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Jill Magid

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

Postcommodity

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dînmuu (My Blood
is in the Water),
2010, mixed-media
installation (mule
deer taxidermy,
wood poles, water,
amplifier and drum)*

Reimagining Ceremonies: A Conversation with Postcommodity

– Bill Kelley, Jr

Postcommodity are a collective comprised of Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, Kade L. Twist and Nathan Young, four artists based in different cities throughout New Mexico and Arizona. Formed in 2007, the group exhibit regularly in the US as well as abroad, and run an experimental art space, Spirit Abuse, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Before agreeing to have this published conversation, I proposed to have one off the record to discuss our mutual interests in art and the discourses around indigeneity, as well as our distinct experiences. For my part, I have a background in colonial studies, and have recently been engaged in community-based projects in Latin America, particularly around the Andean region. In speaking

reimagining the ecologies of knowledge we have privileged – in other words, who is invited to speak, write or exhibit. How we rewrite the theory and history of art will inevitably depend on how we question these boundaries.

Bill Kelley, Jr: You all seem to work with sound independently of the collective, and sound experimentation comes across as a strong unifying characteristic. Given that you all live in different cities and you all work independently as sound artists, does sound bring you together in terms of production?

Raven Chacon: I would say that a lot of our installations have the functionality of a musical instrument. I wouldn't say it is conscious; it is the way we work through the pieces, and how we use the forms of musical instruments as containers, or vehicles, to get ideas out there. Also, music is one of the ways we came together. We have all been, to a certain degree, active in the noise underground movement that was flourishing in the US around 2007–09. Kade has been in different bands. Nathan has done a lot of electronic music. Cristóbal has studied acoustics and sound production as part of his PhD. And my background encompasses all that, but I have also performed as a classical musician, touring and composing chamber music. I think what we all have in common is an interest in non-conventional music and how it can be applied to sound within an installation environment, or in a video or performance.

Kade L. Twist: I do think sound is the glue that holds us together. It provides a common language to communicate with each other throughout our collaborative processes. And that's what we have built our identity around. You know, the history of art is largely deaf. If you go into the Museum of Modern Art [in New York], sound is rarely present; or when it is, it is complementary to the work, or presented

Bill Kelley, Jr speaks to Postcommodity about how their use of duration, sound and collaboration refracts the representation of identity.

with Postcommodity, I was immediately reminded that the critical frames and theoretical language that are being exercised within circles of indigenous artists and cultural workers in one part of the hemisphere are no indication of those employed by native peoples in another. Much history is shared, but the artistic freedom and self-determination that are so often taken for granted carry central meaning in the work of Postcommodity. They are not only concerned with subverting stereotypes, but also with being the artists they want to be, despite economic and social pressures to do otherwise – a seemingly universal concern. What they call their 'indigenous lens' affirms complexity – and a future – by constantly renewing its focus. Our conversations also reaffirmed my belief that the extra-disciplinary nature of a critical practice such as theirs carries a particular theoretical mandate to stretch the boundaries of art by fundamentally



as a subdued, second-class medium. I think this issue is what motivates and drives us, along with many other artists working with sound.

BK, Jr: Raven, you have said elsewhere that sound is a critical part of indigenous culture. How does sound operate in *Postcommodity*'s examination of indigenous perspectives?

RC: Well, a lot of my own practice reflects on how sound might be used in a ceremony. It doesn't necessarily refer to any particular tribal music or sacred event, but rather how it might function in such a ceremony. It has to do with sound as a measurement of time, how it can stretch and condense time and how it is usually part of some other kind of activity seeking to alter perceptions of time within that gathering. So that activity could be a ceremony, a prayer or some extraneous activity, perhaps work. As we always say, sound is such a big part of everyday life, and yet it is often neglected. I think indigenous people are more conscious of how sound is used in everyday life.

BK, Jr: In our previous conversation, one of you described *Postcommodity*'s work acting as 'reimagined ceremonies', which really stayed with me. You have this

background in creating transformative or even ceremonial experiences, engaging knowledges and histories with which the art world generally has had difficulty reconciling. The more I thought about it, the more that lens seemed deeply de-colonial in that it represents the capacity to bring, as Enrique Dussel would say, a trans-modern lens that enriches an otherwise isolated aesthetic viewpoint.

KLT: A lot of our work deals with symbolic representations of meaning, with metaphorical contexts and with processes of redefining space as a means of advancing our shared vision of cultural self-determination as indigenous peoples. Being able to connect to both secular and tribal narratives, and passing from one to the other without any sort of warning or boundary — this is where I think our work becomes a form of reimagined ceremony.

