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by

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of

at

Lindenwood University

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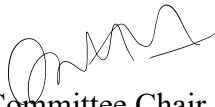
Author's Signature

Jeanette Nicewinter

12/13/20

Committee Chair

Date



Committee Chair Signature

Khristin Landry-Montes

12/13/2020

Committee Member

Date

*Khristin Landry-Montes*

Committee Member Signature

Sarah Cantor

12/14/20

Committee Member

Date



Committee Member Signature

NATIVE ACTIVISM AND MATERIALITY THROUGH THE WORK OF CANNUPA  
HANSKA LUGER: A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY INDIGENOUS ARTIST

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master in Art History and Visual Culture  
at  
Lindenwood University

By

Rachel Daniela Vera

Saint Charles, Missouri

December 2020

## ABSTRACT

Native Activism and Materiality Through the Work of Cannupa Hanska Luger: A 21<sup>ST</sup> Century Indigenous Artist

Rachel Vera, Master in Art History and Visual Culture, 2020

Thesis Directed by   Jeanette Nicewinter- Chair  
                              Sarah Cantor- Member  
                              Khristin Landry- Montes- Member

This thesis focuses on a specific work by Cannupa Hanska Luger called *This is Not a Snake*. This project examines the materiality of the artwork, including beads, crochet, sewing, ceramics, and non-traditional materials. The materials used in this work address 21st-century indigenous issues while also promoting activism from the Water is Life movement, which is centered at Standing Rock Reservation, North Dakota. The materials of this work are relative to Luger's 21st-century contemporary style. The use of repurposed heavily merchandized inorganic materials refers to the protests in Standing Rock. *This is Not a Snake* was inspired by these events, activism that transpired and kept the construction materials at bay. Luger is an interdisciplinary artist raised on the Standing Rock Reservation, North Dakota and he combines statements and cultural legends that persist with the characteristics of this particular installation. This essay discusses the fundamental aspects and how the Water is Life Movement inspired Luger's installation, *This is Not a Snake*. The characteristics shown in *This is Not a Snake* also have spiked other cultural influences regarding climate change and environmental injustices worldwide. Through these materials, Luger uses artistic activism to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline and assert the agency of indigenous groups.

### Acknowledgments/ Dedications

I would like to acknowledge my committee chair Jeanette Nicewinter and her profound guidance regarding the Native activist and materialism subject. Her professionalism and high comprehension of this thesis directed me to scholarly sources and the integration of several aspects that will be discussed through this essay. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members Sarah Cantor and Khristin Landry- Montes for joining my committee to review and assist me through the thesis process. I would like to dedicate this thesis to those who are examining topics such as this one while also taking into regard the importance of Native activism and materiality as a whole. This thesis is for those who stood up to oil corporations and simply fought for clean water. Your actions and movements have immensely activated environmental injustices around the world.

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## Introduction

Cannupa Hanska Luger, born in 1979, is a local from the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota and has firsthand experience of environmental and Native injustice. He chose to create the installation sculpture *This is Not a Snake* in response to Standing Rock's protests, beginning in 2016, against an illegal pipeline. This installation connects to his culture's prophecy of a "snake" that would ruin their lands and invoke havoc if not addressed. The "snake" is an allegory of the pipeline potentially contaminating water and natural resources. If given the opportunity, the oil industry could easily ruin natural resources by placing an oil pipe under a massive water supply. *This is Not a Snake* is an example to look at when discussing any of these issues. The materiality and composition of both human figures and the snake invoke a voice of Native activism from the Water is Life movement, which grew out of the Standing Rock protests. Previous scholarship on material culture studies was a tool used in anthropology, sociology and archaeology to analyze prehistoric and nonliterate cultures.<sup>1</sup> According to Michael Yonan's essay "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," material examination has broadened within material culture studies. Yonan defines materiality as a tool to examine contemporary societies, showing how the field's investigative techniques can shed light on the phenomenon of globalization and late capitalist consumerism.<sup>2</sup> Defining materiality in *This is Not a Snake* is the examination of contrasting materials within Native American contemporary art, and what those materials mean and how it was inflicted upon Native

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Yonan, "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 232.

<sup>2</sup> Yonan, "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," 232.



communities. By discussing the materiality of *This is Not a Snake*, one can develop an understanding of what these materials mean within the artwork and how they are relevant to the movement and Native culture. Materials on the human figures in *This is Not a Snake*, such as beadwork and crochet, are traditional to Luger's heritage and are preconceived aspects of promoting culture in a particular situation. However, the snake materials are inorganic, consisting of plastic and metal buckets, tires, and barbed wire. Through these materials, traditional and non-traditional, Luger uses artistic activism by combining traditional and non-traditional materials to help mainstream society adapt, advocate, and understand their indigenous beliefs while also focusing on environmental awareness and high corporate avidity.

