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Winter March, 2014

# Ghost Dance: The Crisis of Categorization in Contemporary Indigenous Art

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



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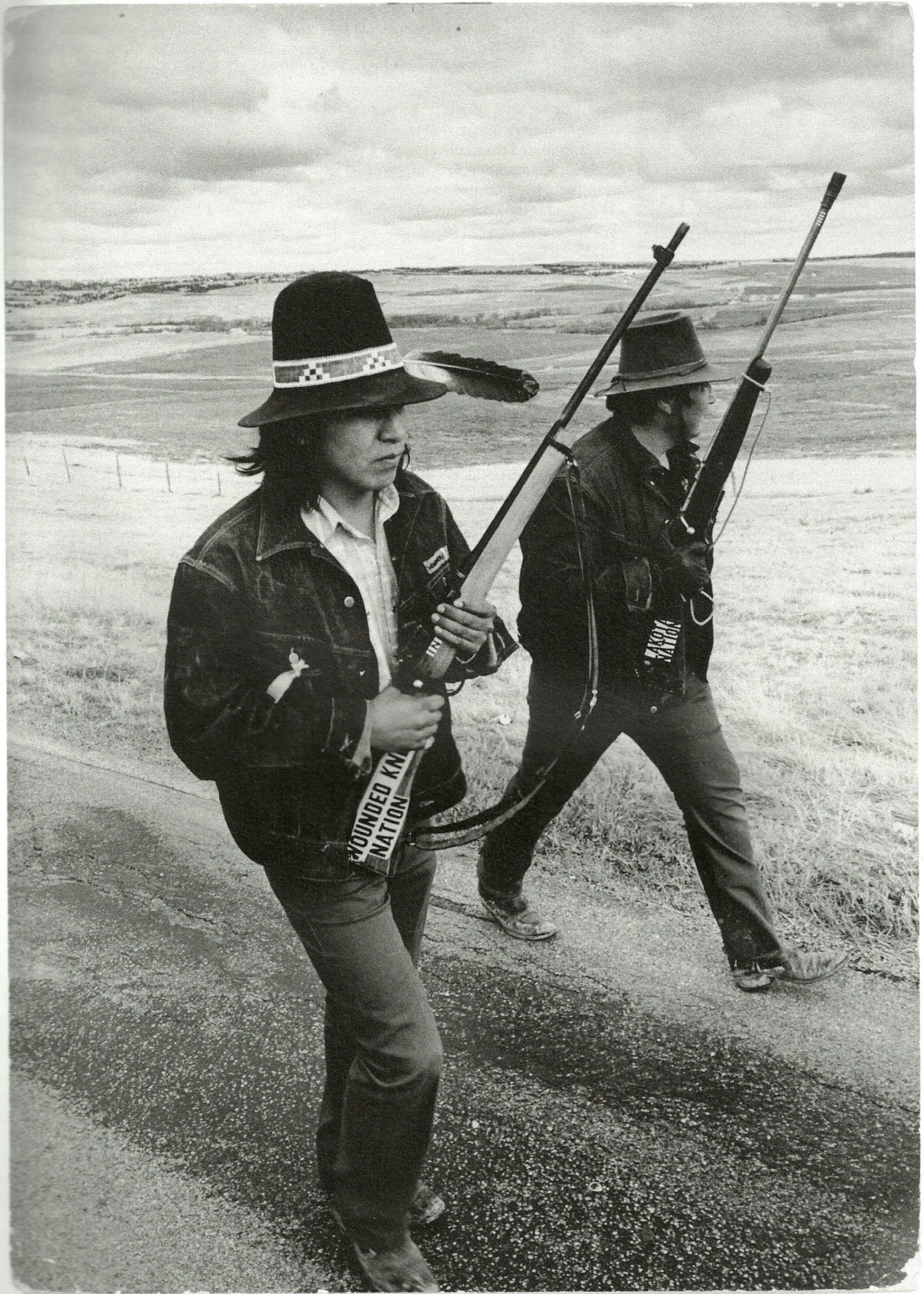
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Michael Abramson, *Untitled* (American Indian Movement: Lakota Indians) Wounded Knee, South Dakota, USA, 1973, gelatin silver print. Reproduction from the Black Star Collection at Ryerson University. Courtesy the Ryerson Image Centre.



