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PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMANCE SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

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## PERFORMANCE & SPACE II

PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
PERFORMANCE SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

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**Indigenous Artistic Collectives as a Radical Place  
of Resistance (R.I.S.E, Winter Count, Postcommodity  
i yəhaw)**

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## Indigenous Artistic Collectives as a Radical Place of Resistance (R.I.S.E, Winter Count, Postcommodity i yəhaw')

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### Abstract

The United States has 574 federally recognized ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse Indigenous communities. In the 2020 Census, 9.7 million people identified as American Indians (AI) or Alaska Native (AN). Recent years have shown that these communities are exposed to increasing economic, and political threats related to limited access to health care and education. In reaction to the hardships of everyday life more and more Indigenous artistic collectives are emerging, on one hand, building a community, and on the other becoming a radical space of resistance. Their art is combined with activism, aesthetic activities with political acts. Together, the creators have a greater impact and, thanks to relational-artistic, horizontal, non-hierarchical activities, they have the opportunity to introduce real changes to the social fabric. In my paper, I headline how the activities of several Indigenous collectives (R.I.S.E, Winter Count, Postcommodity i yəhaw'), and their site-specific art have become both a space of resistance and a place to build Indigenous identity. I refer to Indigenous methodologies (e.g. a methodology based on sounds and spatial structure—*CauseLines* which is a process based on studying the horizon line and landscape, and building scores and stories based on them) and the theories of Indigenous researchers concerning postcolonialism and decolonization issues. I consider how Indigenous art can become a place of resistance, transformation, and change, but also a healing space. I analyze the connections of the Indigenous body with the land of their ancestors, as well as the violence of artificially created borders and the exploitation of natural resources. I present different decolonized curatorial processes that are trying to fight the present and create another Indigenous future through art.

**Keywords:** site-specific art, artistic collectives, place of resistance, Indigenous methodologies, R.I.S.E, Winter Count, Postcommodity, yəhaw', postcolonialism, decolonization

## Indigenous Artistic Collectives

In the United States, there are 574 federally recognized diverse Indigenous communities. Recent years have shown that these communities are exposed to increasing threats, both economic, political and related to limited access to health care and education. In reaction to the hardships of everyday life more and more Indigenous artistic collectives are emerging, on one hand, building a community, and on the other becoming a radical space of resistance. Art is combined with activism, aesthetic activities with political acts. Together, the creators have a greater impact and, thanks to relational-artistic, horizontal, non-hierarchical activities, they have the opportunity to introduce real changes to the social fabric. As Krawczyk (2018) writes in the text *Human-inhuman: the collective as a research method and artistic practice*:

What in most cases connects the ideas and practice of this type of collectivity is an attempt to create a space or a specific event outside the systemic conditions, outside the mainstream modes of thinking and practicing culture. These initiatives are primarily focused on experimenting and implementing on a small, local scale of potential procedures for reactivating forms of social involvement (p. 143).

In this text, I will present the activities of several Indigenous collectives, whose art has become both a space of resistance and a place to build Indigenous identity on a local and global scale.

### Winter Count Collective

Winter Count is an artistic collective consisting of eight members: Ginger Dunnill, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Dylan McLaughlin, Merritt Johnson, Nicholas Galanin, Rob Lundberg, Demian Dinéyazhi, Laura Ortman. The collective is multi-racial, and its name comes from pictographic calendars, traditionally created on buffalo skins, commemorating the most important events of a given clan or tribe. According to contemporary researchers, it is also a unique archive for climate change (Bressan, 2017).

The collective's artistic work is saturated in the Indigenous philosophy that the earth is nobody's property, it is an independent existence, a space that we should care for. Their actions are not only political manifestos, but also poetic reflections on borders, violence and Indigenousness. Their goal is the real change.

The Winter Count has created its own research methodology based on sounds and spatial structure—Cause Lines. It is a process based on studying the horizon line and landscape, and building scores and stories based on them. The collective takes aerial photos of Indigenous places whose landscape is threatened by industry. The lines of rivers, trees, roads and pipelines create the sound score. In the video *We Are in Crisis* from 2016,

we can see images of the landscape next to the Oceti Sakowin camp destroyed by roads and oil rigs.

