Museum politics of the Huni Kuin: the *Aru Kuxipa* exhibition at TBA21 in Vienna

YUJIA BIAN
Brooklyn, NY
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Abstract Have indigenous peoples gained agency in the gallery setting in the 21st century? This article looks at the appearance and participation of a group of indigenous Huni Kuin from Brazil and Peru among a series of events and exhibitions associated with Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) in Vienna, and examines the encounters between them. TBA21 produced the celebration of indigenous Huni Kuin culture and rituals in the name of protest and decolonization. Nonetheless, art turned into another well-justified tool to decontextualize indigenous culture, in this case by setting a stage for theatrical display.

About the Author Yujia Bian is a researcher in landscape, architecture, and art. Her work is situated between criticism, history, and theory, with a focus on environment and nation-building in the South. She currently writes and designs exhibitions and lives in Brooklyn, New York. Yujia holds an MS in Critical, Conceptual, and Curatorial Practices in Architecture from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. She is a 2017 recipient of the Temple Hoyne Buell Center Fellowship for architectural research.

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A 2015 exhibition at Vienna, Austria’s TBA21 (Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary) Augarten, was entitled Aru Kuxipa | Sacred Secret. As noted in the press release, the exhibition “calls for a renewed engagement with and contribution to the world at large, a time of exchange, and a striving for indigenous self-governance and sovereignty.”¹ The exhibition included two works by artist Ernesto Neto that were inspired by indigenous Huni Kuin culture from Brazil and Peru. Huni Kuin means the “real people,” also called Kaxinawá, or the “bat’s people” by white colonizers.² The demand for rubber during the 19th century rubber boom introduced white people to the Huni Kuin.³ In September 2015, during the Aru Kuxipa exhibition, a five-day public program named Aru Bena (meaning the “new” or “sacred time” in Huni Kuin language) took place. Thirty-four Huni Kuin pajés (shamans) from Jordão (Brazil) performed at the event and stayed in Vienna, dressed in their traditional feather-adorned, mixed-patterned costume, and wearing hand-painted face tattoos. The program raised a crucial question: Do indigenous people gain agency in the gallery setting in the 21st century? What role does the event play in working to that end? Performance in an art gallery space is not rare, nor is the workshop format that tends to engage with the public. But rarely do we see indigenous people perform in arts spaces. The Huni Kuin performances at TBA21 Augarten, whether as ethnic performances, artistic performances, or ethnographical display, are to be examined here. Unlike artistic performances that engage shaman cultures, such as Joseph Beuys’ I Like America and America Likes Me (1974), or Marcus Coates’ Journey to the Lower
World (2007), the Huni Kuin shamans took the stage to create both a ritual performance in the conventional sense, and a performance for the purpose of art making. The precise meaning of the performance is difficult to grasp.

In the first instance, the performance is considered performance art. Before initiating the exhibition, TBA21 visited the indigenous Huni Kuin, who were later invited to perform in Vienna. They collectively agreed to do so. This process functioned like an art commission, where the artist was invited to create a new work, and then the artist accepts that invitation. The Huni Kuin also performed in an art-based environment.

Neto’s commissioned work, that was also included in the exhibition, was a tribute to the indigenous group. The artist’s vision was to “mobilize a deep understanding of indigenous wisdom and tradition and the relational and perspectival nature of the Huni Kuin’s world vision.” In the exhibition’s title, Aru means being secret and sacred; Kuxipa means god-like. Kuxipa is the creator, and for Huni Kuin, the creator is nature. Integrated with the gallery’s interior, Neto’s two works of art transformed the 400 square meters (4,300 square foot) exhibition space. The space consisted of a front room and a back room, with a partition wall dividing the two. The front room contained a work entitled Aru Kuxipa (Sacred Secret), consisting of draped elastic polyamide nests of neon pink and blue that were filled with rice and styrofoam, interwoven into a soft jungle of semi-transparent fabric with clusters of shapes. (Figure 1) Neto also painted the gallery’s front room walls white, blue, red, and yellow.

Drawings and photos from the TBA21 trip to the Huni Kuin villages in Jordão, Brazil, lined the sitting area’s walls. Flat and soft cushions were scattered on the wood floor, while integrated LED screens mounted on the gallery walls played narratives of Huni Kuin culture.
Neto’s second work of art, located in the back gallery room, gestures towards a Kupixawa, also called maloca, crocheted from colorful cotton ribbons, spiced with lavender, clove, and turmeric. The tent-shaped roofing structure formed a communal space that hosted the immersive experience of communal gathering, contemplation and healing rituals, which are crucial to Huni Kuin culture. Traditionally, spiritual rituals, such as healing, relaxation, and immersive contemplation take place in the grass-roofed common space. Lozenge patterns that formed membrane-like shape that hints the skin of a joboia (python), an important symbol for the Huni Kuin, were woven overhead.