Cristóbal Martínez: I think of *Postcommodity*'s reimagined ceremonies as places where our diverse indigenous world views converge with each other, while also intersecting with all sorts of media which are at the heart of the very systems we critique, such as the global economy. I don't see this as a de-colonial practice, but rather as an enquiry-based and discursive process



Above and left:
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underpinned by indigenous knowledge systems, all within a context of velocity.

BK, Jr: The concept of a reimagined ceremony set me off to thinking about the relationship between ceremony and the aesthetic experience, or rather the history of Western aesthetic experiences. In the minds of those thinkers long ago – Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Schiller – the aesthetic experience was rooted in the language of autonomy – the autonomy and liberation of both the object and the self. Scholars like the Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui warn us that perspectives rooted in autonomy and liberation are, more often than not, quite Western in their interests. I understand that as a group you don't generally use the term 'de-colonisation' as a rubric for your practice, nor are you interested in being painted into an activist corner, but am I correct in saying that to reimagine ceremonies is an invitation to ask something different of art and that experience?

KLT: I hope so. One thing that I would add is that the word 'autonomy' is antithetical to tribal perspectives, so by engaging in reimagined ceremonies, we are conjuring up interconnectedness, or trying to

approach the interconnected world and make that explicit. But to answer your earlier question, the reimagined ceremonies that we hope to elicit with our work invite people to have a performative and experiential relationship with metaphorical environments. In that sense, it places a significant amount of respect on the shoulders of audiences, because we are trusting them to bring that mindset into the environments we create – which often are spaces within institutions of Western cultural, economic and political power, where this sort of mindset is rarely acknowledged or encouraged.

RC: If there was another word, other than 'activism', we surely wouldn't mind being associated with that. But the problem I have with the word 'activism' is that it is choosing one side, or one point of view, and that becomes another world view. And I think that it is the job of an artist to avoid that. We also recognise that there is a lineage of people creating direct action, a tradition of our ancestors, that we would never want to take credit for.

Nathan Young: Are we asking a larger question about art? This is not something we have ever sat down and made a conscious decision to work towards. But we do consider Postcommodity

a vehicle to create work through what we sometimes call an indigenous lens. We all come from places that are informed by an idea of art that is non-Western, and are marked by how those practices look and take shape, say in my and Kade's community in Oklahoma or Raven's in New Mexico, where there are very rich material cultures and not a lot of white boxes. Art is life, and life is art in a lot of these places, and people live in ways that — if you were to consider it in Western terms — you could call an art practice. So I think it is only natural for us, as individuals who are also able to move throughout the art world, to really sense this difference. We care about contemporary art, we talk about what we see going on, we try to keep up with people who are writing about it, it is what we are interested in. But, sometimes — and it is kind of a hindsight thing — this larger question comes up, regarding how what is commonly understood as contemporary art rubs up against how we live our lives and where we are all coming from.

RC: You know, another thing that all four of us share is probably a background of having family believing it was absurd of us to go into the field of art as a way to make a living.

BK, Jr: Ah, join the club...

RC: So I think that I have always thought if it was going to be an absurd thing to do, then everything I do should be absurd, not rational. And I think that when we all came together, there were no real limitations in what we should do. Perhaps even naïvely trusting that one of the others would know how to do it correctly. [*Laughs.*]

KLT: Don't underestimate that! [*Laughs.*]

BK, Jr: In writing about your work, Gerald McMaster compared it to Jimmie Durham's, who sees the problem of Native American identity in society as perpetuating stereotypes — always needing to represent or perform indigeneity.¹ Does the question of complexity also relate to the need to discuss particular issues but not necessarily deal with them in ways that people are expecting?

KLT: The unexpected, or the new, is really about repositioning what is out there. And for us, it is about repositioning metaphor, expectation or history. That's really essential. We are very aware of those issues, and there is a lot of intentionality behind our work and the way in which we attempt to subvert expectations. In regards to indigeneity, however, I don't know if I agree wholeheartedly with Gerald. It's not that we are not performing indigeneity. I think we are repositioning what that performance is.

CM: For many people, the word indigeneity can evoke oversimplified cultural models that lead to stereotypes. Producing simplified cultural models is an aspect of meaning-making, which humans do to survive. However, part of this survival also includes the weaponisation of cultural models as a way to control representation. I think it becomes challenging to confront this battle in the art world because these weapons are also hegemonic. So I think Kade hits the nail on the head when he states that we try to test and bend expectations. This is how you build complexity, and it is only through complexity that we can move beyond our penchant to stereotype or believe in the accuracy of stereotypes. I, for one, am not a big fan of this aspect of humanity — stereotypes have not been kind to our peoples — and I hate to think that I might be contributing to the process of stereotyping my own people. Perhaps this is one of the many reasons why noise and confusion are places where we prefer to hang out.

RC: I think once artists get past the idea that they have to educate the world, or once Native artists can get past having to speak about who they are, then a whole world opens up about what the discussion is. And all of a sudden speaking about the past isn't as important anymore. You start focusing on the future, speaking about the future, imagining the future of indigenous people.

