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[1x1 On Wendy Red Star](#)

Sweat Lodge, 2019

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By *[Eva Díaz](#)*



Installation view: *Wendy Red Star: A Scratch on the Earth*, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 2023. Courtesy Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.

An underappreciated aspect of many domed projection spaces is that they get exceedingly hot. In the several installations of Stan VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* (1964–65) I've visited over the years its warm stickiness becomes a prominent sensory element of the experience. No wonder: the *Movie-Drome* is an unvented metal silo top stuffed with about a dozen projectors and often at least as many people visiting, all generating heat and humidity. Domes using film projection by artists Ben Coonley and Michael Rakowitz, and domed exhibition spaces like the MoMA PS1 geodesic structures (previously in Long Island City and Rockaway Beach, New York), and the Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil, among others, have reached perspiration-inducing temperatures on outings I've made to them. Due to their temporary and sometimes portable construction, the squat, enclosed spaces of these structures create microclimates not fully served by HVAC systems.

Wendy Red Star's *Sweat Lodge* (2019) slyly flags this intimate, communal, and, well, sweaty aspect of domed film spectatorship, connecting it to the rounded structures customarily used in ceremonies by Native Americans of the Plains communities, including of her own Apsáalooke (Crow) tribe. Once outlawed by the US government, the sweat ceremony is a central aspect of tribal life, and requires a guide conversant in native language who has completed a multi-year initiation process. Obviously sacred knowledge is not the same thing as artistic practice, and Red Star's version of the sweat lodge, originally installed in the 2019 iteration of her show *A Scratch on the Earth* at the Newark Museum of Art in New Jersey, provides a non-ritualized experience of place while sharing some physical elements of the historic and present-day sweat lodge structures. Red Star's lodge does not employ heated rocks, though a fire pit that would heat such stones is located at its entrance. Like the lodges found throughout the Crow reservation near Bozeman, Montana Red Star calls home, her structure is a half-hemisphere of about-human height, with a diameter of about ten feet. And like sweat lodges located outdoors, hers is also covered by an eclectic collection of Pendleton blankets and sleeping bags.

Inside the dome a fourteen-minute film of various outdoor locations on the Crow reservation fills the structure in a 360-degree projection. Sweat lodge ceremonies connect participants to the land and their ancestors, employing heat, steam, and aromatic cedar, sweetgrass, sage, and bear root to create a rich experience of embodiment and site. Red Star's project instead uses the transportive quality of film to portray the vastness of the Montana terrain. In contrast to the bent willow saplings that form the armature of traditional sweat lodges, Red Star uses a metal lattice geodesic dome associated with R. Buckminster Fuller's constructions. The proliferation of Fuller-inspired domes in the Western United States in the 1960s and 1970s ran parallel to rampant appropriations of Indigenous objects and cultural practices by counter-cultural communities. In *Sweat Lodge* Red Star makes a counter-counter-cultural appropriation. What has been termed "survivance" in Indigenous studies can be understood as the complex relationship between resistance and survival; an emphasis on presence as opposed to absence in the face of deracinating Western colonial settler violence. Red Star's combination of the initiate-only sweat lodge with the popular projection environment of the geodesic dome hybridizes the possibilities of counter-colonial practice and the survivance of Indigenous practices and cultural creativity, showing survivance to be a complex interplay between Western and tribal inventions and traditions.

Contributor

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Eva Díaz is an art historian and critic living in Rockaway Beach, New York. Her book *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* was released by the University of Chicago Press in 2015.