interpretation—like Banham, I was at loss, fascinated but incapable of comprehension. And still I had not seen the Indians dancing.

Towards the conclusion of his extended critique of Scully, Banham oddly remarks: "What the book does deliver is photography (much of it his own) that has the unmistakable ring of truth."²² Is photography always truthful, and does it explain anything? One would expect a subtler comment from such a thoughtful and keen observer as Banham. In fact, his statement is also inaccurate: Scully states in the preface of his volume that he had to use a great deal of old photographs because of the restrictions already in place in numerous communities. Photography of any kind was forbidden in the Hopi and Keres towns. The Zuni villages, Taos, and Acoma permitted photography of the towns, but never of the dances. These prohibitions made his task very difficult, but Scully approved of them: "We can only be glad," he writes, "that the surviving Americans became so canny at last. Otherwise, one is soon doing it for the camera rather than for the god, and that is the end of it all."²³ The interdictions in most cases included (and still include) sketching, filming, and taping, and Scully is not the first scholar to signal them. The earliest ethnographic reports from the Southwest, including the famous (or infamous) narrative of Cushing, insist on the Indians' caution towards, and even active if hopeless resistance against, any form of representation of themselves and their ceremonies. In spite of this unwillingness, scientists, journalists, militaries, missionaries, tourists, and professional photographers systematically captured their physiognomies and most sacred rituals on camera. Some photographic reportages were conducted with the best intentions, even if with the utmost disregard for Indians beliefs and feelings. Edward S. Curtis's epic project of documenting

the "vanishing race" is a case in point.²⁴

Equally momentous in the field of art history was the photographic records collected in New Mexico and Arizona by Aby Warburg at the very end of the nineteenth century. Oddly neither Banham nor Scully mentions the visit of the German scholar, and the crucial role it assumed in the development of Warburg's "pathos formula" or the Dionysian impulse in the arts. Warburg went to the Southwest after a number of conversations with the ethnographers of the Smithsonian in Washington. He registered in his journal the Indians' displeasure with photography, but went on taking and buying pictures. At the same time, he kept mourning the killing of the primordial vitality and unity still expressed in Indian rituals, an irreparable loss brought about by the implacable scientific and technological character of the schizophrenic European "civilization."²⁵

In a recent essay, Beverly Singer, professor of anthropology and Native American studies at the University of New Mexico, refers to a renewal of interest for Indian photographic portraits in 1970s that led to a reviving trend in the collection of everything native.²⁶ The late 60s and early 70s were the years during which Scully and Banham conducted their explorations of the Southwest. During this period, Banham explains, "Indian culture was to be admired as an exemplar to wasteful and ecologically destructive Western man."²⁷ It must have been precisely the time of the epic migration of the hippies to the birthplaces of the counterculture to the American Southwest. Leaving Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco or Lower Manhattan (both increasingly overrun by junkies and other ugly characters, and constantly covered and exploited by the media), the flower children were converging on the arid and exotic territories of Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico in search of free (or cheap) land where they could experiment with alternative, communal ways of life. New Mexico, and Taos in particular, became the epicentre of the phenomenon. In 1969, Stewart Brand, editor of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, forum for the dispersed tribes of the counterculture, was proclaiming: "New Mexico is the center of momentum this year and maybe for the next several. More of the interesting intentional communities are there. More of the interesting outlaw designers are."²⁸

Around the same time occurred the mythical Alloy conference, which took place during the spring equinox of the same year in an area



Above and below: Monument Valley, Navajo Indian Reservation, Arizona/Utah border, December 1997. Photo by author.



situated between the Mescalero Apache Reservation and the Trinity atomic bomb test site. According to Brand, the initiator of the conference was Steve Baer, inventor of the Zome, a variation on Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome, which became a favourite model of construction in the newly founded countercultural communities. What Steve Baer had in mind, explains Stewart Brand, was “a meld of information on Materials, Structure, Energy, Man, Magic, Evolution, and Consciousness.”²⁹ Given this premise, the choice of the site for the conference was quite strategic, reflecting the interests not only of Steve Baer (who moved to Albuquerque after studying mathematics at the ETH in Zurich), but of most of the participants. In fact, many of 150 outlaw designers present at the conference shared a common fascination for the sciences and the most advanced technologies, including those developed by and for the military, and a profound interest for Native American culture—and not just because of the exemplary ecological attitude evoked by Banham. What attracted the generation who followed LSD prophets and gurus expounding the wisdom of exotic religions, of course, was the “magic” of the Indian system of beliefs and the spiritual practices involving the consumption of drugs.

