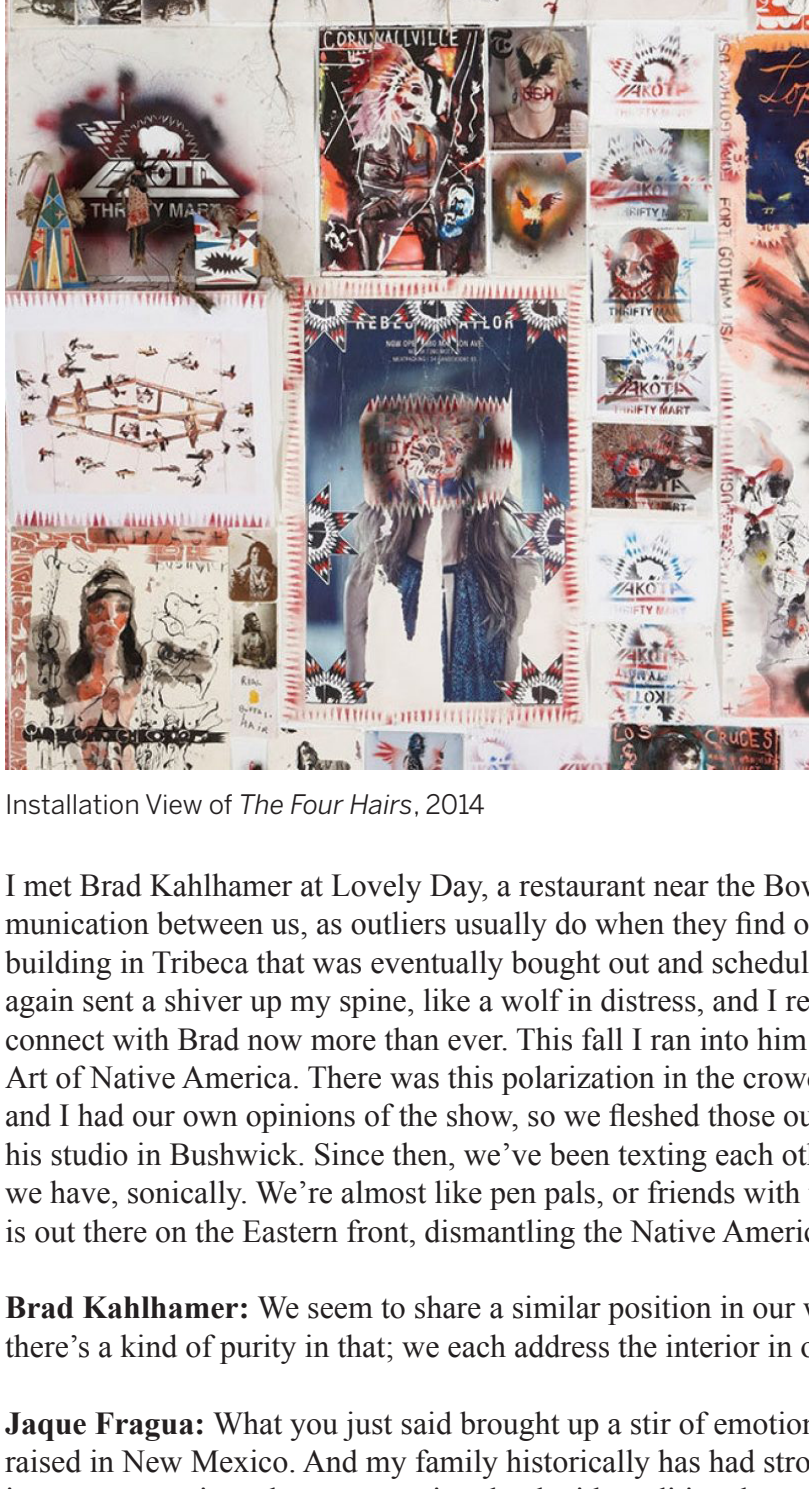


Jaque Fragua and Brad Kahlhamer

BY JAQUE FRAGUA



Installation View of *The Four Hairs*, 2014

I met Brad Kahlhamer at Lovely Day, a restaurant near the Bowery, in 2015. We have this effortless, fluid communication between us, as outsiders usually do when they find out about each other. At that time I was living in a building in Tribeca that was eventually bought out and scheduled for demolition. A sense of displacement once again sent a shiver up my spine, like a wolf in distress, and I returned to the Southwest. Although it seems like I connect with Brad now more than ever. This fall I ran into him at the Met for the opening of an exhibition called *Art of Native America*. There was this polarization in the crowd of creatives and collectors, and clearly, Brad and I had our own opinions of the show, so we fleshed those out the next day with an impromptu jam session at his studio in Bushwick. Since then, we've been texting each other incessantly, mostly with audio notes of ideas we have, sonically. We're almost like pen pals, or friends with tin cans strung together. I'm happy to know Brad is out there on the Eastern front, dismantling the Native American Dream. I'll do the same on this side.

Brad Kahlhamer: We seem to share a similar position in our work, of being both inside and outside. And there's a kind of purity in that; we each address the interior in our own unique ways. Can you talk about that?

Jaque Fragua: What you just said brought up a stir of emotion. My tribe is Jemez Pueblo. That's where I was raised in New Mexico. And my family historically has had strong ties to the cultural side of the tribe. Someone in my community, who was very involved with traditional aspects of the culture once said, "You'll never be Indian enough." It was his reaction to a conversation with my father, a rhetorical comment referencing that no matter how culturally involved you are, no matter how much time you spend in the community or what dress you have on—whatever you do to be as traditional as possible, you'll never be Indian enough to certain folks who have the power of judgment. That fight is a futile one. The point he was making was essentially: create a life you value and find meaningful, versus trying to live up to someone else's standard. Growing up in a community that's very traditional and trying to fight progress reaching the pueblo, I feel I straddle the line of contemporary and foundational. That's something Native people across the country have to face at some point in their lives.