Suspended at the center of the room was a work of art, CanoeKeneJaguarPawLampLight (2015), consisting of pendulous candlelit chandeliers with spherical candle bowls and a perpendicular ladder crocheted together and connected to a suspended square frame. Bamboo mats were spread across the gallery floor. Visitors were required to remove their shoes before entering the exhibition’s back room. A green marble slate from Guatemala carved out shapes of a joboia, a pajé and a maraca lay flat at the center of the room under bright yellow woven draping that held suspended candles. Huni Kuin spiritual objects, such as joboia (snakes), maracas, kené and weaving fabric, the bamboo and stone blowpipes that hold remedial compounds of tobacco and leaves for cleansing and detoxifying the body and the mind rested atop of the marble slate. The snake is at the center of the Huni Kuin worldview, as with many other animals that link to their cultural practices. For them, an animal gave art production to humans, and the animal is an enchanted Huni Kuin. The communication transfers yuxin from animals to humans. Huni Kuin visual art culture, such as kené drawing, painting, body painting, and crafts, is centered around the snake.
Wood benches covered with dry grass mats circled the room. The mats were filled with *amazonite* (stone of power) and *rose quartz* (stone of love), which let visitors reach their hands into the seat paddings to feel the stones.\(^\text{11}\) The dim light, filtered by the crocheted membrane, projected patterned lights and shadows to the textured bamboo floor. The Huni Kuin performed in this artistic setting created by Neto, pointing to their performance as a work of art. If the Huni Kuin performances could be interpreted as art, the Huni Kuin are not artists, per se. Given that the indigenous people participated in art making, and their culture is well respected by Neto, are the Huni Kuin empowered as artists, gaining agency?

The *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition might provide a counterexample. (Figure 3) Curated by René d’Harnoncourt, the exhibition opened at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco in 1939, before traveling to MoMA two years later.\(^\text{12}\) D’Harnoncourt was appointed under the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, which was part of the Roosevelt administration’s New Deal to promote appreciation for Native American culture through the development of Indian arts and craftsmanship. The show aimed to dismantle prejudices toward Native American culture. Careful background research was conducted, and contacts were made with Native American leaders. Like the Huni Kuin at TBA21, these tribal members were commissioned to create “specific exhibits and ceremonies.”\(^\text{13}\) The commissioned performance was set up in the “Living Traditions” section of the exhibition, situated among a series of Native American crafts and daily objects. The performance took the form of sand painting, dancing, and silversmith work for ritual purposes. Charley Turquoise and Dinay Chilli Bitsoy, Navajo sand painters, worked within designated, railed-off areas, and painted during museum opening hours. Visitors were allowed to watch every day except Mondays from 12:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., and on Wednesday evenings from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Each painting took several days to finish before it was destroyed in a ceremony.\(^\text{14}\) Sand painting is a ritual for the Navajo. The act of painting represents a creative mysterious force.

![Figure 3. Navajo sand painters at the *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition (1941). © MoMA](image)
By exhibiting sand painting in an institutional space, however, the ritual quality and its implication were interrupted: the sand painters were confined in space, Navajo rituals were scheduled to fixed times, and museum goers had little engagement with the two painters. In displaying indigenous history and historical narratives, museum exhibitions are often constructed through decontextualized objects, and discussed through a narrative aligned with constructing Western cultural ideals.\textsuperscript{15} Often, ritual performances require a few days or more, incorporating the ceremony with other activities like eating, chatting, and playing. These performances also require diverse sensory engagement, with intervals between selective dis-attention and highly disciplined attention.\textsuperscript{16} As described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in Ivan Karp’s edited book, \textit{Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display}, the Western way of contemplation when confronting art is different from engaging in indigenous performances, which often require participation. The ritual performance at MoMA thus became a decontextualized staging. Despite this implication, \textit{Indian Art of the United States} was well received for its “diverse installation methods,” and because the exhibition reenacted an aesthetic display and ritual experiment. Even Alfred Barr praised it as having “avoided both the purely aesthetic isolation and the waxworks of the habitat group,” and for having “Navaho sand painters working in a Museum gallery but without scenery.”\textsuperscript{17} The “waxworks of the habitat group” and the “scenery” that Barr referred to are the earlier models of ethnic display, where humans and animals were modeled with wax, staged in a fixed “ideal” scene. Without the wax animals and plants to accompany a “lively” tableau that depicts a distant culture, the sand painters found themselves stuck in a more regulated, hygienic museum environment, where the iron railings created a zoo-like display. The exhibition was also used as a spectacle of propaganda for New Deal Native American policy, and Native American crafts became advertised commodity.