"I aim to craft richly symbolic objects, but moreover, I want to lay the groundwork, to establish connections, to mobilize action."<sup>3</sup> Luger centers his work to mobilize action as he did in *This is Not a Snake*, establishing connections with transpired events. Luger was born and raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota and is known for creating artworks that pursue activism. Standing Rock Reservation is where environmental protests took place in 2016. These protests were a movement to challenge the oil industry, which had no valid permits; the oil corporation then desecrated the Standing Rock Indian Reservation's sacred burial grounds.<sup>4</sup> However, the main reason for the protests was an oil industry company, also known as Energy Transfer Partners, intended to place large and long oil pipes under a massive water

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<sup>3</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture," (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, "Introduction" in *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 1. Accessed June 2, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctvr695pq.4](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctvr695pq.4).

supply (the Missouri River), which goes through the middle of the United States.<sup>5</sup> A large pipe under a vast water supply lead to concern to protect their freshwater supply for future generations.<sup>6</sup> That is why this protest movement has gained notoriety as the Water is Life movement. Large movements, such as The Water is Life movement, require large amounts of people; the numbers involved to protect water urged Luger to involve others when creating large installations and, on occasion, states them as collaborative.

*This is Not a Snake* is an installation by Luger that has been in several exhibitions. The Center for Visual Art, Metropolitan State University in Denver, interviewed Luger in 2017 about this particular piece and what it meant to him as an artist. In this interview, Luger states that he is of indigenous descent and was born and raised on the Standing Rock Reservation. His exhibition's whole purpose, which included *This is Not a Snake*, was to criticize the extractive resources industries.<sup>7</sup> Luger explains that the notions of what we perceive as monsters are associated with animals, such as snakes, in our real world. However, the monster he is speaking of is not a real snake. In general, the snake represents extractive resources, such as the oil industry. Luger states in his interview with Center of Visual Art MSU Denver that the oil industry forces us into believing that we as a society are entirely dependent on this resource.<sup>8</sup> The materials he uses in this piece are significant objects of the petroleum world, such

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<sup>5</sup> Alleen Brown, Will Parrish, and Alice Speri, "Counterterrorism Tactics at Standing Rock," In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, edited by Estes, Nick and Dhillon Jaskiran (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 199.

<sup>6</sup> J. D. Schnepf, "Unsettling Aerial Surveillance: Surveillance Studies after Standing Rock," *Surveillance & Society* 17, no. 5(2019): 747.

<sup>7</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

<sup>8</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

as barrels, buckets, and tires. He specifically chose these materials because they correlate with the oil industry.<sup>9</sup> Luger states,

The largest sculpture I have created is called *This is Not a Snake*, which breathes and gives context to some of the terminologies that came out of work I was doing up at Standing Rock. Which is where I am from, it is my home, so I wanted to do work that was out of a prophecy up there about a black snake. I am not sure the larger world understood the context of the snake that we were using. We are talking about the shape and not the thing itself. Snakes are not bad; they are a part of our environment, but the shape of it is what I wanted to talk about. The body of work looks like a serpent, but I want to talk about how it is not a snake. It is really about the material itself; the materials that come together create a monster, and the monster itself is something we need to recognize and name to defeat it.<sup>10</sup>

Luger's material choices composing *This is Not a Snake* denotes activism by reusing the material that infiltrated Native lands and land in general. He uses inorganic materials that are interpreted as rigid items with a characterization of a violent snake. This installation is also part of spreading awareness to our modern society about environmental injustices while also comprehending the "Snake" prophecy that has catapulted this movement to take precautions for their ancestral lands and guide their future generations. *This is Not a Snake* is the production of a Native activism response fueled by cultural belief, environmental injustices, and an example of a hierarchal government that attempts to propel the voices of minority groups across the United States to the side.

Out of this movement came a variety of art that has impacted our culture(referring to Sioux/Lakota nation); contributing to these notions was Luger, and his work called *This is Not a*

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<sup>9</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

<sup>10</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

*Snake* (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> This work acknowledges the Water is Life movement through its use of material culture in Native society. The Water is Life Movement, also known as the Mní Wičóni Movement, was generated out of Standing Rock to advocate for clean water.<sup>12</sup> Those that participated in the movement are called Water Protectors. It is now a support organization designed to unite those who want to fight water issues and the fossil fuel industry peacefully.<sup>13</sup> Their philosophy is that clean water is a right, not a privilege, and a corporation should not dictate the Earth's destruction.<sup>14</sup>

### **Formal Analysis & Exhibition History – *This is Not A Snake***

Looking at Figures 1-5, one can see the snake's installation is composed of materials such as buckets, barrels, barbed wire, plastic, and other inorganic, disposable, and manufactured products. The snake approaches two figures dressed in crocheted, beaded regalia who are holding back the snake. The left figure has its hand in the snake's mouth, while the right figure has its right arm clenched on the snake's upper neck. Although these images are from the *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, *This is Not a Snake* was also exhibited in the *Water Line: Creative Exchange*. The description of the *Lazy Stitch* exhibit stated,

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<sup>11</sup> "Center for Visual Arts to Serve as a Hub for an Artist-led Response to the Water Crisis," Center for Visual Arts. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.msudenver.edu/cva/about/news/press-releases/waterlinepressrelease/>

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Curley, "Beyond Environmentalism: #NODAPL as Assertion of Tribal Sovereignty," In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, edited by Estes, Nick and Dhillon Jaskiran, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 158.