BK: As you're talking, I started thinking about my own experience being of Native descent, adopted in Tucson, Arizona, to non-Native parents. Over decades, my practice has dealt with the private and public issues around identity and tribal ambiguity. It's funny how we define ourselves through the eyes of others. In the Bloomberg years of stop-and-frisk, wandering around New York City, I got picked up by the police. Undercover second-generation Asian detectives had identified me as a Native man who had just committed a robbery at a dry cleaner down the street. And I was struck by their character study, you know; in their eyes, I was Native. It doesn't help me on the rez, does it?

JF: (laughter) I don't think it helps you in either situation. I usually get identified as Hispanic or Latino, according to my, you know, record with the law.

BK: Okay, we're starting this conversation on a low note. (laughter) Getting back to the work, your trajectory has been from street art to social protest action, but all through this you've maintained a sharp aesthetic edge. Did that come from your background, or is it something you acquired at school?

JF: Well, school actually showed me the path not to go down: the academic route. I excelled academically but never thought the Western framework could reach my people as powerfully as creating work outside of that. I only went to the Institute of American Indian Arts for two years, and then I wasn't welcome back because of my financial situation. I just couldn't pay the tuition anymore. I thought the only way I could support myself was to continue making art, and I had to figure out how to do that with the tools I had. My creative background at that time was just graffiti, leaning toward vandalism—destroying property or intervening in urban decay with spray paint and other media. As a younger person, having a way to express angst and even violence through art was essential for me. I grew up wondering why things are how they are but never getting a clear answer from elders or educators or my parents. Trying to take that angst in a constructive rather than destructive direction led me to activism and creating visual resistance work. A lot of protest artwork is used as a form of education, and sharp visuals with an edge move the message a lot quicker in my experience. I'm trying to channel the angst and grievances we have as Native people into a voice that has a particular tone, at a frequency people can connect to and digest all at once. Because it's a lot to digest—the stories, policies, treaties, history. Some people on the reservation don't speak or read English, so visuals and color and design help communicate what we're about and what we're going through.

