

ART OF ENGAGEMENT

VISUAL POLITICS IN CALIFORNIA AND BEYOND

PETER SELZ

WITH AN ESSAY BY SUSAN LANDAUER

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ON RACISM, DISCRIMINATION, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

CHAPTER 3

LIVING IN A DEMOCRACY, WE TEND TO BELIEVE in people's fundamental rights to equality, life, liberty, participation in government, and political expression as intuitively recognizable. How could anyone argue against such basic human rights? Yet, as history has shown again and again, during World War II, the McCarthy years, and the administration of George W. Bush, these rights can be easily and quickly destroyed.

In 1948 the two-year-old United Nations General Assembly, representing close to sixty countries, adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many of this declaration's provisions are grounded in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights and the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, but the U.N. document extends these protections to "all members of the human family." It specifies the rights to enjoy life, liberty, and security of person (with a specific prohibition against slavery); to be protected against unreasonable search and seizure and to be guaranteed due process; to exercise freedom of thought, con-

science, religion, opinion, expression, and assembly; to participate in one's own government; and to work and to organize to protect workers' rights. All these rights, it states, are held by "everyone . . . without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

The Constitution of the State of California also expressly protects many of these fundamental rights. Reinforcing the guarantees made by the U.S. Constitution, the California Constitution explicitly states: "All people are by nature free and independent and have inalienable rights. . . . Every person may freely speak, write and publish his or her sentiments on all subjects . . . [and] assemble freely to consult for the common good." The California Constitution also specifies the rights to freedom of religion and equal access to privileges and immunities, and it prohibits the infliction of cruel or unusual punishment, even though California allows the death penalty.

traditions and paradoxes of southern culture, he paints a dismembered head of Malcolm X wearing Hollywood sunglasses and a white Klan hood, calling this painting, which is in the shape of an altarpiece, *Boy in the Hood* (2000) in reference to John Singleton's 1991 movie *Boyz n the Hood*. Martin Luther King Jr. appears in *The Only Begotten Son* (1997–98), along with a Nike logo and architectural drawings. It can be difficult to figure out a Somerville painting, but the artist encourages the viewer to become engaged in doing so. More direct in its meaning is *Everybody Needs a Mamma* (2001), depicting an elderly, wrinkled black servant in a white kerchief with Walt Disney birds chirping and, below, the legend "I'm living on Fifth Avenue."

In *Raft of the Grand Wizard* Somerville appropriates Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, a highly controversial painting when it was shown at the Salon of 1819. Géricault's image was based on a news story about the frigate *Méduse*, a ship in bad condition and severely overloaded that was shipwrecked on the west coast of Africa while transporting soldiers and settlers to the colony of Senegal. (The *Méduse* may have been involved in the triangular slave trade.) Fifteen men climbed on a raft, hoping to reach the shore. Géricault painted these desperate figures piled onto the raft, their twisting bodies struggling and striving as they direct the viewer's eyes toward a powerful black youth raising a piece of cloth in the hope of rescue. Somerville has substituted eight figures in Ku Klux Klan garments for the dead and dying in the original painting. He retains much of Géricault's pyramidal composition as well as the boy raising the cloth. But now this figure is balanced by a large burning cross, not a billowing sail. A sizable red dab, suggesting blood from a bullet wound, appears in the center of the picture, and "Emancipation Day" is written in large letters by the ropes on the bottom. The boy stands on a beer cask labeled "Dixie Brewing Company," and railroad ties line the bottom of the raft. As in much of his work, Somerville has several narratives working simultaneously (the



railroad ties probably refer to the Chinese laborers who built the railroads in conditions of servitude). The canvas is done in oil and oil stick over collage elements, layered in turn over a stratum of architectural blueprints. Details of old newspapers remain visible, as do sheet-music covers (such as a picture of Harry Belafonte with the song title "I'm Just a Country Boy"). On the right, above an image of the Capitol dome, is a clipping headed "Four Men of the Apocalypse"—the vision of ultimate disaster.

For some viewers, Somerville's work has proved highly provocative. The artist himself articulates some concerns: "As a whole my work raises the question: What does it mean for a white man from the South now living in California to explore race issues from the privileged and outside perspective of being a white person? Who has the right to render or write about black history?"³²

THE NATIVE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

In the 1960s Native Americans—frustrated by persistent betrayals, forced relocations, and abuse by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and suffering from high un-

TRAVIS SOMERVILLE
RAFT OF THE GRAND WIZARD, 2003

Mixed media, 106 x 144
San Jose Museum of Art
Gift of Jeffrey N. D...

