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Paul Chaat Smith (b. 1954) is a major voice in contemporary Native art and culture—creative, funny, and searingly humane. With Robert Warrior, he coauthored the magisterial *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (1996), now a standard text in both Native and American studies. A selection from two decades of his writing was published as *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (2009). Since 2001, he's been an associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, staging the exhibitions *James Luna: Emendatio* (originally developed for the 51st Venice Biennale; both installations 2005); *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian* (2008–2009); *Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort* (2009–2010); and *Americans* (2018).

## Paul Chaat Smith

### What was an early important aesthetic experience you had?

My family went to the 1964 World's Fair in New York, which has always been a captivating thing for me—ideas about what the future might be, how *amazing* it's going to be, and how it almost never works out that way. You want it to be so beautiful, and maybe even back in 1964 I thought, *It's not going to be like that*. But it's still really a delicious thing to consider, and then to watch what actually happens. I remember walking underneath a mock-up of a Saturn V rocket—it was unbelievable how large it was. I was taken by the cheesy plastic-fantastic sensibility of it all.

**How would you describe your relationship to language growing up? I know your grandfather was a pastor in Oklahoma who'd hold services in Comanche, and that you grew up outside of DC.**

When I went to visit my mom's side of the family in Lawton, Oklahoma, they had a complete set of *National Geographic*. In mid-twentieth-century Oklahoma, that's an education. I'm not sure I thought about it at the time, but my grandfather on that side made his living *speaking*, as a minister, which must have been an influence. Both my parents were educators, but they were not particularly worldly or sophisticated. I have an indelible memory of watching my dad write a book—this would have been the midsixties—in the backyard of our house in College Park with his shirt off, typing on a manual typewriter. It was called *Rural Recreation for Profit* [1966]. He did another called *Planning and Paying Your Way to College* [1968]—so he was always

doing multiple things, and within that was writing. He was never a gifted writer, but he felt that language was really important. So, I think watching him type, and watching it become a book, was a big deal.

I remember after that, I learned how to type—one of the few things I really did on my own. I got a book where you learned how to touch-type, and I learned how to do it at home using a manual typewriter. Being a writer was sort of in the *ether*—my grandfather giving sermons, my dad writing a book. But no one ever said, *Oh, you should be a writer.*

My dad went to a one-room schoolhouse in Dibble, Oklahoma. Even though he was good in school, his education was so poor that when he went to the University of Oklahoma he had to transfer. Anyway, both my parents had limited educations, but they really valued education. It drove them nuts that I was a terrible student. They just knew it was really important and we had to get ahead, but they didn't really know how to help us in school, or how to think about stuff like, *What do you really want to be?*

**You went to Antioch College in 1973, and as part of a college internship you volunteered to work for the American Indian Movement, or AIM, in South Dakota—what was it like when you arrived?**

It was a little scary, because I was really on my own. But I embraced it right away. In the years before, I'd gone to the big mobilizations in Washington, DC—like the antiwar moratoriums. The idea of being part of the revolution was very comfortable for me. It certainly tied in well with my sense of self-righteousness, of being on the side of the angels, and all of that.

I was aware very early what a privilege it was to have a front-row seat to the Indian movement in the seventies. Being linked to Antioch meant that I had some legitimacy, so that when someone would ask, *Who's that guy, what is he doing?* I could be identified—*He's the one in this program.* I didn't have any particular skills—most of the people were lawyers or legal investigators, paralegals, who had very particular things to do for the trials. I didn't have any of that. I don't think I would have been particularly good at learning it, either. In that sense it was a great setup to just be there.

What really made an impression on me was the chaos of the mass trials that began in 1974, when hundreds of people were indicted for every conceivable charge, including cattle rustling, which was a brilliant way for the government to put the ordinary people of the movement on trial. But it wasn't a big story nationally—in fact, it was hardly covered by the press. The only things that got covered then were the Russell Means and Dennis Banks trial. I was always fascinated with that disconnect—that arguably the largest mass political trial in US history doesn't get any news coverage.