Another project created by the CauseLines methodology is the sound piece *Coherence/Interference* which emphasizes the interdependence between the Indigenous bodies and their soil. The audience/participants are the creative part of this performance—they are the ones who actively generate the sounds as a part of the installation.

## **Postcommodity**

The Indigenous collective Postcommodity was founded in 2007 and currently has two members: Cristóbal Martínez (Mestizo) and Kade L. Twist (Cherokee). Their installations were presented, among others, at the 18th Sydney Biennial in Australia (2012), at the Whitney Biennial in New York (2017), at Documenta 14, in Kassel, Germany and Athens, Greece (2017)

The collective's name refers to the “commodity era” of the Native American art trade at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Their work refers to the colonial act of partitioning the lands of the Americas, which took place without respecting traditional Indigenous trade routes.

In 2009, Postcommodity created the installation *Do You Remember When?* inside the Arizona State University Art Museum. The work consists of a cut-out concrete section of the museum floor that has been exposed and placed on a pedestal, revealing how the institution's foundations were built on Indigenous land. From this hole emerges the looping path of the Pee Posh Indigenous tribe. This installation is a symbolic portal, a space of Indigenous transformation, revealing the museum's colonial foundations.

In 2015, Postcommodity created the community project: *The Repellent Fence*. They arrived at Agua Priete, Sonora (Mexico) and Douglas, Arizona (USA) in 2012. For three years they worked intensively with both of these border towns. The metaphorical cross-border city "Douglas / Agua Prieta" was created and prepared for a joint Indigenous ceremony, during which there was a symbolic reunion of this divided community. The created installation consisted of 26 balloons fixed to the ground which “stitches the peoples of the Americas together—symbolically demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Western Hemisphere by recognizing the land, Indigenous peoples, history, relationships, movement and communication” (Postcommodity, 2015). The most important result of the project was the transforming meeting, generating new threads of connections and relationships. The aim of this action was to create a safe, fuller and healthier living environment of the borderland.

In 2016, Postcommodity created the video installation *A Very Long Line*, presented at the Whitney Biennial in New York. The installation is built from four screens: each screen displays a fence, filmed in motion, and the video creates a claustrophobic feeling of being cornered and trapped. The image is accompanied by a disturbing noise, reminiscent of processed train sound (Postcommodity, 2016).

### **R.I.S.E. (Radical Indigenous Survivance and Empowerment)**

R.I.S.E. (Radical Indigenous Survivance<sup>1</sup> and Empowerment) is an artistic Indigenous collective founded in 2010. The founder and one of the members of the R.I.S.E. is Demian DinéYazhi a transdisciplinary artist from the Tódích'í'nii (Bitter Water) and Naasht'ézhí Tábaqhá (Water's Edge) clans from Diné (Navajo) (Broken Boxes Podcast, 2015).

The first individual exhibition of the R.I.S.E. collective: *A Nation is a Massacre* was presented in 2018 at Pioneer Works cultural center (Yassmin et al., 2019) in Red Hook, New York. It was created in response to the growing domination of white supremacy in the United States. The exhibition featured manifestos and slogans: "Your freedom is based on genocide and settler violence", "Homophobia Transphobia", "Details are macabre & American & as patriotic as gun violence & rape & mass murder". *A Nation is a Massacre* made the public aware of the centuries-long violence against Indigenous bodies. The next edition of the exhibition took place at the King Street station in cooperation with the yehaw collective. Visitors were asked to bring their own T-shirts, handbags, patches, flags to be printed on with the slogans from the exhibition. Thus, they became an extension of the activity of R.I.S.E.—walking billboards.

R.I.S.E. is not a typical art group, but rather a flexible network of artists. In the R.I.S.E. library there are numerous texts by women and queer authors, which shows the intersectional approach of the collective, emphasizing the need to include queer feminist critique of heteropatriarchy in the overall project of countering colonial oppression—the struggle of the discrimination of minorities (queer, women, Natives, Black, Brown etc.) by the colonial white heteropatriarchy.

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<sup>1</sup> "Survivance" names the conjunction between resistance and survival—calling attention to the fact that not only have Indigenous peoples survived the genocidal ambitions of settler colonialism, but have continued to enliven their cultures in fluid, critical and generative ways. The term thus resists the static overtones of "survival" and instead emphasises the ways in which Indigenous peoples have created counter-poses/positions to those that are marked out for them by the settler-state through stereotypes, popular culture and national mythology.