Compared to the sand painters at the \textit{Indian Art of the United States} exhibition, the Huni Kuin at TBA21 made a step forward. The performers broke from the rail-separated confinement that constrained the two Native American sand painters. The Huni Kuin also actively engaged with audiences in talks, workshops, and other events. (Figure 4) The five days of \textit{Aru Bena public programs} included conversations between the Huni Kuin and the academics; food and medicine making workshops that shared knowledge from indigenous peoples; and film screenings that broadcast Huni Kuin stories. The public program intendeds to deconstruct the dominant, colonial history and the past maltreatment of indigenous Amazonians. The programs called attention to indigenous culture and tried to promote indigenous agency.

Figure 4. Pajés of the indigenous Huni Kuin people in roundtable discussion. June 2015. © TBA21
Each day, *Aru Kuxipa* provided a different topic relating to Huni Kuin culture through both academic and cultural programs. The theme for the first day of *Aru Bena* was ‘Environmental Justice and Sustainability,’ consisting of two evening talks. In one talk, the Huni Kuin spoke about traditional hunting, fishing, agriculture, and environmental challenges, and posed questions on “deforestation, diminishing biodiversity, and economic dependencies.” They also spoke on the topic of **Sovereignty and Rights of the Forest** about their forest-oriented ontology. They also shared their knowledge on medicine and healing tradition during *Una Isi Kayawa*. Between the varied talks, the Huni Kuin performed on multiple occasions, including ancestral chants and dances. The workshop *kené - Arts of the Huni Kuin* explored body painting, mythic genesis, and the meaning found within indigenous weaving. The five days of public programs were dynamic and sporadic. The indigenous participation empowered the Huni Kuin, providing them an occasion to speak and to share. Is this the moment when indigenous people gained agency in the gallery setting?

Despite this apparent advance, the format of the public programs was alien to Huni Kuin. The very juxtaposition of indigenous culture and exhibition space is contradictory. The presence of indigenous people and their culture in museums is often only displayed as museum artifacts. Indigenous people are rarely consulted for collection and exhibition strategies on the topic of their own culture. James Clifford addressed such concerns in relation to the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) exhibition ‘**Primitivism** in the 20th Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.’ The very claim of “affinity,” or “sameness,” is to capture the non-West in the Western image in order to uncover a universal quality.

The five-day program was an arbitrary arrangement for the Huni Kuin. Traditionally, Huni Kuin performances took place in forest environments during special occasions. Rituals, myths, and dances are critical within Huni Kuin culture. The primary rituals, such as the Katxa Nawa (celebration of harvest and fertility), and the Nixi Pae (sacred spiritual brew), are still practiced by the Huni Kuin today. Forests are also indispensable for Huni Kuin rituals as energy transfers take place between plants, animals, and human. Once dislocated, the rituals become a recreational, where the only meaning left is theatrical.

During the five-day public programs in 2015, the group was hosted overnight on the second floor above a café, where 19th century sculptor, Gustinus Ambrosi, lived. This host-guest arrangement is familiar. Ethnographical exhibitions burgeoned following imperialist expansion in the 19th century. These exhibitions occurred at world fairs, and at national and world cultural exhibitions, often with missionary or nationalist intentions including: the 1851 Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in London, the Paris World’s Fair of 1878, the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, the Greater Britain Exhibition and the Moskauer Panoptikum in Frankfurt of 1899, the establishment of the Paris Jardin d’Acclimatation in 1859, the British Empire Exhibition in 1924-25, and the 1931 Exposition of Colonial in Paris, etc. In the 19th century, indigenous peoples, often brought to imperial nations from colonies and distant places, were forcibly displayed together with artifacts, houses, and complete villages in what have been called “human zoos.” It was not uncommon at the time for a living man be exhibited in theaters, concert rooms, museums, and zoos over the course of several weeks or months. This often included travel with the exhibition team, exposing these “imported” indigenous people to varied degrees of shock, harassment, torture, and miserable deaths.
The situation at the 2015 Huni Kuin exhibition at TBA21 Augarten was different. Unlike the human zoos where people were displayed, within an “idealized” environment encircled by ropes and fences, the Huni Kuin were not confined in circled areas and were not surrounded by exotic plants and animals. However, TBA21 did persuade the Huni Kuin to display their culture, and displayed their sovereignty, through an invitation to participate in the exhibition. (Figure 5) Though appearing to be a different contemporary situation, the Huni Kuin’s condition is not far from the older model of display and exploitation. TBA21 created a new violence. The presence of photography and sound recording are incompatible with Huni Kuin culture. Staff and visitors were instructed not to take photographs or to speak to the sand painters during the Native American ceremony at MoMA’s Indian Art of the United States, though one wonders where the published photograph originated. Contrarily, the Huni Kuin ceremony was heavily photographed and recorded. Under the observation of both visitors and the surveillance of cameras, the Huni Kuin rituals in a gallery space became a performance as an ethnic display.