# “Ghost Dance”

## The Crisis of Categorization in Indigenous Art

by Matthew Ryan Smith

*“It soon became evident that there was more in the Ghost dance than had been expected... as the dance still exists and is developing new features at every performance.”*

— James Mooney, 1896

### Ghost Dances

In 1870, the Northern Paiute prophet Wodziwab (“Grey Hair” or “Grey Head”) organized ritual ceremonies throughout the Smith and Mason Valleys of what is now the state of Nevada. Wodziwab was intent on transforming the present conditions of Indigenous peoples through encounters with the supernatural world. Each ceremony was scheduled to coincide with the beginning of a food-gathering season and proposed a utopic return to the pre-contact period, a time when Buffalo ran in abundance and agriculture grew plentiful. Essential to the ceremony, which lasted five consecutive nights, were traditional Paiute round dances (circle dances) involving men, women, and children; interlocking fingers and moving steadfastly to the left, individuals sang of their spiritual visions. According to historian Gregory E. Smoak, such ceremonies formed the first Ghost Dance movement, which also became the first pan-Indigenous religion to emerge from the Great Basin. This, the lesser known of the two pivotal Ghost Dance movements, soon ground to a halt when Wodziwab’s prophecy failed to materialize.<sup>1</sup> Little, if anything at all, had changed for the betterment of Indigenous peoples.

Nearly two decades later, on New Year’s Day, 1889, the Paiute prophet Wovoka, better known as Jack Wilson, experienced his first spiritual vision during a full eclipse of the sun. Speaking to Christ in heaven, Wovoka was told to return to earth bearing messages of unconditional love, peace, and understanding among whites and Indigenous peoples. Yet it was only after Wovoka took ownership of a substantial rainfall that cured a severe drought that he amassed a substantial following. Wovoka’s Ghost Dance is similar to the 1870s ceremony in that he used the round dance to bring various Indigenous communities together in a gesture of reciprocity intended to strengthen social bonds. However, as Smoak makes clear, other elements of the ceremony were largely open to interpretation because each and

every tribe was able to introduce their own religious traditions and historical experiences.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the second Ghost Dance movement was malleable enough to include hybridized forms of worship particular to each Indigenous sect while its overall project fostered a culture of solidarity.

“The new religion emerged at a fortuitous moment,” says curator Candice Hopkins; “these were desperate times and people were looking for something—anything—to believe in.”<sup>3</sup> Naturally, the resurgence of Indigenous selfhood by way of the Ghost Dance became a source of trepidation among government officials and agents—solidarity was far too close to sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> The Ghost Dance was, and has always been, a mark of resistance. Almost since its creation, the ideology behind the dance was never neutral; its history is a strategic one, intended to drive against the parasitic effects of colonization and the legacies of malevolence that support it. Importantly, the political vestiges of the Ghost Dance have carried over to the present day in spiritual ceremonies and visual culture alike. The exhibition “Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.” at the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto provides one such example. There, curator and art historian Steven Loft has taken the Ghost Dance as his point of departure, applying its spirit of resistance towards the larger project of decolonization. On display are a wide variety of sculptural objects, still images, and video works executed by Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) artists that attempt to corroborate the critical argument that to identify as an Indigenous artist is to categorically identify oneself as a political artist as well. In the brochure that accompanies the exhibition, Loft writes, “I posit that Aboriginal art is innately political. It is the culmination of lived experiences, from pre-contact customary societies through the colonial enterprise.”<sup>5</sup> The result is an “indigenized” institutional space,<sup>6</sup> but also a problematic one. “Ghost Dance,” among several other exhibitions in Canada, is part of a larger movement consumed with locating and defining a contemporary Indigenous style. The central question is whether continued attempts at categorization by curators and institutions alike will stymie or galvanize the work currently being made.<sup>7</sup>





"Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art," installation view of *Leila's Desk*, 2013 © Kate Tarini, Ryerson Image Centre.