I met Dennis Banks pretty soon after I arrived in South Dakota. Russell Means wasn't there a lot, but I ended up in the Russell Means clique. These guys were in their thirties. They didn't come out of student activism. Most of them had been in jail. Dennis Banks had been an executive with the Honeywell Corporation—they'd had these rich lives that were not necessarily what you would have thought.

**How did you first meet Jimmie Durham?**

It was a few days after I arrived in South Dakota. He looked like Abraham Lincoln then because he had this beard. I'm not sure what I thought of him at first, actually. He makes a big impression on people. He explained he had lived in Switzerland and was an artist who had come back to help AIM. He was one of the leaders of the legal defense committee—I don't know what his relationship was with Russell Means at that point, but he was already a significant person there. When we talked, I think he was vetting me to see what use I would be. I think I got identified as a smart Indian who could be helpful, even without any skills.

Jimmie had contacts in Geneva, and he persuaded Russell Means that we needed to be a liberation movement working with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. A Methodist women's committee arranged for the AIM offices to be right across the street from the UN—Jimmie had all these contacts that nobody else in AIM possibly had.

I became somebody who was helping Jimmie—at the UN office and with a newsletter AIM put out in San Francisco. This again was the Russell Means faction—basically, if I was Jimmie's lieutenant, he was

Russell's lieutenant. Obviously I learned a great deal from talking with him. He just had a very clear-eyed sense of AIM and its flaws—he was very realistic about things.

**Something brilliant in your writing is your engagement with the long history of representations of Indians—the complexity of their presence in all forms of media since the beginning of film. Does that come out of the ways AIM was thinking about the media?**

I remember weeks after I arrived, there was a trial for a riot at the Custer County Courthouse in South Dakota. Wesley Bad Heart Bull was killed by white people, and justice was not coming. So his mother, Sarah Bad Heart Bull, participated in this riot—everything is so fucking overdetermined with Indians, of course, it's got to be “Custer County Courthouse,” “Bad Heart Bull,” all of those things. So, this is the mom of some guy who was killed; she gets arrested, and then she's on trial in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I can't remember what our side did, stood up or made some kind of demonstration, but a SWAT team came in and cleared the courtroom. I remember meeting this Irish dude who had ties to the IRA who bragged about being interviewed about the riot on the *Today* show. That way I became aware of how AIM was being portrayed. But in terms of what I wrote later, which was what you're riffing on—that a lot of the representations were rooted in deliberate staging that went back to Edward S. Curtis's photographs and Thomas Edison's films, in sometimes brilliant, sometimes stupid ways—I don't know how much I thought about that back then. Maybe I was just taking it all in. When I was writing *Like a Hurricane*, it was really clear that people like Russell in particular really understood what it would take for the movement to be heard. And some of what it would take was playing on those tropes and repurposing stereotypes in different ways.

**After you and Jimmie both resigned from AIM in 1979, you moved to New York. When did it feel like being a writer was on the horizon as a serious possibility for you?**

I would say it was writing the first book, *Like a Hurricane*. I guess I had written a few small pieces by then. The book became this *thing*—it was basically like taking everything that's dear to you and throwing it

over a very high fence so you have no choice but to do it. At that point in my life, the idea of writing the “truth about AIM” book, which nobody else was going to write except me and Robert Warrior, was a big part of my identity. The very first book proposal we did said it would be a collection of essays by different people involved with AIM, and this smart agent said, *No, you guys should just write the book*. It seemed too audacious at first, given that we’d never written a book before. Robert at least had published a big piece in *The Village Voice*, so he’d written more than me. We took that advice and got a really good publisher, New Press. It was through the ordeal of writing that book that I forced myself to write—failure was not an option.

In your essay “Radio Free Europe” for the recent catalogue *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World* [2017], there is an anecdote about you going to see him in Mexico when you started working on *Like a Hurricane*. The advice he gives you is, *Write it for people smarter than you are*. How did you approach writing that book?