Typical is the case of Stewart Brand, who, after studying ecology at Stanford, served in the U.S. Army, and then became involved in the work of USCO (“US” company), an anonymous group of East Coast artists producing avant-garde multimedia installations. Brand then moved to San Francisco to become a member of the Merry Pranksters, the crazy tribe of Ken Kesey, responsible for organizing the notorious Acid Tests. In the early sixties, while collaborating with USCO, Brand visited the Warm Springs, Blackfoot, Navajo, Hopi, Papago, and other Indian reservations to research and gather photographs and other materials for a multimedia experience called “America Needs Indian.” The event employed movie projectors, Indian dancers, and multiple soundtracks playing simultaneously. In 1966, it became part of the Trips Festival in San Francisco, one of the era’s greatest countercultural moments. Brand, who for a time was married to a Native American mathematician, mentions in the *Whole Earth Catalog* a recommended collection of publications written on Indians or by Indians:

The booklist that follows comes from two intense informal years (and five slack

ones) hanging around Indian reservations, anthropologists, and libraries. Long may Indians, reservations, anthropologists and libraries thrive! They gave me more reliable information, and human warmth, than dope and college put together. I am sure the books all by themselves cannot deliver The Native American Experience. For that you need time immersed in the land and neighborly acquaintance at least with some in fact Indians.”³⁰

He was preaching to the converted. Members of the counterculture in the Southwest were already fraternizing with the local natives, displaying an active interest in particular for the peyote ceremonies, living in tepees, wearing Indian attire, and adopting names like New Buffalo for their newly founded communities.

They were also rediscovering the previous generation of escapees and Indian lovers, from D.H. Lawrence to Aldous Huxley and Mabel Dodge Luhan. In the cult film *Easy Rider* (1969), the tragic account of a journey of two countercultural bikers travelling from Los Angeles to New Orleans in search of America (and which incidentally also presents a fictional portrayal of New Buffalo), one of the characters, played by Jack Nicholson, constantly quotes D.H. Lawrence. Dennis Hopper himself, after the incredible success of the film, moved to Taos and lived in the house of Mabel Dodge Luhan with the hope of creating an alternative movie centre.

This enthusiastic espousal of Indian costumes and way of life was inspired more by a fanciful image of the Native Americans than the reality of local tribal traditions. The tepee, for example, was far from being the typical habitation of the region. The Navajo built hogans and Pueblo adobe architecture. Likewise, names like New Buffalo evoked more the hunting and nomadic life of the tribes living on the plain than the sedentary habits of the Pueblo who subsisted mainly on a diet of corn, beans, and squash. Nevertheless, scholarly books, diaries, memories, and oral narratives copiously document these encounters and the tolerating attitude of the Native Americans.

In the eyes of many palefaces, an alliance was in fact staged between hippies and Native Americans. Years later, Brand noted: “By the end of the 60s, Indians had been adopted by the hippies, and to everyone’s astonishment, not least mine, it basically worked out. There was a transmission

of traditional frames of reference from older Indians to hippies, who were passing it to their young peers in the reservations and a lineage was inadvertently, but I think genuinely, preserved.”³¹ But what was the Indian perception of this supposed alliance? And did it really take place? Scully, in *Pueblo: Mountain, Village, Dance*, offers a glimpse into the Indian response by reporting an episode that took place in June 1968 at Shipaui. Hopi clowns were performing during the intervals of a kachina dance, “satirizing social workers and the agents of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At other times they have taken off hippies and missionaries, tourists, and especially all Indian lovers, always.”³² On a different occasion, reports Scully, in one of the kivas of Mishongnovi, in the course of a ritual, some hippies, “wrapped Indian-like but unfortunately not Hopi-like,” sat by mistake on the benches reserved for the dancers. “The priests,” writes Scully, “said nothing at first, but the women carried on until they stirred themselves to make the hippies move. A number of them passed out (zonk) later.”³³