STEPHEN SHAMES
*INDIAN OCCUPATION
OF ALCATRAZ, 1971*

Gelatin silver print.

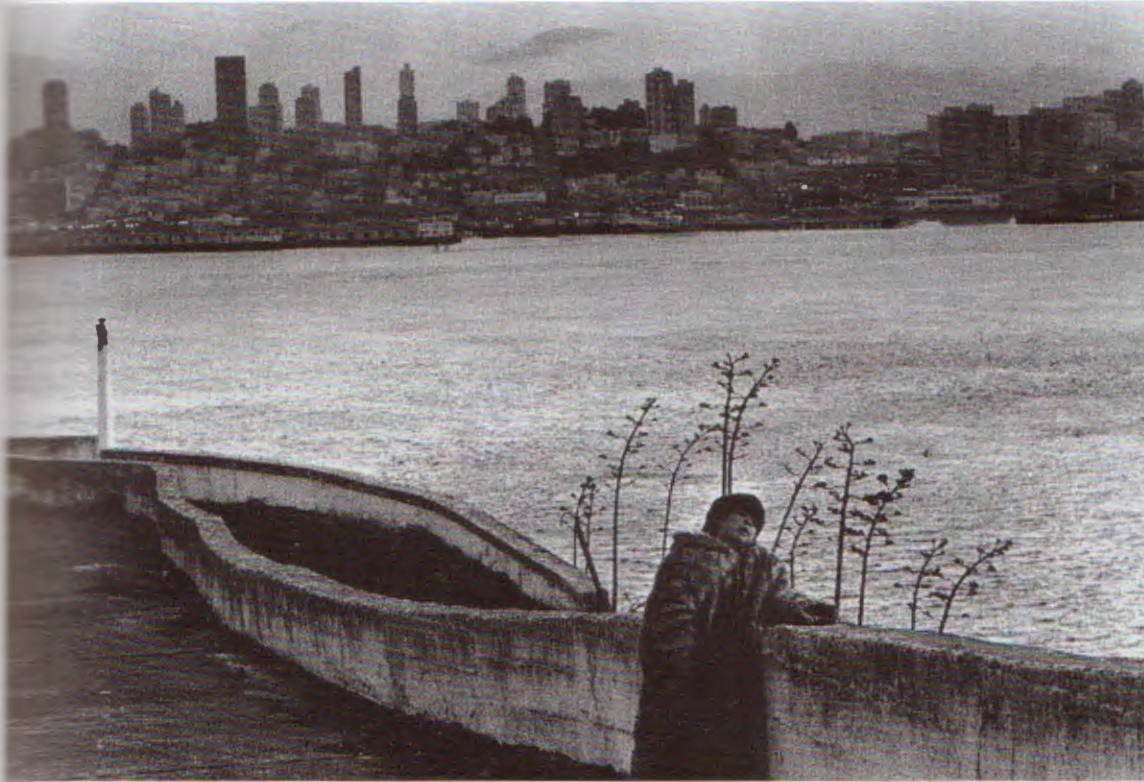
© 2005 Stephen
Shames/Polaris.



employment and impoverished living conditions—began organizing civil disobedience actions, stimulated by the civil rights movement and the social activism of the times. In March 1964 five Sioux activists landed on Alcatraz Island to claim it for Native American use, after the notorious federal penitentiary there had stood vacant for years and the government had declared it excess property. These activists then waged an unsuccessful court fight for the island, which had been Indian land for thousands of years prior to its occupation by the U.S. Army in the 1850s. In November 1969 a group of Native Americans again occupied the island, proclaiming that Alcatraz should serve as a symbol for Native American liberation and proposing the establishment there of an educational and spiritual center for American Indians (the American Indian Center in San Francisco had burned down just a month before). The occupation grew, even though the Coast Guard blocked some of the

landings, and within a month more than two hundred Native American men, women, and children were camping out at the Rock. They put up teepees, as seen in Stephen Shames's photograph of the traditional conical tent outlined against the San Francisco Bay and the city's skyline—an image that would have intrigued the French Surrealists.