BK: In 2012, I was invited to the island of Lopud off the coast of Croatia to speak at a Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) conference. And on the plane over I came up with the concept of the post-Smithsonian delinquent and based an informal talk on it.

JF: What is the post-Smithsonian delinquent?

BK: Well, it relates to authenticity and representation within the discourse of Native American art, which are complicated by the concept of originality or of the primordial as established by many Native Americans today. In my case, I'm adopting a position of delinquency in these fields of discourse, possibly making myself a target by emphasizing and exploring my tribal ambiguity. This is both a precarious act and one that provides the potential for innovation, for a discursive handling of identity, cultural representation, and self-reflection. Early on, being adopted, my tribal ambiguity was actually a freedom. I didn't have the guidelines and contours of a tribal card to direct me into a particular market. So I turned what some people would think of as a disadvantage into an advantage, and I did that by moving to New York City, which doesn't really care. The New York art world is based more on innovation and, for better or for worse, not so much tradition. In cities, you're surrounded by these institutions, and the Smithsonian, I feel, controls a lot of the conversation around the art historical narrative of indigeneity. It wasn't clear where I would fit, so I had to break out and adopt an alternative position, that of the post-Smithsonian delinquent. You may be one too.

JF: I'm pretty sure I am. (laughter) I feel that institutions, museums, schools take a lot of influence from the Smithsonian and other anthropological or archaeological collections, whereas the contemporary art world is more about the living and breathing and what's happening now. So with this idea of post-Smithsonian delinquency, we're not relying on past references or fabricated identity references; we're coming through our own Native experience and creativity at the present moment, looking toward the future, and seeing how we can affect that future with our artwork. One reason I like your work is because you're not referencing Andy Warhol or other blue-chip triumphant artists of the Western world. You're coming from a source that's hard to define other than it's just Brad. Your work is a lighthouse in the space of creativity that usually defines a Native artist—you're not using identity as a crutch; you're letting the work speak for itself. And that's what I hope to do, through whatever I touch or create.

BK: I think it connects to where you and I meet more directly, around music and the impulse of punk and direct action. There's an immediacy you get from the audience, and how you relate to your tribe and your people. You and I have been talking about forming a band. But I also feel like I already have a band with you, through our visual dialogue.

JF: Definitely. When I was making graffiti or "street art"—people want to call it art; I'm not a proponent of that term as a generalization—I felt I was painting music in a way. There's the immediacy of creating an impact with this improvisational, on-the-spot experience. I was doing line work and petroglyphic-style stuff, more poetic than just lettering. I took the idea of a one-liner—pressing the can and throwing up with a single continuous line—and wrapped whole buildings, billboards, train cars. It was therapeutic; there was a frequency, pattern, rhythm, and syncopation happening while I was painting. And that all came from the influence of music. I can't wait to get back playing. When I was in New York last and picked up a guitar, that was a rare moment for me. But I still got it. It's like riding a bike. (laughter)

BK: We'll make that less rare. I'm eager to strap on a guitar to your tunes. This brings me back to the years I spent in the city looking at punk rock posters and the kind of edge they offer. I did a CD called KTNN, which was the Navajo Nation radio station I grew up listening to. And I remember seeing Glenn Branca here in New York with a guitar army and this kind of jagged, East-meets-the-spiritual-Southwest sound. Do you take any of this urban grit from the East Coast back with you to New Mexico? Or are you looking at LA and other places farther west?

JF: I do take inspiration from New York, the blight and also the positive side of urban living. I see the huge deviation between rural reservation life and New York City life. The people in those two spheres are separated by class, by industry. And yet the things that happen on the reservations power the big cities. Like the Navajo Generating Station, which powers parts of Phoenix, Las Vegas, and other parts of the Southwest. There's this interconnectedness created by the consumption of resources at the expense of Indigenous people and their labor. Industrialization comes into rural areas through oppressive forces. Like at Standing Rock: grassroots groups camped out there, and when things started to escalate, the military came in, and a lot of technology was brought to the frontlines. Both by media—cameras, wireless technology, drones, even by security on the Energy Transfer Partners side, who had rubber bullets, more drones, sound cannons, even weaponry. People think rural areas don't have much access to technology, but then, in the event of a calamity, it appears all of a sudden—right there on the reservation.