Robert and I had a lot of agreement on what the book should be. Before he became an academic, he had this brief life as a journalist, so we both had a journalist’s sensibility—we weren’t going to start with the 1868 treaty, and we weren’t going to do the ponderous things a lot of people do. It turned out I had a flair for writing stuff set in the moment, trying to draw out the elements that are most interesting to me, and that made it more readable. Also, I found that I couldn’t write unless I really cared about it, which sounds cool, but that’s a huge problem in many ways, because there’s an awful lot of stuff I’ll never write because I can’t become interested in it enough to do it. We decided the book was going to focus on three key moments, which all happened before I became part of the AIM. That advice from Jimmie Durham is very helpful—*Make it for smart people*. I took that as saying, *Take all the issues you have with AIM, and instead of deciding what the right political line is, explore them through the book*.

People would say, *Oh, you’re going to really write about AIM and tell the truth, you’ll probably get killed*—which was silly, but there was an idea that it was dangerous to do. The major thing that shaped the book was that

we really cared about our Indian readership, who already knew these things about AIM. If you are just writing for a white, left audience, one might focus on the FBI and the whole *Feel bad about the 1868 treaty* stuff. But if I'm writing for Indian people, most of whom felt a great affinity for AIM and then were disenchanted by it—if I want *that* audience—I have to be straight up about it.

**At many stretches, it feels almost cinematic—there are really precise stylistic decisions about the structure. How did you get to that?**

I picked certain things that resonated with me and built it from that. I knew I was going to use an account of Buddy Lamont's funeral. One account mentions a hundred-gun salute—I knew that was a perfect chapter title, "Hundred Gun Salute." It's an amazing moment, he's the local hero, the Oglala guy killed at Wounded Knee—most of the people were not from there, they were from outside—and he's buried in his military uniform. That's so powerful—those were things I felt I could write about.

At first I thought, *Okay, there's this meeting in which the elders decided to call in AIM. We have to reconstruct that meeting in every possible way.* I start trying to do it half-heartedly, but I'm not a very good researcher. I'd get bored with it, and you realize you don't trust the information that much anyway. There are things that you think you *must* have to nail it. What you discover is, actually, you don't have to do that. You know this meeting happened, you can rely on a few accounts, you don't have to be the definitive encyclopedic account of every single thing—that's just not possible to do.

What I was fascinated by was that after the occupation, people would find the fabric from parachutes on the ground. Or that people who'd lived there their entire lives found their homes completely destroyed. And if I feel engaged in details like that, my talent as a writer is that I can make it work, as long as I'm really invested. It was like assembling the things that I really cared about, and then making the narrative fit around them.

**Your writing is often a meditation on the complexities of history—how it's written, communicated, and constructed for different people**

**and at different times. How has your relationship to writing history developed over time?**

Lately I just feel like history is not a friend. I'm not even sure if it's a *frenemy*. History is a big mess. In retrospect, based on what we know now that we didn't know about AIM when we wrote *Like a Hurricane*, it's a soft book in certain ways. I don't think Robert and I ever made decisions to be untruthful about AIM's nature. What we've learned since then is almost half of AIM's major leadership was involved in an order to kill Anna Mae Aquash, who they suspected of being an FBI informant. It wasn't really part of our book—you could have that excuse. In many ways the book portrays these guys as lovable rogues who at their worst just might beat the shit out of people once in a while. Not killers. And they've accused each other, right? It's incontrovertible that some people in AIM were involved in calling for the execution of this person they thought was an informant. Which means there was a darker side to AIM than what we explored. I guess a harder question for me is, *If I had known all those things at the time, would I have gone there?* That would have been a very difficult choice, because I wanted to show AIM as deeply flawed but heroic. I think you could still argue it was. But it really changes when you have to account for some of these things that go way beyond what a lovable rogue does.