BK, Jr: *Repellent Fence* is only going to be viewable for four days, from 9 to 12 October, but you have been working on

1 See Gerald McMaster, guest essay for the exhibition 'It Wasn't The Dream of Golden Cities' (Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2 August 2010-2 January 2011, curated by Ryan Rice), available at www.iaia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Gerald-McMaster-Guest-Essayist.pdf (last accessed on 15 March 2015).



Postcommodity,
*It's My Second Home,
But I Have a Very
Spiritual Connection
With This Place*, 2010,
two-channel video
installation, colour,
sound, 30min, stills



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it for a very long time and it has a lot of moving parts. Can you talk to us about that process?

NY: *Repellent Fence* was really the first work that Postcommodity envisioned, and is probably what really brought the collective together. We have been working on it since 2007 — a very, very early stage for us. So, close to ten years now. *Repellent Fence* is an ephemeral monument made of a large number of floating spheres, which are each made in the shape of a predator's eye and will bisect or cross the Mexican-American border. In the early stages of the project, it was really important for us to try to reposition the conversation away from lines of nationality — the US-Mexico dichotomy — and to focus on thinking more about it as a human rights crisis affecting indigenous peoples. We were really considering things like human migration paths in a wider historical context: natural migration paths; migrations for medicine, for ceremony; things that truly affect our lives today as indigenous people.

KLT: It's like a classic social practice piece where the artist has this idea of what the piece should be and then reaches out to a particular community to try to find ways to produce work that gets to that point. We all know how that goes.

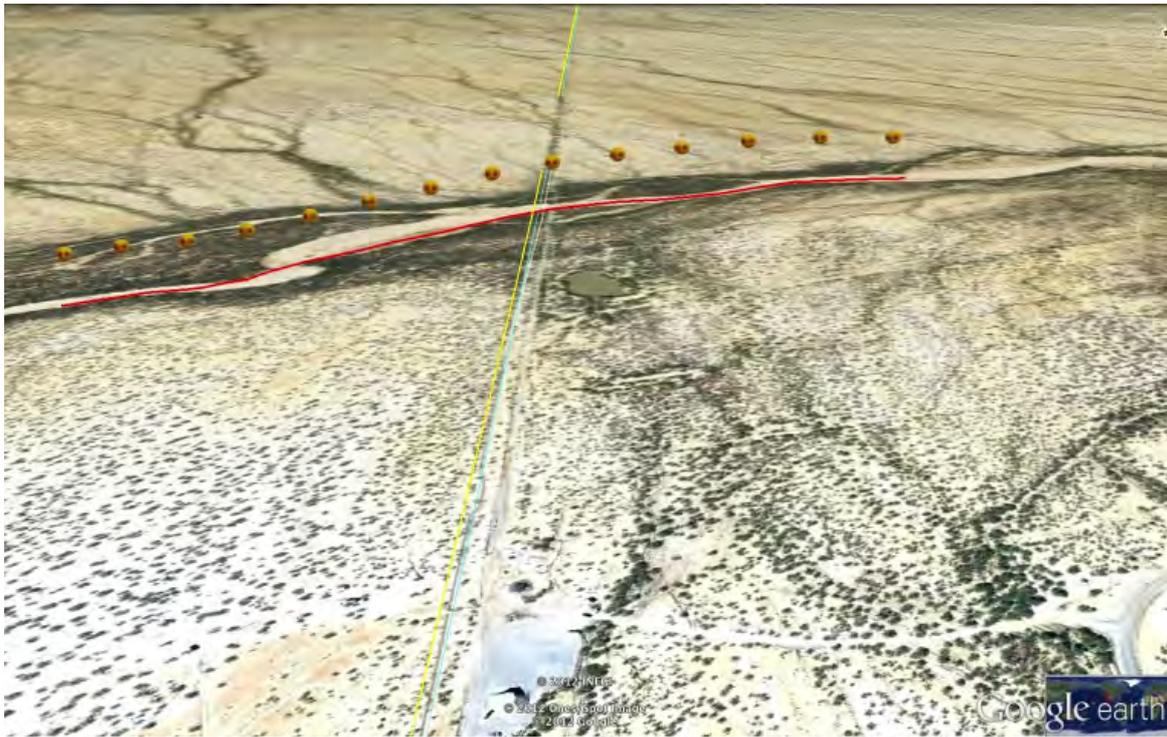
Over the past two to three years we have been trying to find a location for *Repellent Fence*. We started with the Tohono O'odham Nation, a tribe west of Tucson, Arizona that is divided by the US-Mexico border. At that time we contextualised the piece as a metaphor for that division, and all the social, cultural, ecological, political and economic implications of a tribe forcibly divided by an externally devised border. Initially it was a very American Indian-centric project. When we realised that there was no way we would be able to do *Repellent Fence* at Tohono O'odham, we decided to stay within the original Tohono O'odham homelands and still address that idea. As we started moving the fence eastward, we started thinking more about how the project had to do with the entire hemisphere. This is clearly a hemispherical issue, not just a Tohono O'odham issue.