BK: An insurgency.

JF: Yeah, it's here. It's always been here. New Mexico is occupied by a number of military bases and government laboratories: Los Alamos National Laboratory, Kirtland Air Force Base, Sandia National Laboratories, White Sands Missile Range, and others. And it's funny, people talk about Area 51 and conspiracy theories about secret government bases, but really they're in plain sight. Driving down the highway, you see nuclear waste being moved from one huge dumpsite to the next, out in the open like things are fine. Industry, modernization, hypercapitalism: they're everywhere.

BK: In that way you and I share a similar background. I grew up in and around Tucson and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. Part of the complexity of the Southwest is that you have this notion of spirituality and purity, yet also these military formations overhead. Which brings me to the idea of being a wartime artist, which always seems to be a Native position. On one hand there's the holism, or even wholeness, of the Indian art market. And then there's this whole other faction of Native activism that's come to life. At the time of the Wounded Knee occupation, I was seventeen, and I only read about it through the Bugle-American, an underground newspaper out of Milwaukee. And I remember experiencing my first real political awakening. Now of course we have Instagram, so these actions are suddenly amplified. I was wondering what you thought about that in relation to social practice aesthetics.

JF: I see a lot of people taking selfies and geotagging their location—you know, organizing in the open air. And I have mixed feelings about that. Even beyond Standing Rock and other movements where there's military presence, surveillance is such a big deal. In some ways I think it's bad that social media provides this access to sensitive information. But at least it's getting out there, and I agree, it's better than only having the Bugle. Nowadays, you have multiple sources, maybe too many. How valid is the information? And who is it coming from? I like the idea of disseminating our own independent voices, and more people are finding out about certain injustices, and movements that can become a part of or allies in, and that's great. But at the same time, in many of these social or environmental justice movements, there is real work to be done in the practice part. You'll see people at the first meeting, the next meeting you'll see fewer, and so on. We live in an age of short attention spans, so if people aren't engaged then it's just like, your time's up and on to the next thing. The desire for instant gratification and immediate results kills a lot of civic engagement and prevents people from getting involved and getting their hands dirty. Most don't want to put in the hours and be present for longer than three minutes.

BK: We both paint, and I think we value that practice as a way of slowing down. I talk to my students about slow looking and structural viewing, which is a classical music concept of how one breaks down chords and patterns based on previous listening. You talk about the self and maybe that's a kind of pause button we can hit in lieu of all this noise out there and all the contradictions—I refer to it as digital tourism. There appears to be a lot more noise and energy around Standing Rock than there was in 1973 around Wounded Knee. And yet it's this linear path of the struggle and you rarely hear victory. How do you turn a continuous struggle into victory? I'm still thinking the answer's in the individual, but I also grew up in an era when it was thought that a painting or fixed object couldn't compete with the 24/7 news cycle. So I'm conflicted.

JF: I feel that art cancels or alleviates a lot of what I would call intentional stress and disruption in our natural lives. In my own experience, if I'm stressed out or feeling depressed, I go to the art museum, or the street. I like to look at graf, at marks people have made. If it's one versus the other: studio painting versus people just painting on the sides of buildings because they can, I find more value in the latter.

In terms of media, I don't watch TV news anymore, let alone read my viewer. My focus is more on the news of my community and different struggles going on. I try to keep my vantage as clean as possible, so when something magical happens, I can be there to witness it. A lot of the stuff I've created in recent years has been used in protests or activist events, and I like the ephemerality of that. It also connects to graffiti, painted one night and gone the next day. And once it's out there, then it's everybody's property. But I'm also interested in creating work that is monumental and can withstand the test of time.