### Activism. Resistance. Art.

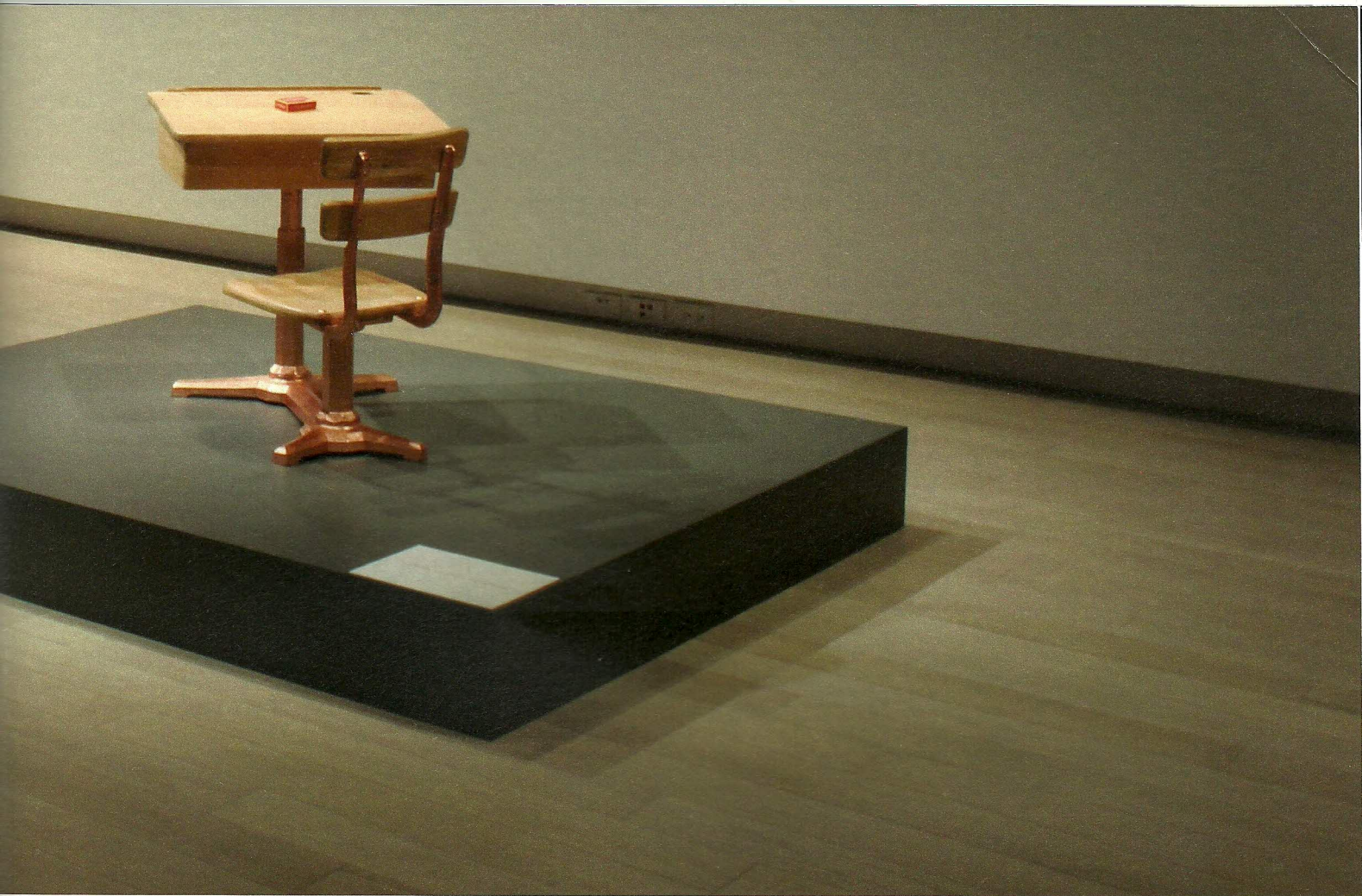
Among the strongest works in "Ghost Dance" is Ligwilda'xw artist Sonny Assu's sculpture *Leila's Desk* (2013), a poetic representation of the small desk his grandmother used when she attended high school in the early 1940s. As was the case, it was only through revisions in the Indian Act that Indigenous peoples were finally allowed by the Canadian government to attend non-residential schools; Leila would have been one of the first to do so. In the work, a bar of Lifebuoy soap has been placed atop the desk's wooden surface, which is supported by a solid cast iron and copper lead frame. In doing so, Assu relates a story of how a classmate of his grandmother left behind a bar of soap because she was considered to be, like other Indigenous students at the time, a "dirty Indian." In this haunting narrative, the Lifebuoy soap is a material signifier of bullying-as-systemic racism in Canada.