When Michelle Vignes, with her eye for the human portent of a historic occasion, photographed a similar view from Alcatraz, she foregrounded the tired young son of Richard Oakes, a Mohawk leader of the occupation, who had been a student at San Francisco State University. Oakes and his family would leave the island in early January 1970, after his stepdaughter died in a fall. Others also began to leave the island, for a variety of reasons—including the General Services Administration's cutting off electrical power and disrupting phone communications. Press reports of violence on the island eroded public sup-



MICHELLE VIGNES
*ALCATRAZ: THE SON OF
 INDIAN LEADER*
 RICHARD OAKES, 1969

Gelatin silver print.
 © Michelle Vignes.
 Courtesy The Bancroft
 Library, University of
 California, Berkeley.

part, as did concerns for safe navigation, as the lack of electricity shut down the island's lighthouse and fog signals. Food and fresh water became harder to come by. By June 1971 only fifteen people remained, and the government had no trouble removing them. Yet, despite the failures, the nineteen months of occupation had been widely publicized, creating a greater awareness among the American public of the plight of its Native population.

For too long, indigenous culture in North America had been seen as an archaism. Native Americans were stereotyped as either howling, filthy heathens or "noble savages." This attitude was clearly evident in the way Native Americans were photographed. In an article about the noted Native American photographer and filmmaker Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (b. 1954, Diné/Seminole/Muscogee), the writer and curator Veronica Passalacqua observes: "Early encounters between photography and Native Americans

have a history laced with racism, colonialism, broken treaties, captivity, and romanticism. Before the medium found its artistic outlets it purveyed so-called factual evidence by functioning as a mode of one-sided documentation serving governmental and scientific purposes. Many stereotypes generated by early images of Native American life and culture continue to be insidiously pervasive."³³ Over time, however, this situation has changed. Telling their stories of resistance and survival, Native American photographers are bringing about a new vision. Tsinhnahjinnie, now the director of the C. N. Gorman Museum at the University of California, Davis (see below), says: "No longer is the camera held by an outsider looking in, the camera is held with brown hands opening familiar worlds. We document ourselves with a humanizing eye, we create new visions with ease, and we can turn the camera and show how we see you."³⁴

Within the mainstream art world, an initial change

in attitude toward Native American art can be traced to two exhibitions organized by René d'Harnoncourt: *Indian Art in the United States and Alaska* for the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco and the highly acclaimed *Indian Art of the United States* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1941. Instead of displaying Native American art as specimens in a natural history or ethnographic museum, or as curios at a trading post, these exhibitions put it on an equal footing with Euro-American art. In doing so, however, they also placed Native American art outside its indigenous cultural context.

When Edward Said described "Orientalism" as a discourse "by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, ideologically and imaginatively,"³⁵ he could easily have been referring to whites' attitudes to American Indian culture. During the twentieth century so-called primitive, or tribal, art became venerated for the way it inspired modern Euro-American artists; it was not seen within its own cultural context but rather as part of a "universalist" art, which was essentially Western modernism in disguise. This linear equation of "primitive"/modern underlay the Museum of Modern Art's well-publicized (and beautiful) 1984 exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.³⁶ Taking issue with the basic concept of this exhibition, the critic Thomas McElivey has questioned any universal hegemony for Western art, transcending and denying cultural identity. Instead, McElivey postulates the emergence of a new postmodern model in which each ethnic group would write its own history and create its own art without resorting to a linear view of historic evolution.³⁷ Also arguing for a non-linear approach, the writer Alicia Gaspar de Alba criticizes the vertical term "subculture," whose prefix signifies the hegemony of a higher culture, and introduces the horizontal word "alter-culture," simply connoting the condition of Otherness. Gaspar de Alba was writing about Chicano art, but her terminology is applicable to the art of all ethnic groups.³⁸

Perhaps in discussing Native American culture we should refer to multiple "alter-cultures." The nearly 2.5 million Native American citizens in the United States belong to more than five hundred separate tribes and bands, where each tribe's culture has its own character and each artist his or her own individuality. Stereotypes need to be discarded. As the artist Frank LaPena has pointed out, "Indian art is not realism, abstract, mixed media or traditional items but includes all of these things and more, for it is a diverse and rich combination of cultural expressions."³⁹ Within their diversity, these tribal cultures do all seem to share an intimate relationship with the world of nature, a rapport with animals, plants, the earth, the wind, the rain, the sun, and the stars. They offer a holistic worldview, so any consideration of indigenous art must finally deconstruct the Euro-American separation of art and craft, of performing arts and ritual.