BK: It sounds like we're crossing the same street in opposite directions. Because I've just been doing some stuff on newspaper that I want to wheat-paste up around Bushwick. I don't even know why. I just want to inject fun and impulse back into my practice. You mentioned being stressed and going out to a museum or to see graffiti; centuries ago, people were probably looking at rock paintings on the canyon walls as street art. Those were the galleries of the day, these canyon walls that you and I were born in. And we can take it in for free.

JF: Where I live right now in Albuquerque it's actually a bit easier to get to the museum than to go out and see the petroglyphs.

I want to connect what you're saying about post-Smithsonian delinquency with the development of these public lands or sacred sites that are culturally important to Indigenous people in the Southwest. We had a conversation about decommissioned sacred items, displayed as artifacts.

BK: Oh yeah. We met at the Met's *Art of Native America* exhibition. Interesting title. And we were going through, talking about these artifacts. I'm not sure decommission is the right term for what happened to them; it makes me think of old military ships or something. But way back these items had amazing, vibrant lives. There's this ceremonial rattle in the American Indian Collection at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, which I think still retains its original power. It's fully alive, raging in its glass cage. Are you talking about somehow reincarnating these objects?

JF: I'm thinking about the mechanism by which these things become decommissioned. I feel like it's always been the impetus of the colonizing country to decommission us as a people. If not physically—by genocide, murder, and rape of Native people—then by decommissioning the way we think, our identity, our culture, taking away the sacred places that connect us to our origins. These are fights happening now, as we are try to protect Bears Ears for instance, or Chaco Canyon, where all the available Bureau of Land Management property is about to be leased to developers. There's a ten-mile buffer zone around the actual Chaco Canyon, but it's part of a larger network of ancestral sites and monuments that exist all along the San Juan Basin. Many of the areas have already been bulldozed over and developed by the oil and gas sector. Now you have the largest methane cloud in the country, right there in the Four Corners. This plume comes from leaks from the natural gas development there. The Four Corners is contributing to global warming and creating a hole in the ozone. It's the decommissioning of Mother Earth, of our natural world, for short-term gain.

BK: It's shifting the original purpose. Native culture is the foundational culture of this country, and it's shocking how little people know about it.

JF: Touching on the idea of foundation and sacred areas, I think we have to talk about water—that's the elephant in the room, clearly. You and I come from desert spaces, but now you live in New York, so you have access to some of the best drinking water in the country. (laughter)

BK: Exactly, it's all upstate. Here on the East Coast it seems almost plentiful. Too much water, considering the storm activity and all that. It's difficult to generate enthusiasm or empathy from New York City for big protests, such as Standing Rock, because it just feels so far away for the average citizen here in New York. You have to make these social stances accessible and engaging. But out in the Southwest, it's a completely different story, no?

JF: Yeah, I think a lot of the historical vantage points on water have informed water policy. For instance, because of the Pueblo tribes here in the Southwest, many of us have access to agricultural spaces and drinking water as well. With several water systems around the tribes where I grew up, near the Jemez River, all the water comes from the mountains and flows down the valley into an irrigation system that's about twenty miles long. This is how we've been cultivating the land for ages. The state has set things up so that if we don't use it, we lose it; if we're not using the water to sustain agriculture or the tribe itself, then those rights or privileges will be taken from us and used farther upstream or downstream. And the Jemez flows into the Rio Grande, which has been the river of life in New Mexico for millennia. Even this river is polluted at times—a few years ago, six million gallons of sewage poured into the river due to a power outage. And then upstream we have Los Alamos Natural Laboratory, where the Manhattan Project started. A lot of the weapons testing and development have impacted the water through contamination, and other things like chromium plumes poisoning the aquifers, affecting groundwater and drinking water sources. And obviously all of that is carcinogenic and affects the people who live near the river, Indigenous people, Pueblo people. And we're not even talking about the Colorado, which is also contaminated.

BK: It's been hard, personally—I know I'll be drinking bottled water when I visit Mesa, Arizona, which is disheartening: returning, suddenly everybody's drinking bottled water and not talking too much about it. I don't know if that's the situation with you.