The year after our trip, Philip Deloria, a historian of Indian descent, published *Playing Indian*, a thoughtful investigation of the way Americans since the time of the Boston Tea Party have repeatedly appropriated Indian dress and acted out Indian roles in order to shape their national identity. Retracing this fascinating history, Deloria devotes an entire chapter to Indians and the countercultural New Age, wherein he describes the response of real Indians. As a conclusion, Deloria observes: “Like many before them, they [the countercultural and new age Indians] had turned to Indianness as sign of all that was authentic and aboriginal, everything that could be true about America. [...] Yet like those who came before, they found that Indianness inevitably required real native people, and that those people called everything into question. Playing Indian, as always, had a tendency to lead one into, rather than out of, contradiction and irony.”³⁴ However, despite all the misunderstandings, inconsistencies and paradoxes of the encounters between hippies and Indians, these years of revolt against the dominant values of American society and of civil rights battles had a profound impact on Indian consciousness. As I was to learn later, in the unrest of the time American Indians found the seeds of a transformation that has recently been compared to a cultural revolution. But in the winter of 1997, during the journey that took us to

the Zuni and Hopi towns high on their mesas, to the bare and silent remains of Canyon de Chelly, Mesa Verde, and Chaco Canyon, to the ominous museums of Los Alamos, to the unimaginable gorgeousness of the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, and Shiprock, and to the reservations sprinkled with casinos and dialysis clinics, the fruits of that revolution were still unknown to me. The Indians, selling souvenirs, acting as guides, and living in evident poverty, remained a baffling presence. And then, at the very end of our trip, we saw them dancing.

Acoma

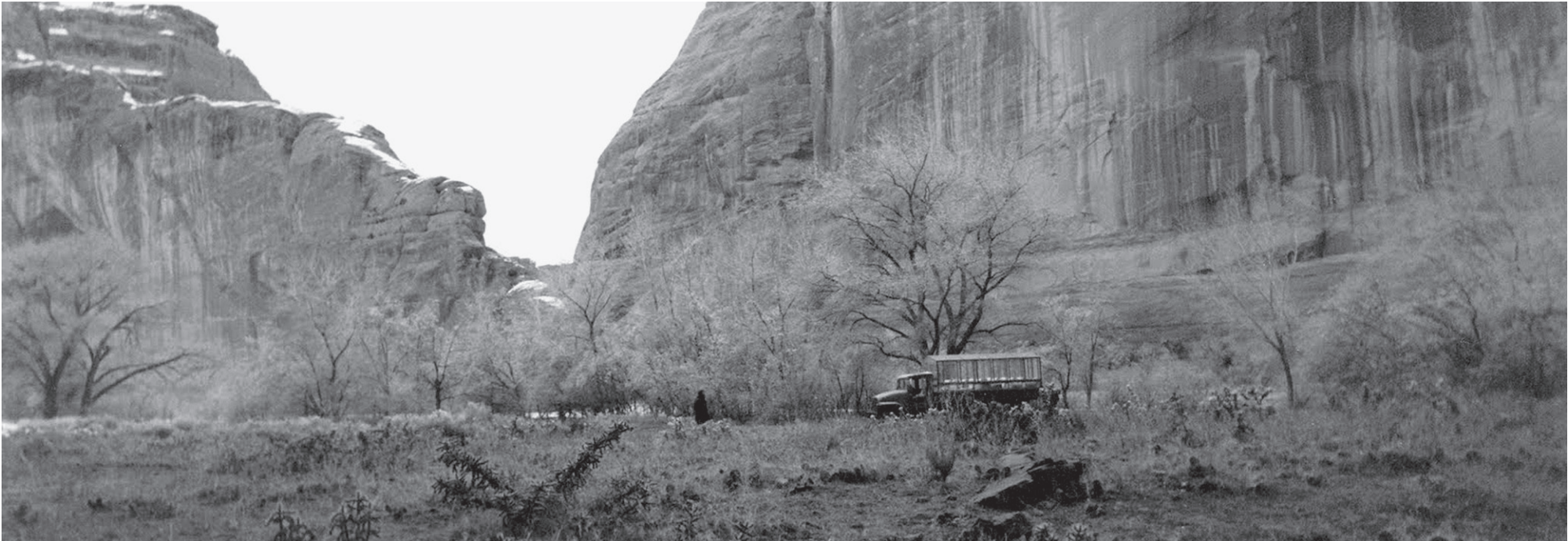
The “Sky City,” almost an afterthought. One of us insisted on visiting it, even though it was our final day and we had to catch planes in different directions early in the afternoon. We left the last of the Best Western hotels very early in the morning. It was still dark and exceedingly cold. We had to leave our car at the foot of the mesa where Acoma has stood, unchanged, for centuries. A guide drove us up in the astonishing radiance of the morning. Elemental adobe compositions, blinding sunshine on snow and ice, a terse and freezing sky, drums and stamping feet—it was December, time to celebrate the winter solstice. Once more, we were the only tourists. We sat, unused cameras in our hands, in a corner of the church San Estevan del Rey. Dressed in traditional attire and beautifully masked, the men came, and the adolescent boys, and the maids, and the mature women and the children, joyously dancing, honoring the bountiful new year to come. Again we were speechless, a silence that stayed with us beyond the quick adieus at the airport. For the first time in my life I felt the unbelievable power of a traditional society and the experience still haunts me ten years later.