I was personally invested in the narrative of AIM, too. The book was really trying to be tough and truthful while saying, *This was important*. Whatever you think about AIM, when you look at the scope of the twentieth century, that period of activism, the most overlooked thing about AIM was that thousands and thousands of people participated in the occupation—in terms of raising money, food, crossing those lines, over months. It was a mass activity in a way that doesn't get enough attention. That's true regardless of whether the movement was more screwed up than our book accounted for.

I was watching this Martin Scorsese film called *The 50 Year Argument* [2014], about *The New York Review of Books*, the other day. There was this story that really resonated with me, about Frances FitzGerald, one of their journalists covering the Vietnam War. She was a hero to their



liberal readers. Then she started reporting on all the horrible things that the National Liberation Front did and was vilified—people turned on her in an instant. I feel like that’s what we’re living at this present moment. You choose your team, and you want to hear what you want to hear. The complexity is understanding that the NLF was a legitimate anti-imperialist, anticolonialist outfit that did all kinds of wonderful things, *and* it’s absolutely guilty of atrocious war crimes. The one doesn’t mean the other thing isn’t also true. Humans are flawed, the world is flawed, and more and more it’s not like there’s good guys and bad guys in the way that some of us hope for. I was very fascinated in that film to see that the same journalist, the same person you thought was amazing, you could so easily say is either a liar or that you don’t want to know the truth of what she’s saying.

You gave a talk at the Walker Art Center during the height of the controversy around Jimmie Durham and his identity as a Cherokee. Your take was so “grown-up.” I loved this part: “I love doubt. I love confusion. Sometimes I even love being wrong. Anything’s possible, right? If Jimmie Durham is a fraud, it would rank somewhere between two poles for me. The first would be finding out my parents were actually KGB officers. The second would be a colleague that you’ve known for decades, whose house you visited, who shared stories of their childhood and their siblings, you met their spouse and have friends in common, and you find one day every single thing they told you about their past was a lie. Hard to imagine what that would feel like, but I’m sure it would make me feel dumber than a box of rocks, which in a way would be deeply interesting.”

I was really surprised to see an art critic recant her glowing review of his retrospective once the controversy erupted. What do you make of all that?

I remember the rock critic Ellen Willis saying something like, *The Rolling Stones are sexist and they’re really awesome, and, so, deal with it.* That’s like, Harvey Weinstein made some amazing movies. Right? That doesn’t mean the movies are now awful. He’s obviously this terrible person. It’s so interesting that artists and people who follow art would have so

much trouble with that, because we just know that a lot of great artists have been terrible people. That's part of it. What I decided with AIM is that you can't just pull out this or that aspect that you want—because all of its problems, all its contradictions stem from its brilliance. I think with a lot of artists it's the same.

**When you started writing criticism, who were your models?**

The *Voice* was pretty influential, the idea of critics who could write in really different ways with their own style. Early on I was reading people like Hunter S. Thompson. I had this book by Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* [1972], in the early seventies—that made a big impression on me, that somebody could have this outsider Chicano activist thing and be writing in a first-person voice. When I was in New York, there was access to a lot of great criticism. I followed Stanley Crouch, for example—somebody coming from a very different perspective. I liked the fact that criticism could express a worldview—basically a critic is imprinting their worldview on you. I also liked the free-ranging nature of it, where you could talk about music and politics at the same time—both activism and art. That really suited me.

**Many of the essays in *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* are in the first person, and in many of your essays you've deployed this hyperstylized first-person character. What's the relationship between the "Paul" character in the writing and in the world?**

I think the character came from writing *Hurricane*. The book was in large part me figuring out what I thought about AIM—as I was writing the book. Not before. It then seemed only natural to be more explicit about the texts being PCS deciding what he thinks about the topic at hand, in real time. Though I think the PCS character is a lot more fun than I am.