![Figure 5. Video screenshot of TBA21 inviting the Huni Kuin to participate in the exhibition during TBA21’s visit to South America. © TBA21](image)

This does not indicate that indigenous individuals have not been active in shaping museum collections or programming. The very presence of indigenous people suggests a confrontation. One such confrontation occurred during the Aru Bena healing workshop when traditional healing rituals were performed under Neto’s woven work of art that represents a kupixawa. (Figures 6 and 7) The healing tradition of many tribes in the Amazon involves drinking Cipó, a hallucinogenic drink extracted from a forest vine, which became part of the psychedelic culture of the 1960s. For the Huni Kuin, such knowledge comes through Nixi Pae (Ayhuasca) - a medicinal brew used as spiritual medicine among traditional Amazon basin tribes, that was said to possess the power of the White Jibóia (the sacred snake). The sacred drink Cipó is shared during ceremonies to create a common path to guide, follow, and to clarify. Equally important are the Huni Meka (songs). During the performance, the correlation and mutual transformation between songs and Cipó shape the experience. Under collective hallucination created by Cipó and the singer’s poetic voice, inner power and collective imagination were sought. The collective unconsciousness, combining poetic
voices, fused nature and people into the Huni Kuin cultural production. The Huni Kuin engaged with the viewers within an entangled empathy at an emotional and spiritual level.

Though attempting to engage with broad audiences, including academics, artists, curators, and the visitors from distinct backgrounds, the TBA21 exhibition and its five days of public programs failed to address the urgencies of indigenous cultures despite it claims to do so. The juxtaposition of indigenous knowledge and art remained superficial and symbolic. The Huni Kuin in their ceremonial costumes became the exotic, attractive “other.” The celebration of indigenous Huni Kuin culture and rituals was disguised in knowledge sharing and in advocating art programs in the name of protesting and decolonizing. In the 21st century, the historical experience of indigenous people differs from the time of Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans, among the first Western ethnobotanists to visit the Amazon.32 However, representing, reenacting, and recreating indigenous people and experiences remains problematic. Art is just another well-justified tool to decontextualize indigenous culture, this time by providing a stage for theatrical display. Hence, is it impossible for indigenous people to gain agency in the 21st century? The idea of agency suggests an uneven balance of power. The “togetherness” attempted during the Huni Kuin healing workshop instead created an illusory production, that the gallery visitors, Huni Kuin, and the artist Neto all engaged in.

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Figure 4. Pajés of the indigenous Huni Kuin people in roundtable discussion. June 2015. ©TBA21

Figure 5. Video screenshot of TBA21 inviting the Huni Kuin to participate in the exhibition during TBA21’s visit to South America. ©TBA21

Figures 6 and 7. Huni Kuin healing ritual performed at TBA21. ©TBA21

References


Huni Kuin & Kaxinawa: True people of the Amazon forest. (Huni Kuin official website) http://wuante.com/hunikuin/index.htm


Notes
3 Huni Kuin & Kaxinawa: True people of the Amazon forest (Huni Kuin official website) - The Kaxinawá. http://wuante.com/hunikuin/index.htm
5 The video on this issue has been recorded and posted on TBA 21 official website that can be accessed here: https://www.tba21.org/#item--a_gente--867
7 Official website accessed here: https://www.tba21.org/#item--a_gente--867
8 “BasnepuruTxanaYubé”
9 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 94.
17 Staniszewski, “Aestheticized Installations,” 94.


The invitation and negotiation of TBA21 with Huni Kuin was recorded in the video – “Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin ~ Aru Kuxipa | Sacred Secret - Assembleia.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIYF5JNwkIE

“Huni Kuin & Kaxinawa: True people of the Amazon forest (Huni Kuin official website) - The Kaxinawá.” http://wuante.com/hunikuin/index.htm

Ironically, the building itself was originally constructed in 1953 for sculptor Gustinus Ambrosi before he moved to his new house in Stallhofen, Weststeiermark and later killed himself in 1975. Ambrosi was supported by Albert Speer and Adolf Hitler. The information was acquired during my visit to TBA21.


A more detailed history see Corbey. "Ethnographic Showcases."

Staniszewski, “Aestheticized Installations,” 94.


Matos, "The Serpent's Song," 106.

Ayahuasca is an entheogenic brew that mainly extracted from Banisteriopsis caapi vine.

“Huni Kuin & Kaxinawa: True people of the Amazon forest (Huni Kuin official website) - The Kaxinawá.” http://wuante.com/hunikuin/index.htm


Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans were the earliest ethnobotanists to visit the Amazon.

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