Coda

In the early 50s, one widely advertised attraction of Las Vegas was its proximity to the Nevada Test Site. An iconic 1957 photograph of “Miss Atomic Bomb,” portraying showgirl Lee Merlin of the Sands Hotel with a cotton mushroom cloud added to the front of her swimsuit, is an image that has been reproduced in hundreds of publications and embodies the spirit of the time. One can still buy souvenirs displaying the long-legged blonde raising her arms, euphorically celebrating the



Above and below: Canyon de Chelly, Apache County, Arizona, December 1997. Photo by author.



extravagant face of the Atomic Age. Las Vegas, the city of “sin,” was strangely gaining a new legitimacy by joining the Cold War effort and transforming the spectre of nuclear annihilation into spectacle. Documents about the Las Vegas of the time, like the famous postcard advertising the Pioneer Club (circa 1955), with its winking cowboy sign and a glowing red mushroom cloud in the distance, show how images related to atomic tourism quite often employed the strategy of association with the pioneer and Native American past of the area. Resorts and gaming establishment like El Rancho or the Hotel Last Frontier in the early 40s were offering “authentic” western experiences like horseback riding, BBQs, and line dancing. The 1950s saw the creation of the Last Frontier Village, a sort of theme park, complete with old western post office, general store, jail and museum illustrating the Indian roots of the region. In 1955, the Hotel Last Frontier added a new building to the north of its property, naming it the New Frontier Hotel and Casino. The intention was to discard the western theme in favour of a modern atomic or space-age experience. Nevertheless, contemporary photos show attendants dressed in cowboy attire and full Indian regalia waiting for the guests at the main entrance. After reducing to entertainment the painful history of war, domination, and conquest over the western territories and their indigenous occupants, Las Vegas was performing the same operation on the Cold War and the threat of obliteration of life and civilization: the tragedies and perils of the old and new wars were reassuringly contained and gloriously reframed by the powerful, all-American myth of the Frontier.

In February 2005, the Atomic Testing Museum opened in Las Vegas. An affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, it’s located only a mile from the Strip and appears to be quite a popular tourist destination. To judge from the numerous postings on the internet, visitors love to be portrayed in front of photographs of spectacular nuclear explosions. The mission of the museum is to present scientific matters in a compelling way, preserve the legacy of the Nuclear Test Site, and promote public accessibility and understanding of the site. The various galleries document the history of the NTS in the context of the Cold War, show how the Atomic Age was reflected in pop culture, and display photographs, films and interviews with on-site workers and protestors. The most spectacular section of the museum is the

Ground Zero Theatre, a replica of a bunker where visitors can watch a video of an atomic explosion accompanied by a realistic multi-sensory experience of deafening sounds, shaking, vibrations and blasts of hot air. Not far from the Theatre are the Steward of the Land Galleries I and II. The first covers geology, hydrology, and radiation monitoring. The second is dedicated to archeology, endangered species, and Native Americans. According to the museum authority, a collection illustrating crafts and various objects used by the ancient inhabitants of the NTS is being completed with the collaboration of a local tribe.

Nuclear power and American Indians

At the Atomic Testing Museum, we find the association, albeit carefully reframed and updated, already constructed and exploited by the Las Vegas of the 50s. At the museum, the Indians, instead of being presented like the warriors of a Buffalo Bill show, are offered to the visitors as descendants of a primeval civilization living in harmony with the arid territory. The label “stewards of the land” seems to suggest a possible reclamation of the technologically devastated terrain thanks to the everlasting wisdom of its original occupants. A similar strategy is deployed at the Nuclear Test Site, which has now also become a tourist destination. The signs posted on the fence surrounding the NTS, after describing the function and the origin of the area, tactfully announce: “Archeological studies of the NTS area have revealed continuous occupation by prehistoric man from about 9,500 years ago. Several prehistoric cultures are represented. The last aboriginal group to occupy the site was the Southern Paiute, who foraged plant foods in season and occupied the area until the arrival of the pioneers.”