Tradition and Protest

The takeover of Alcatraz and the succeeding occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 were undoubtedly instrumental in sparking a new self-awareness among Native American artists. When *Art in America* published a special issue on "The Native American Indian" in the summer of 1972, it included a contribution by Lloyd E. Oxendine, a member of the Lumbee tribe and former director of Native North American Artists. He discussed and illustrated contemporary American Indian art that was based on traditional artifacts and totemic images, including a painting of an American flag on buffalo hide by Wayne Eagleboy, with two Native Americans in the field customarily reserved for the stars, and Earl Eder's image of the head of a Sioux Ghost Dancer crying for revenge. Oxendine asserted that much "recent American Indian painting and sculpture is protest art, and can be seen as part of the larger American counter-revolution that in turn likes to identify itself with the Indian. . . . For the first time a generation of articulate well-educated Indian artists have positive Indian identity to which

they may relate. Their new solidarity focuses their art, an art that is Indian in a whole new way."⁴⁰

Fritz Scholder (1937–2005, Luiseño) was prominently featured in the article. Born in Minnesota, Scholder has lived mostly in the Southwest, although he did study with Wayne Thiebaud at Sacramento City College in 1957–58. While Scholder is not really a California artist, he is of signal importance because early on he established an art that honored American Indian culture yet opposed romantic clichés about it, an art that was open to but not dominated by Euro-American influences. His borrowing from artists such as Francis Bacon can be seen as a reversal of the interest of Jackson Pollock and other Abstract Expressionists in the totemic imagery of Amerindian art. Moreover, Scholder's work has dealt directly with such issues as dislocation and alcoholism, breaking the ice for a politically potent Native art.

A painting by Frank LaPena is also illustrated in Oxendine's article. LaPena (Wintu/Nomtipom) was born in 1937 in San Francisco and, like many Native Americans at the time, was sent to a government-run Indian school. Later he went to California State University, Chico, and received a master's degree in anthropology from California State University, Sacramento, in 1978, by which time he was an exhibiting artist. After spending some time teaching juvenile delinquents in San Francisco, LaPena joined the faculty of California State University, Sacramento, where he taught for some thirty years and headed the Native American Studies Program. In addition to working as a visual artist and publishing in ethnography, LaPena is a singer, an essayist, a poet, and a founding member of the Maidu Dancers and Traditionalists.

LaPena speaks of art making as a spiritual act, empowering the maker to achieve a greater understanding of life, and of dancing as an act of renewal. Some of his work is harrowing in its defiance. His 1989 monoprint *Destruction: Hostage* shows dead men on hangmen's ropes with a skeleton and skull looking at the viewer and a cross below the dead bodies. A decade later he produced *Diaspora: California Indi-*



ans, a series of frontal views of heads of Native Americans on which he superimposed texts referring to key events in the history of California Native Americans. After this work was shown in a special exhibition at the Venice Biennale in the summer of 1999, LaPena wrote:

"Diaspora: California Indians" . . . was to let the world know what happened in California to the indigenous population and to point out that survival issues are still of concern. The destruction/desecration of California begins with the Mission system. The enslavement of the Native Americans to create and maintain the Mission system in California was reinforced by the militia. The great epidemics of the 1800s were brought to a population that had no resistance to many of the diseases. Measles, influenza, tuberculosis, malaria and smallpox . . .⁴¹

LaPena has also created works inspired by prehistoric rock painting, saying that he "looks at Chumash rock art through the eyes of Abstract Expressionism."⁴² At times he has painted total abstractions, though more often his works show a strong sense of his Native heritage. Often LaPena has turned to na-

FRANK LAPENA
HOUSE OF SOUND:
MOUNT SHASTA, 1996
Mono-transfer print,
21½ × 29¾ in. Courtesy
of the artist.