**How did you start writing on visual artists?**

My stock answer, which I think is really mostly true, is that politics got boring and artists were having more fun. I would say that's it. By the end of AIM, there were all these different factions. Jimmie and I always liked that movie *Life of Brian* [1979] because they have this funny riff about the "People's Front of Judea"—all these little factions

set in Jesus's time. All of that kind of absurdity of the New Left was manifesting itself in AIM until it was tedious and irrelevant. Then I saw that artists were actually engaging some of these larger questions I was thinking about.

One thesis of *Like a Hurricane* is that AIM never had a political agenda—there was never something coherent like *land to the tiller*. It was reacting to things in an extraordinary way and understood invisibility as a huge thing that all Native people could relate to, and was asking, *How do we change that?* A lot of Native art was about the same kinds of things—*How do you overcome how most people see Indians? How do we create a space to be seen and understood differently? How do we make work relevant to our lives?* And the ways the artists were asking all this was more interesting. Once I got past the idea that I had to know about painting and art history to describe the work and what it means, it just made sense to write about it. And I got gigs writing about art—hopefully because my stuff is good, but also because there are very few people writing about Indian art. The best writers tended to be people like Jimmie, or Jolene Rickard, who are themselves artists—and that's a different thing.

My art writing evolved over time. Mainly I liked getting published, and I could get published writing about art and I could still talk about politics. Everyone who asked me to write about art usually knew *Like a Hurricane*, and they were somehow interested in me bringing an activist's understanding.

**You write, in the broadest sense, about contemporary Native art—is that fair to say?**

Yes.

**Though it is weird to put it that way, because it's such a vast array of things that you write about. How do you conceptualize the diversity of that group of artists?**

I think I generally avoided that. Kathleen Ash-Milby, my colleague in New York, has done us all done a great favor by saying, "*Native art*" simply means art done by a person who says they're Native. I think what I've really tried to do is figure out how the work of, say, James Luna is asking the right questions, the larger questions, and then I get to riff on almost

whatever I want.

What has been most successful is when it's an artist for whom I can do real service by enlarging the conversation around them—by talking about the contemporary moment, or by contextualizing their work in relation to AIM, which you can do to some degree with both James Luna and Fritz Scholder. Those are the more ambitious things where I wasn't worried, *Do I have enough art history to do this?* I had confidence that this would be of interest to the field.

Both Fritz Scholder and Jimmie Durham have an interestingly ambivalent relationship to claiming Native heritage. In things you've written about both of them, you've described the function of their work and personas in the world as "ultimately an Indian project." I was interested to hear more about what that means, not just in the case of those two, but in a broader sense.

There are probably better examples, but there was this great line from a Springsteen interview: *There's an empty concert arena, then there's a band, then the arena is full of people—what happens each time is a unique new experience: it's something that's created together.* To me, the work of art and the reception of the work are new every time, and that's instructive to look at.

For the Scholder exhibition, I think a lot of curators would have said, *Okay, now there's this whole issue about his identity, and we'll deal with it over there.* But I'm always looking for that third rail, and for Scholder it's his fellow students at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, most of whom still hate his guts to this day. They went to school with him and say, *When he came here, he was an abstract painter—he ripped off our work.* They're furious even now. That's where the energy is, so go with that, instead of saying, *Don't pay attention.* I wanted to front-load it so we might see what's actually going on. And maybe this controversy is the key to understanding his work—that story of him saying, *I will never paint Indians—okay, I'll paint Indians, but I'm not painting Indians anymore—wait, I need money, so I'll paint Indians again.* To me, it's an irresistible narrative. And something that I'm qualified to talk about.

Well, what does it mean to then say that he, as a cultural figure,

is an “Indian project”?

I guess it’s probably trying to get at, *What is the usefulness of Fritz Scholder?* You have an Indian-consciousness constituency saying, *Here’s this guy, this weirdo, who has a fancy dog and drives a Rolls-Royce or whatever. He doesn’t seem to care about us much, and he buys all these stupid ads in New York art magazines to get famous. What do we do with this guy?* The idea would be that we can put him to different uses. My mom hated Fritz Scholder—she wouldn’t even come to the opening of that show, she dislikes his work so much. She doesn’t care about art in general, she just thinks he made us look ugly. What I love about his work is it captures who we were before this mandatory retraditionalization thing. The fact that we hang on to him means that he’s still significant—that these paintings and images have some use for the Indian world.