<https://decolonialdictionary.wordpress.com/2021/04/15/survivance/>

## yəhaw̄

In 2017 yəhaw̄—an artistic Indigenous collective was founded by three artists: Tail (Cherokee Nation), Rector (Choctaw and Seminole) and Kahlon. The word yəhaw̄ comes from an Indigenous story that the Coast Salish tell about several neighboring villages where the inhabitants spoke different languages but shared the same land. This word defines a joint action, an activity based on cooperation beyond divisions (Hilbert, n.d.).

yəhaw̄'s mission is to improve the mental and emotional health of Indigenous people by creating art, and building community. It is an artistic platform, on one hand, intended for creators of Indigenous origin, on the other, it is radically inclusive. It invites Urban Native peoples, Coast Salish artists and Afro-Indigenous artists, as well as Indigenous Latinos and Indigenous queers (LGBTQ+). yəhaw̄' applies a decolonized curatorial process. During the implementation of online exhibitions, all authors who apply for participation receive remuneration, which does not depend on whether the work is finally shown. Often the group accepts all submitted works.

yəhaw̄ has recently bought a land. The parcel includes over 500 trees, and it has access to Mapes Creek. It aims to create a “welcoming interdisciplinary hub where Indigenous creatives can connect with each other and the earth” (Hua, 2023) They want to take their time to really get to know the land, and to work on restoring the native ecology. “In Indigenous design methodology, co-creation is one of the key components. Being intentional, thoughtful, transparent, and inclusive; those are all Indigenous values in the design process” (Hua, 2023).

## Radical Support Space

The Indigenous art collectives presented above differ from each other, but share a few common features. These include radical inclusiveness, decolonization of the discourse around Indigenous identity, and horizontal cooperation. Groups exhibit together, while the number of their members is constantly changing. Neither group has a leader, and the collectives work on the basis of non-hierarchical cooperation.

All groups combine activism with art, but they do it in different ways. The first two: R.I.S.E. and yəhaw̄ focus on the political aspect of art—real change is important to them andart is one of the tools to build a healthy Indigenous community. Postcommodity and Winter Count also focus on creating a space of resistance (combating the climate or migration crisis, pointing out the creation of violent borders, destroying ancestral land, fighting for respect for the identity of Indigenous peoples regardless of their nationality), but they put more emphasis on the artistic form, avoiding simple, propaganda messages. , They create complex metaphors, performing objects or multi-level artistic activities. This

comparison is not intended to evaluate any of the methods chosen by the artists. It is to show their diversity: from propaganda directness, street activities, strong colors, slogans and performative actions in alternative gallery spaces, to complex, multi-level artistic works, combining various media, from performance to installation, video or sound compositions often performed in public museums, or during large artistic events, such as biennials.

All four collectives carry out activities related to the place, emphasizing the importance of the story and the connections of the Indigenous body with the land of their ancestors, as well as the violence of artificially created borders and the exploitation of natural resources. In the activities of the collectives, one can notice an emphasis on partnership relations with the land, protection of both the Indigenous bodies and the destroyed and exploited body of the Earth. As Martinez Luna, Zapotec anthropologist, in a conversation with the artist Abaroa says:

As a natural epistemology, communality understands the being as an element that derives from the land, from the people who inhabit this land, from what the people do on that land and of course, what they achieve through their natural movement; in other words, it is the result of everything that surrounds them. In this sense, human beings are just another species, not the owners of the land, nor its possessors, but a creature that derives from this reality. (Luna, 2021, p. 105)

In the activities of collectives, resilience and resistance intertwine, and groups present alternative forms of building relationships based on performative activities referring to the typical Native American worldview of continual emergence, becoming, constant change, transformation and manifestation, rather than defining, closing and creating a hermetic whole. They create street actions in urban spaces, build a community by creating relational seams in non-obvious places. They invite outsiders to participate and interact. The performativity of their actions is not revealed through the body, as the matter of art, but in the conviction that art not only describes reality, but changes it. It manifests itself in rituals, demonstrations, community activities and in the acts of repeating a given work or meeting. The performances of the collectives cross borders, disturb the existing order and are trying to create a new better reality.

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