

NEWS

Artist creates mirrored shields for Standing Rock protesters

Cannupa Hanska Luger says he hopes the project will empower demonstrators and create a connection with police

by GABRIELLA ANGELETI | 21 November 2016



In a video, Cannupa Hanska Luger teaches others how to create mirror shields to protect the pipeline protesters

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As protesters and police continue to clash in North Dakota over a \$3.7bn oil pipeline, the artist Cannupa Hanska Luger plans this week to distribute mirrored shields he created, to inspire the demonstrators to “hold ground and not panic”. He also hopes that, once the shields are in use, police will see the reflection of their own shared humanity “underneath their uniforms—and realise that they are also on our side”, Luger told The Art Newspaper.

If completed, the 1170-mile-long Dakota Access Pipeline project, backed by the firm Energy Transfer Partners, would move 470,000 barrels of domestic crude oil per day through four states. The line’s intended route runs just north of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe’s reservation, and at one point—where the protests are centred—would cross under Lake Oahe, a dammed portion of the Missouri River that is a major water source. Those who oppose the pipeline say that the chance of an oil spill poses a serious risk to local drinking water, and threatens ancient lands that are culturally and spiritually important to the tribe. Energy Transfer Partners says the pipeline will have safeguards against leaks, and that no sacred sites have been disturbed.

Luger, who is of mixed Native American and European descent, was born on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation and was raised in the Fort Berthold reservation, where Energy Transfer Partners has installed pipelines and drilled for oil using fracking, or hydraulic fracturing techniques. “I’ve already watched this company tear through sacred sites and geological landforms, some that are bound to our creation stories,” Luger says. “It happened so quickly and completely devastated the landscape. The well at my grandparents’ house contained water that turned a silver and orange colour—you can’t drink it.”

During the protests at Standing Rock, Luger says that friends and relatives have been shot by rubber bullets, sprayed with mace and intimidated by police, and this weekend protesters camped in below-freezing temperatures were sprayed with water cannons and tear gas. It was the artist’s “desire to be on the frontlines” that fuelled the shield project. “I saw that in Ukraine, people brought mirrors to a protest to show the riot police themselves. Underneath all that gear is a human being, and it’s hard to see the heart and the eyes of a person behind a weapon, uniform and baton,” says Luger. His mirrored shields are slightly more durable, made with Masonite boards and reflective adhesive foil.

Luger has been working with students at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he is an artist-in-residence, to create the shields. He has also released a video to teach others how to build their own. He says that a key motivation behind the project is the idea that “art can be an incredible tool when you’re fighting aggression since it’s a language that transcends barriers”. On 22 November, the artist plans to travel to Standing Rock to deliver around 36 finished shields.

He is also calling on Americans everywhere to join the protests in Standing Rock, especially those who are unhappy with the recent presidential election. At the end of October, as part of the Trump campaign’s monthly disclosure filings to the Federal Election Commission, it was revealed that the president elect has somewhere between \$500,000 and \$1m invested in Energy Transfer Partners, and further holdings dependent on the pipeline being completed. “To all those protesters around the country holding up ‘Fuck Trump’ signs, I say come to Standing Rock and stand with us”, Luger says. “Show them the power of our grassroots movement, the power of the people and what democracy looks like.”

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