Once again Americans are playing Indian, or better still playing with the Indians. The Native Americans represented at the museum and mentioned on the NTS signs are not the contemporary inhabitants of the reservations living in poverty next to contaminated areas, suffering from obesity, diabetes, heart disease, alcoholism, making an uncertain life catering to tourists. The lands that have been taken from the original owners are symbolically “returned” by the institutions, but not to the Indians of the present, immersed and transformed by the reality of contemporary America. The reinstated Indians offered to the

tourist gaze are safely frozen in time. They are the custodians of immemorial knowledge, captive to tradition and authenticity.

Indeed, tradition and authenticity are the traps that a new generation of Native American artists are exposing and trying to evade. They are questioning and challenging the carefully constructed prison where they are condemned to conform to a required stereotype, and their weapon of choice is very often photography. From a wealth of provocative artists, I will mention only three examples.

In 2005, Zig Jackson became the first Native American photographer represented in the collection of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.. Jackson donated four photographic prints from each of three series. The first group of photographs, under the title *Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian*, humorously represents invasive tourists taking pictures of reservation Indians. The second, *Native American Veterans*, more somberly honours military veterans and their families from Plain Indian reservations. *Entering Zig’s Indian Reservation*, is the final, darkly amusing, series in which Jackson represents himself. Wearing Indian attire and sunglasses, he poses at various sites in San Francisco next to a huge, official-looking sign that says, “Entering Zig’s Reservation.” Under the heading, the sign lists private property rules that include “No Picture Taking,” “No Hunting,” “No Air Traffic,” and “New Agers Prohibited.”

Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie, a Diné/Seminole/Muscogee, is an artist that privileges photography as a medium and conduit for political expression, and became internationally famous with *The Damn Series* of 1997. When exhibited at the Barbican Gallery in London, two images in particular captured the attention of the audience and the press: *This is not a commercial, this is my homeland*, and *Damn! There goes the Neighbourhood*. The first depicts Monument Valley, the iconic southwestern panorama of mesas and red mittens employed innumerable times as a setting for advertisements and films. The superimposed titular inscription subtracts it from the realm of cliché and reframes the iconic scenery as sovereign Diné land. The second represents a desert landscape with an old photograph in the foreground of an Indian warrior holding a smoking gun, and a garish, bullet-ridden Oscar Meyer Wiener-mobile behind him. Once again, the inscription that seems to come out, cartoon-like,

from the mouth of the warrior, eloquently denounces the fate of the Indian people and of the lands they have lost.

In 1992, James Luna, a Luiseño Indian, proposed a performance at the Whitney Museum in New York entitled *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*. Visitors were asked to pick a real Indian from a selection of cardboard cut-outs and invited to take a Polaroid. The work was inspired by a trip through Navajo land during which Luna had seen Indians selling souvenirs and catering to tourists.



James Luna, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*. Performed for the National Museum of the American Indian, Columbus Day, Washington D.C. Train Station, October 10, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist.



James Luna, *Artifact Piece*, in “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, in collaboration with the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.



Above and below: Clouds dissolving over the Grand Canyon after a winter storm, Arizona, December 1997. Photo by author.



A few years before, in an exhibition called *Artifact Piece*, Luna had spectacularly called attention to the exhibition of Native American people and their relics by displaying himself in a glass case at the Museum of Man in San Diego. For days he remained motionless, dressed in a loincloth and surrounded by personal documents and ceremonial objects. Many members of the public were stunned by the discovery that the unmoving figure on exhibit was actually a living and breathing individual. In another memorable performance, *Petroglyphs in Motion*, Luna presented a non-linear history of Native American man using typical stereotypes. Beginning with a petroglyph, Luna in turn impersonated Shaman, Rockabilly, War Veteran, Drunk, and Coyote. Vertiginously traveling through time, his characters mutate, learn, and evolve.

The powerful works of these artists eloquently speak of a new form of resistance and self-representation. The camera, held for so long in the hands of the white man, the scientist, the missionary, the military, the tourist, is no longer kept at bay with interdictions very often ignored. Photography, now in the hands of American Indians, is no longer there to record stereotypes, immortalize tradition, or confirm authenticity. Poignantly or ironically it exposes unbalanced systems of relationships, different perceptions of time, history and reality. The Indian wars have moved to new battlefields. Paraphrasing James Luna, who in 2005 together with Ed Ruscha represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, tourists beware: the petroglyphs are in motion. x

Notes

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2. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 23-24.

