

Cannupa Hanska Luger  
*The Mirror Shield Project* (2016-ongoing)

For artist Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota), the *Mirror Shield Project* began out of urgency when in the summer of 2016 he learned that the water of his father's homelands, where he grew up on the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Reservation, was under threat. The Dakota Access Pipeline, A \$3.87 billion underground petroleum transport pipeline which connects fracking grounds of the Bakken Oil Fields of North Dakota (Fort Berthold Reservation of the MHA Nation, where Luger is an enrolled member), through 4 states and ending at refineries in Illinois, was to cross the Missouri River just upstream from the Standing Rock Reservation. The pipeline was originally planned to cross the Missouri River, north of Bismarck, North Dakota's capital, but the city protested for fear that it would contaminate their water supply. The pipeline was rerouted down river and just upstream from the Standing Rock Reservation. In addition to the threat to the water, this new path of the DAPL was to desecrate several marked ancestral burial sites of both the Mandan and Lakota peoples. Over the course of nearly a year, an estimated 15,000 people from around the world traveled to the Water Protector camp areas just outside of Cannonball, ND to stand in solidarity with the protection of the water and in support of the Indigenous led actions in opposition of the DAPL.

As an artist, Luger knew he had access and privilege to a much larger global community to affect change and generate the support his homelands needed. By using art as a measure of action and creating an open source format call for participation with an instructional video, *How To Build Mirror Shields For Water Protectors*, filmed and edited by Razelle Benally at the Institute of American Indian Arts during his Artist In Residence program in November, 2016, Luger launched the *Mirror Shield Project*. This call to participate inspired people from across the Nation to create and transport what has been estimated at over a thousand mirrored shields to the Oceti Sakowin Camp near Standing Rock, ND. Once onsite, these shields were available for use by the Water Protectors in frontline actions as they stood up against the police and the DAPL.

Throughout 2016, with the support of his family, Luger continued supply runs to the camps, engaging in and supporting the Water Protectors actions, including making mirrored shields at Oceti Sakowin Camp with various onsite arts and activist organizations who used the shields among many other forms of art generated for the Water Protectors peaceful direct frontline actions. One such impactful moment when the mirrored shields were engaged and which has since been shared globally as an act of inspiration for art as peaceful resistance, was during a collaborative performance action created with support from Rory Erler Wakemup, an Indigenous artist and friend of Luger's. Inspired by the Water Protectors continued actions and Luger's *Mirror Shield Project*, Wakemup and his community in Minneapolis created hundreds of mirrored shields with support that Wakemup gained from Forecast Public Art and other local Minneapolis organizations. Wakemup brought Luger out to host a mirror shield making workshop at All My Relations Arts, MI and then together they drove these mirrored shields to Oceti Sakowin camp for use. In addition to aiding in frontline actions, these

mirrored shields were used for the *Water Serpent Action* (2016), which invited hundreds of Water Protectors to engage in a site specific performance, walking the entire Oceti Sakowin camp site while holding the reflective shields overhead, creating a moving river or serpent-like formation, documented from above via drone by Wakemup. This action was intended for the police surveillance planes constantly flying overhead, so they could witness the Water Protectors resilience and have their own toxic practices of surveillance upon those at the Oceti Sakowin camp reflected back. In addition to this performance, many other actions were facilitated and organized by anonymous communities onsite which deployed the mirrored shields, including in December, 2016 where over 1,000 U.S. Veterans traveled from across the Nation to the camps and engaged in several direct actions where they held mirrored shields and other DIY protection shields up to the police, holding the frontline in protection of the Water Protectors who were facing rubber bullets and water cannon assaults.

The Mirror Shield Project was conceived by artist Cannupa Hanska Luger in 2016 for the protection of his homelands and the water and inspired by images of women holding mirrors up to riot police in the Ukraine, so that the police could see themselves. Luger developed a process of making a mirrored surface shield using accessible and affordable materials, using reflective vinyl adhered to a ply-board for safety and durability, instead of an actual glass mirror. Luger's mirrored shield design is made out of all items you may have in your garage or which you can pick up at any hardware or big box store. These shields are very simple in design so that anyone can make them at home, with instructions developed by Luger to create with affordable and readily accessible materials to allow anyone to construct these mirrored shields in order to protect the people who are holding a frontline for the cause that they believe in.

As an artist, the concept, building approach and materials for this version of a mirrored shield were thoughtfully developed by Luger with strategy and intention around safety and access for direct action by the public, but the idea of the mirrored shield can be traced back in human cosmology to as far as the the Greek Hero Perseus who used a mirrored shield to aid in slaying Medusa. The Mirror Shield Project was created by Luger with the intention that this technology is all of ours as human beings, we are now simply slaying modern day monsters such as extractive industry and capitalism. Luger's Mirror Shield Project as a contemporary iteration of the collective consciousness of the mirrored shield has proven to be an accessible and determined Indigenous perspective to the continuum, and varied interpretations of Luger's mirrored shield design continue to be used in actions globally. Luger has created this work as open source in hope that the idea is able to travel as far as possible, and be used as a way to stand up against oppressive systems in all spaces where a line is drawn and a people are standing up for their rights or those of the land and water.

The intention is to create a reflective mirror not only for a shield of protection, so that an oppressor may cause less harm, but to also utilize the oppressors' image to reflect their own oppressive violent force back to them, to remind them that we are all human, regardless of the side of the line we are on, to force the oppressor to see themselves and the harm they are causing. This project speaks about when a line has been drawn

and a frontline is created; that it can be difficult to see the humanity that exists behind the uniform holding that line. But those police are human beings, the mirror shield is a point of human engagement and a remembering that we are all in this life experience on this planet together.

The Mirror Shield Project demonstrates explicitly that art is a verb, how just one person can acquire one sheet of plywood and cut it into 6 shields, those shields could stand on a frontline protecting hundreds behind them, and behind that line stands millions of people, who are seeking justice through that direct action. And so The Mirror Shield Project instructs us on how one person can help protect millions, dismantling toxic and oppressive systems that do not serve us or the generations to come. Even if you are not able to be on the frontline, you can contribute to those who are, through the humble act of making.

The Mirror Shield Project continues to maintain a trajectory of its own, these mirrored shields continue to be produced anonymously, finding their way into frontline actions across the world including most recently for several Black Lives Matter actions across the United States in 2020.

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*“Art can be an incredible tool when you’re fighting aggression since it’s a language that transcends barriers”. -Cannupa Hanska Luger*