

## **Exhibition “Songs for Spirit Lake” in New York City**

The exhibition at the Rauschenberg Foundation Project Space in Chelsea, New York, has been overrun by mythical bison, which haunt the present at North Dakota’s Spirit Lake Sioux Reservation, some 1,500 miles away. In “Songs for Spirit Lake,” they are joined by images of today’s painted and photographed inhabitants of the Spirit Lake Sioux Nation, sculptural investigations into Tribal family structure, and poetic reflections on tough social issues faced by today’s Spirit Lake people.

Curated by Laurel Reuter, Director of the North Dakota Museum of Art, the exhibition brings together six artists from various disciplines and backgrounds, including Native Americans, to create work with and about a community that has minimal contact with contemporary artists.

The artists are photographer Rena Effendi of Baku, Azerbaijan who now lives in Cairo; Bill Harbort, a New Yorker transplanted to Minot, North Dakota, who left a lucrative graphic design career to teach art to college students; and John Hitchcock, of Southern Cheyenne and Northern European descent who teaches at the University of Wisconsin. They are joined by North Dakota sculptor Terry Jelsing, Manitoba painter Tim Schouten, and New York video installation artist Mary Lucier who has completed two major works about loss in North Dakota.

Under the aegis of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation’s Artistic Innovation and Collaboration Grant Program, this first in-progress show allowed these artists to create work that responds to contemporary life on the mixed-race, multi-cultural, poverty-ridden Dakota Sioux Reservation.

In November 2012, these artists were introduced to the Spirit Lake community through an exhibition of their own work. Installed in the gymnasium at the Cankdeska Cikana Community College in the village of Fort Totten, it was the first contemporary art exhibition ever mounted on the Reservation. Over the past year the artists visited the Reservation, introduced themselves to the people through an exhibition of their own work, attended ceremonial powwows, delved into local history, and found themselves welcomed into both “White” and Indian homes. The local Cankdeska Cikana Community College served as their home base.

In “Songs for Spirit Lake,” the artists explore how people live within the landscape; who the people are; and their patterns of intermingling the past and present in contemporary life through photography, painting, installation, and video. A traditional Spirit Lake drum group, training ground for an eight-year-old performing next to his father, opened the exhibition. The video artist Mary Lucier filmed the opening

performance and turned it into a projection with sound to continue in the space until the exhibit closes on June 29.

Exhibited in the context of New York City's Rauschenberg Project Space, "Songs for Spirit Lake" invited a new, broad audience to engage with the voices and traditions of the Spirit Lake community as conveyed through the eyes of the artists. This endeavor parallels not only the North Dakota Museum of Art's mission to address global concerns—ideas as relevant to people living on the Northern Plains as they are to people from around the world—but also the legacy of Robert Rauschenberg, who sought to create social and cultural awareness through artistic collaboration and innovation.

***Songs for Spirit Lake* exhibited May 24 through June 29, 2013, at the Rauschenberg Foundation Project Space located at 455 West 19<sup>th</sup> Street, New York City.**

### **About the North Dakota Museum of Art**

The North Dakota Museum of Art, while located on the campus of the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, is a private not-for-profit institution, which by legislative act serves as the State Art Museum. This contemporary art museum is recognized nationally for the strength of its exhibition program, groundbreaking human rights exhibitions, responsiveness to its rural community, and involvement with international artists long before it became usual. According to Museum Director Laurel Reuter, North Dakota is the end of the earth for most US artists but an exotic land to international artists. Finally, in seeking to establish contemporary art within the ethos of the place and to develop a canon of art about and from that place, the Museum commissions landmark works of art anchored in the landscape, history, and culture of the Northern Plains.