3. Paul Chaat Smith, "Luna remembers," in *James Luna Emendation*, 51st International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian (Washington and New York, 2005), 26.

4. On nineteenth-century ethnography in North America, see Curtis Hinsley, *The Smithsonian and the American Indian: Making a Moral Anthropology in Victorian America* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981); Curtis Hinsley, "Ethnographic Charisma and Scientific Routine: Cushing and Fewkes in the American Southwest, 1879-1893" in *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork. History of Anthropology, Vol. 1*, ed. George W. Stocking Jr. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 53-69.

5. For a contextual analysis of the interpretation of Ruth Benedict, see George W. Stocking Jr., "The Ethnographic Sensibility of the 1920s and the Dualism of the Anthropological Tradition," in *Romantic Motives: Essays on Anthropological Sensibility, History of Anthropology, Vol. 6*, ed. George W. Stocking Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 208-276.

6. Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1979); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988); James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fisher, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1986); *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct*, ed. Roy Frank Ellen (London: Academic Press, 1984).

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Postcolonial Worlds, eds. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1999).

8. Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

9. *Inventing the Southwest: The Fred Harvey Company and Native American Art*, eds. Kathleen L. Howard and Diana F. Pardue (Northland Publishing, 1996). See also *The Great Southwest of the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railway*, eds. Martha Weigle and Barbara A. Babcock (Phoenix: The Heard Museum, 1996); *Visions and Visionaries: The Art and Artists of the Santa Fe Railway*, eds. Sandra D'Emilio and Suzan Campbell (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991); and Virginia L. Grattan, *Mary Colter: Builder upon the Red Earth* (Grand Canyon: Grand Canyon Historical Association, 1992).

10. Rudolph Schindler, Letter to Neutra, February 9, 1915, in *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture: A Biography and History*, ed. Thomas S. Hines (Los Angeles/Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 321.

11. Rudolph Schindler, quoted in Elizabeth A.T. Smith, "R.M. Schindler: An Architecture of Invention and Intuition," in *The Architecture of R.M. Schindler*, eds. Elizabeth A.T. Smith and Michael Darling (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), 20.

12. Richard Neutra, Letter to Dione Neutra, n.d. 1923, in Thomas S. Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture: A Biography and History* (Los Angeles/Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 46.

13. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Organic Architecture," *Architects Journal*, August 1934, quoted in *Shelter and Society*, ed. Paul Oliver (New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), 16.

14. Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserta* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1989), 119-120.

15. Maurice Sterne, quoted in Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Edge of the Taos Desert: An Escape to Reality* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), xi-xii.

16. Lois Palken Rudnik, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 93.

17. D.H. Lawrence, "Indians and an Englishman," in *D.H. Lawrence and New Mexico*, ed. Keith Sagar (Paris/London: Alyscamp Press, 1995), 10.

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19. Vincent Scully, *Pueblo: Mountain, Village, Dance* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 84.

20. Ibid., xiii-xiv.

21. Banham, *Scenes*, 126.

22. Ibid., 127.

23. Scully, *Pueblo*, xvi.

24. Among the vast literature on Curtis, see for example *Sacred Legacy: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian*, ed. Christopher Cardozo (New York/London: Simon & Schuster, 2000). On Indians and photography, see Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2002); James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography: A Critical History of Representation of an American People* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002).

25. See *Photographs at the Frontier: Aby Warburg in America 1895-1896*, eds. Benedetta Cestelli Guidi and Nicholas Mann. See also Joseph L. Koerner, *Aby Warburg, Le rituel du Serpent: Art et Anthropologie* (Paris: Macula, 2003); and Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement* (Paris: Macula, 1998).

26. Beverly R. Singer, *Husk of Time: The Photographs of Victor Matyas* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2006), ix-xviii.

27. Banham, *Scenes*, 120. Banham's first encounter the American desert took place in February 1968.

28. Steward Brand, "Report from Al-loy," *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (Portola Institute and Random House, 1971), 112.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 382.

31. Quoted in Andrew G. Kirk, *The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 39.

32. Scully, *Pueblo*, 320.

33. Ibid., 330-331.

34. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1998), 180. An expanded and revised version of this text has been published as Philip J. Deloria, "Counterculture Indians and the New Age," in *Imagine Nation: The Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael Doyle (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 159-188. On Indianness and American society, see Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

35. James Luna's performance for the 2005 Venice Biennale, *Emendatio*, was sponsored by the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian.

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