**I see a lot of your writing about art as advocacy more than criticism per se. How do you see that, and what do you think is important to address in writing about contemporary art made by a Native American artist, as opposed to anyone else?**

I think that’s true. There’s a certain low-key, triumphalist, pro-Native-art slant, and in the field we talk lots about someday having enough going on that a Native artist is slammed by a Native critic, which never happens. Also, I’m not sure my art writing has a larger critical point of view. Probably not. I would say from the perspective of 2018, I wish both of these art scenes had greater ambition to reach larger audiences. It feels like we’ve given up and no longer dream of contemporary artists being as significant, as famous, and as discussed as celebrities or athletes.

**How do you understand the relationship between politics and art—between what artists are doing and other forms of pop-cultural representation?**

I remember talking with Steve McQueen and other panelists about an event that was part of an Edgar Heap of Birds exhibition in Venice in 2007. He laughed at the idea that artists today are more or less political than they were centuries ago. I’ve always been close to that perspective: it’s all political. I have felt disenchanting with the art

world in recent years, in large part because the artists I'm supposed to like the most, Indian and others, make preachy, didactic work that reaches an audience who already agrees with them. And that becomes less appealing to me given the political economy of the contemporary art world these days, how much of it is based on the extreme wealth so many of these artists condemn. I understand the contradiction is complex, and this doesn't make the artists hypocrites necessarily; I just want it to be acknowledged more than it is.

Your essay "The Big Movie" [1992] is a radical expansion of the role of **visuality in Native American history—you argue for very canny and complex dynamics at play in these representations, in which Indians are active participants.**

In a way, writing *Like a Hurricane* was saying, *How about a book where Indians are at the center of it, and not just as the victims?* I started thinking the same things about photography and films. I developed sort of a novelist's sensibility about it. Like, you look at the famous Edward Curtis photographs, and you know the Indians sitting there are not stuffed. They got up in the morning, they did different things, they were told to take their watches off so they wouldn't be in the photos. I'm interested in what these people were thinking about while they were doing their part to make these photographs. The thing that motivated me to write the book about AIM was to counterbalance the narratives out there, which were really about white people doing things to AIM, as opposed to dealing with the vital lives of the people actually involved.

In a similar way, a lot of very trite writing about Indians and photography is really about the white imaginary of Indians and not about the actual agency Indian people had. That they, in fact, could be very intelligent human beings who were doing all these things for strategic reasons, or not.

I'm having a real issue at the moment with a lot of the messaging from the museum around a veterans memorial that we're doing. They've made a central element of it this question, which is a completely white-person question: *Why would Indians serve in the US*

*military given how they've been treated?* I understand why people would ask that, and I would not say it's a stupid question, or that at some point you wouldn't want to engage it—it's just not remotely a question that has anything to do with why most Indians are in the military, historically or in the present day. People don't wake up and think, *Oh, I'm an Indian and I'm oppressed. Somehow I've joined the army, but wait a minute, they screwed us over!* Most Indians who join the military do it for the same reasons other Americans join the military. I had uncles on my mom's side who were in World War II, and they are very patriotic. They wanted to fight for their country. They don't say, *I'm going to do this, but it's really ironic because . . .*

It's partly because you're talking about it so generally. What I try to do is look at really specific moments, details, individuals—then you can get at who people actually are. What you end up finding is that they are basically as smart as you are in that moment. They're not puppets, and they're not without any choices. My work is always trying to unlock that.