GEORGE LONGFISH
THE END OF INNOCENCES, 1992
 Acrylic on canvas, two of three panels, each 8 x 9 ft.
 Courtesy of the artist.

ture for his inspiration. *House of Sound: Mount Shasta* (1996) grew out of his memories of the sacred mountain before it was dammed and polluted, when he could swim in the stream below it. In this monoprint a great spiral ascends to the snow-covered volcanic peak, a sacred place for healers and shamans. Large black circles appear on the road below, while a red cross is set against the dark blue sky. As LaPen a describes it: "I am remembering stories of Creation that the mountain is alive and that it has been teaching people for many generations. This ancient wisdom has continued to direct the elders with its teaching. We can learn something about being distant from the land by knowing these stories."⁴³

George Longfish, a Seneca/Tuscarora artist and writer, feels strongly about the way images of Native peoples have been distorted in American culture: "The images I create are meant to question the stereotypical romantic image of Native People so often portrayed in past as well as current media."⁴⁴ Longfish was born in 1942 on a reservation in Ontario, Canada, and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago before

moving to California. For many years a professor in the Native American Studies Program at the University of California, Davis, Longfish also directed the C. N. Gorman Museum at Davis, turning it into a showcase for Native art that he considers some of the best contemporary art being made in America.

In his paintings Longfish, who calls himself a "narrative abstractionist," merges Indigenous emblems (which may at first appear abstract) with contemporary forms and images. Some of this contemporary imagery might be compared to that of older California painters such as William T. Wiley (see pp. 243–45) and Robert Hudson, artists who themselves were influenced by Native American art. Longfish is acutely aware not only of his ancestral spiritual culture but also of the dominant outside culture, speaking admiringly of Arshile Gorky and aiming for an inclusive art. The way he juxtaposes Native American images with ones from extrinsic cultures makes for powerfully incongruous and idiosyncratic work.

Longfish's *The End of Innocences* (1992) is a triptych inspired by the quincentennial of Christopher



JEAN LAMARR
SOME KIND OF
BUCKAROO, 1990

Screenprint, 24 x 36 in.
 Courtesy of the artist.

Columbus's arrival in North America. Together, the three panels measure more than twenty-five feet long. As Longfish noted, "Five hundred years later the non-Indians, who have had little respect for human rights, animal rights or the earth's environment, are having to overcome their own ignorance and come to terms with the alternative concept of making change that doesn't destroy the elements of this planet and its people."⁴⁵ The left panel of the triptych shows an Indian chief in elaborate attire, with contradictory words and phrases stenciled seemingly at random: "Blackfeet Pencil Co.," "Sacred Land," "The Only Good Indian Is," "Spiritual." Jagged shapes and thrusting forms, all painted with a vigorous brush, appear on a ground that is mostly red, dark blue, and green. In the right panel a chief presides over Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, updating the Iroquois warrior clan. Against a background of electric colors, the artist has inscribed "Sioux," "Land," "Wounded Knee 1892," "Wounded Knee 1973," "Broken Treaties," "Rain Forest," "Termination," and other evocative words. This monumental painting is about Native Americans

renewing their tradition of martial courage and spirituality to regain power and create change.

Like Longfish, Jean LaMarr (Paiute/Pit River) makes works with Native themes. She was born in 1945 in Susanville, near the Nevada border of the California high desert, where she now directs the Native American Graphic Workshop. She came to the Bay Area through the relocation program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and studied painting and printmaking at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1970s. At Berkeley she encountered difficulties in having her work accepted, as she did not adhere to the abstract modern art favored there at the time, and joined forces with Chicano/Chicana classmates in rejecting Eurocentric biases. Much later, in 1995, the city of Berkeley would commission her to paint a large mural, *Commemoration of the Ohlone Way of Life*, in Ohlone Park.

In the early 1970s LaMarr designed a poster protesting the government attack at Wounded Knee. "We don't want to be your whiteman's Indian anymore," the caption read. In a series of monoprints in



HARRY FONSECA
CREATION STORY, 2000
 Mixed media on canvas,
 6 ft. 1 in. x 17 ft. 3 in.
 National Museum of the
 American Indian,
 Smithsonian Institution.

the 1980s she depicted contemporary women in the Great Basin area expressing their opposition to the government's actions on their land, especially the testing of MX missiles. In her silkscreen *Some Kind of Buckaroo* (1990) a Native American cowboy stands on a flowered lace ground that symbolizes the earth. But he is shut in by barbed wire. Overhead, against a dark red sky, a fighter plane and a missile whiz by, presumably toward the testing grounds in Nevada. LaMarr has described how, during the first Bush administration, war planes would fly across the desert almost daily, dropping "test" bombs.⁴⁶