Adjacent to Assu's sculpture is work from Lakota (Sioux) artist Dana Claxton, 2010 series "AIM," where she has enlarged several censored FBI documents relating to the American Indian Movement (AIM), an activist organization established in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1968. Among other interests, AIM was mainly concerned with pursuing social policy reform and political sovereignty for Indigenous peoples in the United States. Two years after AIM occupied the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington, DC in 1971, a 71-day armed stand off between AIM activists and armed forces of the US military arose at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the original

site of the Wounded Knee massacre. In Claxton's work, viewers see government-authored documents outlining the specificities of the AIM movement, including the names of members and their supposed whereabouts; however, areas of the text have been blacked-out, line after line, and therefore the constitutional rights of some members as well.<sup>8</sup> The overall effect of the work is unexpectedly modernist in its relationship to geometric abstraction; conversely, the "AIM" series harkens back to the sizable colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, specifically his more rigid, linear works of the late 1940s. One of Rothko's most popular idioms, "silence is so accurate," is not lost on a work that fundamentally represents a suppression of information and access by U.S. government officials.

Into the fold, Loft has also included several photographs from the Ryerson Image Centre's massive Black Star photo collection; specifically, Michael Abramson's gripping images of armed AIM activists during their occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. Printed on their rifles, in bold black letters are the words "WOUNDED KNEE NATION" and "LAKOTA NATION." Ultimately, the photographs serve to anchor and energize Claxton's blown-up AIM documents while further contextualizing the reality of armed resistance during the 1970s. Abramson's photographs are among oldest works historically in the exhibition by approximately forty years, which begs the question as to whether their inclusion was to satisfy the Ryerson Image Centre's research mandate or is considered to be essential to the overall curatorial premise.





Photographs are also a central component of Mohawk multimedia artist Jackson 2bears's 2013 new media installation *Mythologies of an [Un]dead Indian*, where he confronts Haida/Tsimshian writer Marcia Crosby's concept of "the imaginary Indian" first penned over two decades ago.<sup>9</sup> In a synthesis of thudding beats and textured images, 2bears, much like the urban-Iroquois artist Jeff Thomas, is intent on dismantling the prevailing cultural stereotypes of "Indianness." Unfortunately, its placement in the hallway leading to the gallery's main lobby, an area typically saturated by sunlight, deadens the aesthetic richness of the photographs and 2bears's skillful manipulation of them.

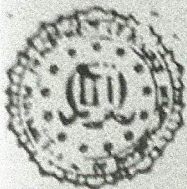
Several works in "Ghost Dance" by the Cree/Métis/German/Polish multidisciplinary artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Mohawk artist Alan Michelson, muddy the ongoing critical debate between "activism," "resistance," "art," and social praxis. Social theorist and cultural critic Nina Felshin stresses that "activist art, in both its forms and methods, is process- rather than object- or product-oriented, and it usually takes place in public sites rather than within the context of art-world venues."<sup>10</sup> A case in point is Alan Michelson's hypnotic series of four videos "Round Dance II," 2013, which feature circle dances corresponding to the nautical directions north, west, east, and south. The works circumscribe almost the entire exhibition space including the lobby. Here, people move jubilantly, in front of a stationary video camera, hand-in-hand, from right to left in a profound gesture of understanding and connectedness. One man wears a red "Idle No More"

graphic t-shirt, which helps to situate the work and the exhibition within the contemporaneous political economy and renewed urgency of Indigenous civil liberties. In a nearby headset, the words "We are here to remind all Canadians that our history is your history. It doesn't start with confederation" are repeated as a way to commit Indigenous historical experience to public memory.