**I see your new exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, *Americans* [2018], as a summation of a lot of the ideas you've worked on for a long time. How do you see them taking shape in this particular exhibition?**

When we were first starting to plan this show, we held an important symposium with some of the smartest people in Native studies, called "You Can't Teach American History without Teaching Indian History." The punchline is, *Of course you can, because it's done all the time.* The level of Indian scholarship now is just extraordinary—it's like a golden age. Despite that, when these people teach undergraduates, it's like it's still 1970. The needle hasn't moved. Despite all of the public campaigns and great scholarship, in terms of an average American's knowledge of Indians, it's still almost at zero. What that tells me is, *It's not about more information, and it's not about correcting false ideas about history or stereotypes—because we've been doing that forever, and it hasn't move the needle.* The radical notion of the *Americans* exhibition is that we're telling visitors, *You're part of the Indian experience by virtue of being an American—Indians are so*

*embedded in American national identity, in visual culture, that this really is about you. With this show we're trying to say, You are part of this construct.*

I think in 2004, it would have been a fair criticism to say you could come to our museum and learn about the Northern Cheyenne, and that's cool and interesting—they had great art and ideas about the universe—but then you could leave and it asked nothing of you. Because it had nothing to do with you—I mean, atomized exhibitions are constructed that way. Instead, with this show, we're saying, *There is no you without us: everything about this country is entangled with Indian consciousness, identity, history, continuing up to this day—it's in all our heads.* That's risky, because it's giving the audience a lot of power.

When I was researching *Hurricane*, I saw that throughout history, there is this recurring thread of feeling sorry for Indians. Back to the very beginning—*Lo, the poor Indian!* You get people writing in the mid-nineteenth century lamenting, *We're screwing over the poor Indians—it's so sad*, so we made this funny slogan: *Lo, the poor Indian!* Guilt about Indians has produced disastrous results quite often. The famous thing about the Carlisle school, where Indians were sent off the reservations—when it's discussed, they often show a cemetery full of dead Indian children. *Very subtle.* It wasn't a great place, but what people leave out is that, first, many Indians sent their kids there because it was much better than schools on the reservation; second, private boarding schools all over the world were fucking horrible—think about rich, upper-class English boarding schools and what goes on there. But most important to me is that the guy who ran it, who famously said “Kill the Indian to save the man,” was a radical Republican antiracist. For his time, he was the most militant *Nation*-reading Bernie bro you could find. Because these were *radical* ideas, to take Indians and educate them. Most of the Indian world at that time *wanted* assimilation—it was just a question of on whose terms, and how much. When Indians today say, *We wanted to stay the way we were*—that's against reality, which is really hard to admit.

**How has your conception of the audience shifted with this show?**

This show will get a million plus visitors a year—all kinds of people, ninety percent of whom are non-Indian. If I'm interested in reaching



that kind of mass audience, if it really works, it'll be something they think about the next day. It'll be something like, Trump says "Pocahontas" and they'll say, *Oh, I learned these cool things about Pocahontas at that exhibition*. Noticing the place names and the images will reinforce the idea that Indians are part of your life, whether you're white or South Asian or whatever. That this is part of the experience of living in this country.

I think it's a pretty accessible thought that when we've rained down "Tomahawk" missiles on fifteen countries in the last thirty years and called the South Bronx "Fort Apache" in the seventies, these are not unimportant psychological elements of the country that are worth investigating, without instantly becoming about manifest destiny or white supremacy. How do we avoid that trap? That's what I'm trying to get to. A lot of it is helping people feel that it's just kind of cool to think about. Museums are organized around didactics and messaging and all of that—I just think humans are so complicated. I never want to be *proscriptive*. If I get people with the spectacle, and they're thinking about how Indian experience is part of their own individual life in a different way—that's success.

I think the shift is thinking more deeply about who the audience actually is and what's the most impactful thing we can do. To do that turns out to be sailing against the zeitgeist and saying to the people wearing those red "Make America Great Again" baseball caps, *Come on in. Learn about this. Be part of it*—without irony, without, *We're going to show you how bad you are, how wrong you are*. I think that's what's radical about it.