For many Native American artists, irony serves as a foil to the tragedy of life inside or outside the reservation. Certainly this is true of the art of Henry Fonseca (Maidu/Niseman/Hawaiian/Portuguese). Born in 1946 in Sacramento, he grew up and attended college there, first at Sacramento City College and then at California State University. In semiabstract landscapes, such as *The Discovery of Gold in California* (1979), he has recorded how, during the Gold Rush, Indigenous people who had lived in the Sierra Nevada foothills for millennia were subjected to forced labor, starvation, disease, and murder by prospectors and their crews.⁴⁷

Fonseca is also fascinated by the coyote, the trick-

ster par excellence of Native American mythology, and he frequently paints himself as one. In his effort to deconstruct clichés, he may show us his coyote alter ego in street clothes, a hipster outfit, or a woman in a rose-flowered dress, or as a Hawaiian-shirted tourist visiting a pueblo. Fonseca's coyote is able simultaneously to laugh at himself and at others. He embodies paradox and ambiguity and personifies the Native American as both separate from and a part of the dominant culture.

Fonseca's painting *Creation Story* (2000), which is more than seventeen feet wide, is based on Native American pictographs. Its story is told through schematic figures, standing or seated with outstretched arms and legs, not dissimilar to devices found in Outsider Art. Stylized trees and running deer animate the landscape. Clusters of semicircular humps suggest hills or mountains, while serpentine lines indicate streams. A large concentric circle appears in the center on the left, depicting the creation of the world, and a spiral turns around itself on the right. Painted largely in blue and earth colors, this canvas captures the color and energy of the earth honoring the land and its flora and fauna prior to its despoliation.

The trickster irreverence evident in Fonseca's cov-

ote paintings takes an even more provocative form in the installations and performance pieces of James Luna (b. 1950, Luiseño/Diegueño). Luna studied at the University of California, Irvine, but became dissatisfied with the limitations of the college curriculum and worked as a labor organizer, before returning to obtain his degree. He sees his art as functioning beyond the discourse about art itself—as a strategy for confrontation, inseparable from its reception in the sociopolitical sphere. His work questions the dominant culture's views about Native American art. *The Artifact Piece* (1987), produced for the ethnographic Museum of Man in Balboa Park, San Diego, recalls the exhibition of the "Hottentot Venus" at fairs in England and France during the nineteenth century. We see Luna, wearing a leather breechclout, lying on a bed of sand in a display case, like an object in a museum of anthropology. An adjacent display case is filled with medicines used in rituals at his reservation, and a third contains various trappings of the 1960s counterculture, such as a Rolling Stones album and United Farm Workers buttons.

A year later Luna and the Chicano artist David Avalos (see below) created the satiric *California Mission Daze*, condemning the Catholic Church and Father Junípero Serra for their subhuman treatment of the Native population. The piece was a response to Pope John Paul II's beatification of Father Serra. For a 1991 show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Luna again exposed himself as an exotic specimen. Entitled *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, this installation presented Luna, once again in a breechclout, next to cutout portraits of himself in traditional garb or in Western street clothes. Spectators were invited over a public address system to have their pictures taken with a living ethnographic artifact to show how fond they were of the Native population. The resulting photos, with museum visitors posed next to the live Indian artist, turned the humiliating photo op on its head: Who is the subject here?

James Luna has worked as an academic counselor, confronting problems such as alcoholism at the Palo-

mar College, near the La Jolla Reservation, where he was born. He has explained: "I feel like my art is strong as long as I stay working as a counselor. We Indians have survived as long as we have because of our ability to adapt. We still have our healers, leaders, and warriors. It's just that the new warriors are armed with legal, political, and artistic weapons. I am one of the warriors."⁴⁸

THE CHICANO EXPERIENCE

César Chávez, the United Farm Workers, and La Causa

When in the 1930s John Steinbeck, in the novels *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, described the plight of California farmworkers (migrants from Oklahoma at the time), he did not think they could



JAMES LUNA
TAKE A PICTURE WITH A REAL INDIAN, 1991
 Performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sheldon Collins.