The same can be said for L'Hirondelle's poignant video-based installation *Here I Am*, (2013), where nine female artists sing the song *Here I Am (Bless My Mouth)*, while seated, into Bell payphones. Co-written by L'Hirondelle, her music producer, and the incarcerated women of the Okimaw Ochi Healing Lodge in Southwest Saskatchewan, the nine artists/singers serve as proxy to the women "on the inside." *Here I Am* is entrenched in layers of social engagement, moving fluidly between people of different geographies, classes, and histories.

The aforementioned works, in their own way, build on the idea suggested by Jacques Derrida in Ken McMullen's 1983 film *Ghost Dance* that, "*ghosts just don't appear, they come back.*"<sup>11</sup> Essentially, Derrida is concerned with the acuity of haunting, of spectrality, and with the repetitious return of the past in present memory. Though his notion is rooted in psychoanalysis, more precisely the act of mourning, its message is significant here. For many Indigenous artists, transformative historical events are so deeply ingrained into the fabric of their current work that some believe the designation "contemporary art" may be misleading when referring to it critically.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, thinking of recent Indigenous art in terms of spectrality, rather than





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ENCLOSURE



the Ghost Dance itself, may be a more useful theoretical framework, and perhaps more inclusive to other Indigenous artists and artworks. Ghosts are not to be feared. They work against forgetting, and bridge the gaps between space and time. As Emilie Cameron reminds us, "It is only by living with, talking with, and accommodating our ghosts that we might 'learn to live' in these 'postcolonial times.'"<sup>13</sup>

It appears that curators and critics have recently shifted their attention to the socio-political role of the Indigenous artist out of a critical impasse to locate and define a style or movement in contemporary Indigenous art in Canada, from coast to coast: "Beat Nation" (Vancouver), "Don't Stop Me Now" (Medicine Hat), "Decolonize Me" (Windsor), "Changing Hands" (Kleinberg), "Trade Marks" (Toronto), "In the Flesh" (Ottawa), "Indigenous and Urban" (Gatineau), "A Stake in the Ground" (Montreal), "Snapshot" (Halifax), and, of course, the seminal "Sakahàn" (Ottawa) to name a few. Perhaps the categorical elusiveness of contemporary Indigenous art, its refusal to fit neatly into boxes, is where much of its political potential lies.

Today, there is a critical propensity to fix Indigenous artwork within a narrowly-defined political (and aesthetic) category, thus severely limiting its potential for meaning. For Anishinabe-kwe media artist, writer, and curator Wanda Nanibush, "While we may not be able to define Indigenous art, it's time we define 'Indigenous artist' as a strategically political category"; consequently, "If an artist does not want to be limited by that definition or feels confined by it, then they should not be in Indigenous exhibitions and should stick to non-Indigenous specified spaces for exhibiting and leveraging funding."<sup>14</sup> What remains to be seen in this crisis of categorization is whether or not this shift towards a kind of absolutism is ultimately restrictive, if not rigidly dogmatic. The critical approach in recent years to categorize contemporary Indigenous art and artists is of principle concern here; there is a danger of conflating aesthetic, cultural, and individual autonomy under the banner of partisanship. It seems to me, at least, that there is an underlying danger that when too many lines are drawn in the sand, there becomes no more room left to manoeuvre.<sup>15</sup> Wodziwab and Wokova's concepts of the Ghost Dance took, as their principle measure, the spirit of interconnectedness between all Indigenous peoples; just how the ceremony itself was interpreted and played out was left to each and every tribe. **BF**

"Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art." curated by Steve Loft, was exhibited at Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, from September 18 to December 15, 2013.