So, as we went from location to location — from west of Tucson to east of Tucson, then east of Nogales and finally to Douglas and Agua Prieta, two adjacent cities divided by the US-Mexican border — we figured out, together with those communities, what the piece was really about, which was quite different from our initial idea. The project found a home within the communities that were most interested in working collaboratively to bring this co-determined metaphor to life and to use the work as a vehicle to facilitate dialogue around social and economic policies. Within this broader context, the iconography of the 'open eyes' on the balloons — which are one of the oldest indigenous symbols in the hemisphere, stretching from Central America all the way to Canada and into Alaska — took on much more powerful meaning. We have realised, collaboratively, that this piece is ultimately about demonstrating our

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interconnectedness through the land, the people, the cultures of this hemisphere, and connecting the past with the present and future. This piece now becomes a metaphorical suture for healing, for bringing the land and people together, and for thinking about how issues of indigeneity extend well beyond the construct of American Indians.

From a social practice model, the project evolved into the realm of metaphor through the materiality of human relationships, which was really powerful for us. We knew that this was it: this was the location, these were the communities we wanted to work with. And yet it became a much more international discourse than we ever imagined. At that point, all the partners started falling in place. Through formal networks, we set up partnerships with the cities of Douglas and Agua Prieta, the Mexican Consulate and the US border patrol. They are all looking for a positive metaphor that can restore relationships to how they used



to be in the 1970s, before the war on drugs. Everybody wants a binational dialogue that will make the borderlands a more desirable place to live. And this desire is still germane to the Tohono O’odham experience. But it is also germane to the Americas, because the borderlands are a microcosm of the entire hemisphere: all the social, cultural, political and economic issues that are present across the Americas have become hyperbolic in the borderlands.

BK, Jr: I am particularly drawn to how you mark time in your practice generally, and in this project in particular. It seems to me that when you are talking about people who walked across these lands — whether it’s ancient trade routes or more modern-day migratory patterns defined by the boundaries of 1848 — you have to deal with the reactionary and nervous energy around migration currently in place in the US. This project seems to operate with a different clock in mind, reflecting on this land and who lives on it. It is a quality present in much of your work — marking time along different or parallel temporal matrices. Is there something there?

RC: There is! And I have thought about it in relation to *Repellent Fence* a lot. I think our sound and music practice, especially improvised music, has left

us with the thinking that there is no confinement for duration in what we do.

Every piece we have done wants to be temporary. Sometimes it does that by using resources that aren’t available, such as in the swimming pool piece *The Night Is Filled With the Harmonics of Suburban Dreams* [2011]. Other times, by using a natural resource, such as the blood of a deer, helium or sound. We are very much against permanence and we just don’t think that some of these things are meant to be there for long.

NY: Time and transformation go hand in hand. We are trying to create environments or experiences that might be able to transform the viewer in some way.

CM: I would characterise what we are doing as a symbolic act of indigenous trade, creating a momentary fissure in the border fence that in and of itself envisages an alternative reality for the future, one that remembers the old pre-Columbian trade routes. In other words, *Repellent Fence* is moving forward into the future by way of remembering the past — the time of our ancestors — and by reminding the public that those who cross today are not immigrants but indigenous peoples, responding to the colonisation of their market systems. As goods and services go south at prices Mexican producers and distributors

Postcommodity,
*Repellent Fence (US/
Mexico Borderlands)*,
2015



Postcommodity,
*Repellent Eye Over
Phoenix*, 2008,
site-specific
intervention
and installation.
Installation view,
Phoenix, AZ

cannot compete with, indigenous peoples move northward on their own ancestral homelands in search of economic opportunity. Indigenous trade and the movement of peoples across the border is a self-determined action toward equity, something that Robert Miller argues is a key characteristic of indigenous capitalism in the Western hemisphere.² *Repellent Fence*, then, is ephemeral but contextualised within a long-view perception of history transitioning well into the future – the bending of millennia in four days.

KLT: You could call that an organic critique of Western perceptions of time and the Western desire for permanent gratification. It's not like we set out to intentionally critique the Western imagination, or Western ways of being. In our case, it's just the result of four Indians working together as an artist collective.

BK, Jr: Or in this case, you could call it a critique of leaving one's mark on the land.

KLT: For sure, for sure. That's a little more intentional.

² See Robert J. Miller, *Reservation 'Capitalism': Economic Development in Indian Country*, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012.