JF: Yeah, it's weird. Even the drinking water at my Jemez Pueblo community is subpar. There are high levels of arsenic. And that's led to a rise in different types of cancer, such as pancreatic cancer.

I went to a meeting last night about Chaco Canyon, and the panel was a group of Pueblo and Navajo allies who are working on a campaign to stop new development in the San Juan Basin and the Four Corners region. They were talking about what they're fighting right now and the negative effects of the oil and gas industry. And someone from the audience asked, "Can't you just relocate or move?" (laughter) And maybe this is what's going to have to happen. These are our homelands, our spaces that we've been in for millennia, and maybe at some point it will be time to have to find somewhere else to go. Maybe it's Boise, Idaho. Or I don't know—

BK: I'm going to suggest Alaska.

JF: Oh, man.

BK: I know it's cold, but having been up there, Alaska presents an interesting situation. You don't really have reservations; you have what they call corporations, which are sort of a new model. I witnessed first-hand very right-wing Republican individuals teaming up with Native communities to protect these still fairly intact wild-life migration patterns because everyone feeds off and depends on them. It struck me as an interesting example of how individuals might work together against corporate interests, at least from what I saw. In the Southwest, there seem to be very strict lines of ownership. I'm thinking about Scottsdale and Phoenix. The Gila River Tribe actually has some rights, similar to what you're talking about.

JF: I think as time goes on, instead of asking about the weather, we'll be asking how the water is. The fight's happening everywhere. I just got an email from a friend who's down in this camp in the pipeline between Chitimacha and Houma in Louisiana, trying to stop the development of the Bayou Bridge Pipeline. It's essentially the end of the Dakota Access Pipeline. This is where the results of all the product will be flowing through. It's a pretty big deal. People are getting arrested for civil disobedience, strapping themselves to the workers' equipment and trying to delay the construction as much as possible. These frontline engagements need more coverage via independent media, and also just our awareness, support, and prayer. Man, I have no idea what's going to happen in the future. I'm trying my best to be open with the possibilities of scarcity because I think it's coming. It's tough to think about.

BK: There have to be alternatives, and you and I will be continuing this conversation as I spend more time down in the Southwest. I was reading that if oil falls below seventy-eight dollars a barrel, it suddenly becomes economically unfeasible to build these pipelines, so maybe that's another thought. As artists we suddenly constantly be thinking about these things and about what we can do.

JF: I want to commit more of my energy to water, beyond what I've already been doing, but as far as artwork goes, maybe we should collaborate on a water piece.

BK: Yeah, as we're talking about this, I'm thinking, How do you make these private thoughts public? I'd love to do something together. Maybe we should stop the interview here and get to it. I have some ideas...

JF: Well, with music, we already know there's a synthesis there. And I think carrying it over visually would be great too.

BK: I mean, if it has a sound component, there's something about the sensorial idea of water. Turn up the volume on that.

JF: Yeah, I'm all about sound design.

BK: Though we should stay clear of any New Age aspirations. (laughter)

Where was I? The Apache reservation, San Carlos. You have to drive out. There's a big dam that looks particularly desolate; it's so functional—there's a place to start. This grid of irrigation all over Arizona, pecan farms and all of that. Something between that and fresh rainfall would be interesting for us.

JF: Yeah, water is a sacred element in the desert for sure.

BK: Going back to those foundational ideas of purity, you know, I work the unpure well—a lot, as you do, elevating it. It's not a black and white struggle. Maybe we're talking about the original well—another idea. I was up at the mouth of the Mississippi, way up in Minnesota, and I was struck by how small it is. And then it gradually turns into this giant vein, this life force.

JF: Amazing.

BK: We keep going back to music. Hybridization, certainly musically, is so much a part of tribal culture, and it seems that the art world is finally catching up. It's like 6 AM in the Native art world, but I think it's good for us to position something that's happening later in the day. I'd be super interested in seeing you out here in New York more, so we can collaborate on some sort of intervention.

JF: Intervention is a good way to put it.

BK: The heart beats. It's good.