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D., is a writer, independent curator, and educator based in Toronto. His writings have appeared in Canadian and international publications including Canadian Art, The Globe and Mail, C Magazine, FUSE, Afterimage, ArtUS, and First American Art, in addition to academic journals and exhibition catalogues.

#### Notes:

1. For more information on Gregory E. Smoak's analysis of the Ghost Dance, see: Gregory E. Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity: Propetetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

2. After 1870, the sustained effects of colonization led to further displacement, forced assimilation, starvation, poverty, disease, armed conflict, and the reservization of Indigenous peoples. See: Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity*, 113-151.

3. Candice Hopkins, "Why Can't Beauty Be a Call to Action?" *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, ed. Sherry Farrell Racette (Winnipeg, MB: Plug In Editions, 2011), 66.

4. The anxiety over an Indigenous revolution loomed when, almost a full year after Wovoka's first vision, on 29 December, 1890, as many as one-hundred and fifty to three hundred Indigenous men, women, and children were marshaled into Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota where they were slaughtered. For their disgusting actions, twenty soldiers of the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry regiment received the Medal of Honor, the highest accolade offered by the US military, which has yet to be officially rescinded. See: Dana Lone Hill, "The Wounded Knee medals of honor should be rescinded," *The Guardian* (18 February, 2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/18/massacre-wounded-knee-medals-honor-rescinded>

5. Steven Loft, *Ghost Dance: Activism. Resistance. Art.*, exhibition brochure, (Toronto, ON: Ryerson Image Centre, 2013).

6. See, for example: Steven Loft and Joseph Henry, "INTERVIEW: Steve Loft on Indigenous Curation and 'Ghost Dance,'" *Artinfo Canada* (23 September, 2013), <http://ca.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/962270/interview-steve-loft-on-indigenous-curation-and-ghost-dance>

7. I first proposed this idea in an exhibition review of "Trade Marks" published in *Magenta Magazine*, see: Matthew Ryan Smith, "Trade Marks," *Magenta Magazine* (Fall/Winter, 2013/2014), <http://www.magentafoundation.org/magazine/trade-marks/>

8. Murray White, "Ghost Dance at Ryerson Image Centre: outrage for the past, hope for the future," *Toronto Star* (12 October, 2013), [http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2013/10/12/ghost\\_dance\\_at\\_ryerson\\_image\\_centre\\_outrage\\_for\\_the\\_past\\_hope\\_for\\_the\\_futureghost\\_dance\\_haunted\\_by\\_the\\_past\\_looking\\_to\\_the\\_future.html](http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2013/10/12/ghost_dance_at_ryerson_image_centre_outrage_for_the_past_hope_for_the_futureghost_dance_haunted_by_the_past_looking_to_the_future.html)

9. Ellyn Walker, "Ghost Dance," *Magenta Magazine* (Winter, 2013) <http://www.magentafoundation.org/magazine/ghost-dance/>

10. Nina Felshin as quoted in *Imagining Resistance*, Kirsty Robertson and J. Keri Cronin eds. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2011), 10.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Ghost Dance*, DVD, directed by Ken McMullen (Looseyard for Channel 4 in collaboration with Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, 1983).

12. For more on the problem of categorizing recent Indigenous art as "contemporary," see: W. Jackson Rushing, "Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art," *Art Journal* 51.3 (Autumn, 1992), 6-14.

13. Emilie Cameron, "Indigenous Spectrality and the Politics of Postcolonial Ghost Stories," *Cultural Geographies* 15 (2008), 383-393.

14. Wanda Nanibush, "Sakahàn: Contemporary Indigenous Art," *C Magazine* 199 (Autumn, 2013), 55.

15. It is my intention here to use Jolene Rickard's famous essay to foreground the idea of solidarity in an effort to oppose the fracturing of social and political bonds. See: Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," *Aperture* 139 (1995), 50-59.