<sup>13</sup> Hogan, *On the Freedom Side: How Five Decades of Youth Activists Have Remixed American History*, 160.

<sup>14</sup> Hogan, 160.

*Lazy Stitch* will interpret the bead's concept as a connection point for human beings across land, race, culture, gender, and time. Four contemporary artists from diverse backgrounds will collaborate with Cannupa Hanska Luger to investigate the bead's concept as an object. Through multiple installations, the artists will engage the idea that there is a hole in us—what we consume and what we waste is the thread that connects us all. As Hanska Luger states, “We are all beads, threaded together in a larger work; diverse individually yet together we create a larger social structure dependent on one another and the land for survival.”<sup>15</sup>

Through this exhibit, one can understand his crochet and beadwork's representation in the Native regalia the figures are wearing. He states, “what constitutes a bead is the hole. It holds the thread. The voided matter creates the function of the object. This void becomes the potential for connection. In this respect, finding value in the relationship between humans acknowledges the importance of intersecting experiences, which create a larger narrative.”<sup>16</sup> This quote directs back to the gatherings of Standing Rock's Water is Life movement. The beads are the protestors or water protectors at Standing Rock, while the thread is the shared belief and their cause's voice. Voices of those standing up to the oil industry are the same thread fed through their ancestors and now the younger generation.

In the *Water Line: Creative Exchange* exhibit, *This is Not a Snake* is altered. The snake is the same; however, the individuals are replaced by two attacking wolves (fig. 7).<sup>17</sup> The exhibit's description states that it, “will feature the artist's critical response to institutional and individual actions that contribute to the water crisis and imaginative solutions, practical and not, for addressing the issue. The challenge presented to artists is to engage audiences in multi-channel

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<sup>15</sup> “Lazy Stitch,” University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>.

<sup>16</sup> “Lazy Stitch,” University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>.

<sup>17</sup> “Center for Visual Arts to Serve as a Hub for an Artist-led Response to the Water Crisis,” Center for Visual Arts. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.msudenver.edu/cva/about/news/press-releases/waterlinepressrelease/>

dialogue about water, intending to make visitors think differently about solutions to this problem that affects everyone and requires all.”<sup>18</sup> The *Lazy Stitch* exhibit took place in 2016, followed by the *Water Line: Creative Exchange* in 2017. The individuals attacking the snake changed over the year because of what was happening at Standing Rock. As noted, the 2016 exhibit displayed humans dressed in crocheted regalia and beadwork as an interpretation of the thread flowing in crochet and beaded material. The thread is the ancestral knowledge flowing through present Native American individuals. The individuals in the 2017 exhibit are replaced by human figures with wolf faces. They are dressed in synthetic attire, however still reminiscent of tribal decorum due to the fringed coats, skirts, and scarfs. However, this time the human/wolf’s expression is vicious. The one in the air is holding a short baton, while the other seems like it is holding a phone to document the events surrounding Standing Rock. When it comes to documenting Native news, social media was a primary source in getting the issues surrounding Standing Rock out into the real world.

### **Introduction to the Standing Rock Protests & the Water is Life Movement**

The Water is Life Movement has many names, including the “#NODAPL movement” and “We are Standing Rock,” however, during this discussion, it will be referred to as the Water is Life Movement. The text *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NODAPL Movement*, edited by Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, is an important work of scholarship that consists of eyewitness accounts and timelines of what went on at Standing Rock.<sup>19</sup> *Standing with Standing*

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<sup>18</sup> “Center for Visual Arts to Serve as a Hub for an Artist-led Response to the Water Crisis,” Center for Visual Arts. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.msudenver.edu/cva/about/news/press-releases/waterlinepressrelease/>

<sup>19</sup> Estes and Dhillon, “Introduction” in *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, 1.

*Rock: Voices from the #NODAPL Movement* consists of several writers who had firsthand protesting experience within the movement and essays from political and environmental analysts. The volume is heavily detailed and provides information on the escalations at Standing Rock. In the text's introduction, Estes and Dhillon explain the Black Snake scenario and how it led to upheaval or police brutality on peaceful protestors.

It is a prophecy. A tremendous Black Snake, Zuzeca Sapa, will spread across the land, bringing destruction to the land, the water, and the people. The Black Snake is the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a \$3.8 billion, 1,172-mile pipeline that transports half a million barrels of oil a day across four states (North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois) and under the Missouri River twice and under the Mississippi River once. A rupture jeopardizes millions of human souls' drinking water and countless other-than-humans who depend on the river for life. While the Black Snake prophecy portends doom, it also sparks hope. Indigenous nations will have to unite with non-Indigenous allies to protect Unci Maka, Grandmother Earth. Few could have imagined it would happen in their lifetimes, except for, perhaps, the visionaries themselves who kept the dream alive, and yet it happened, in the isolated, rural geography of dirt roads, farmlands, and the lush shorelines of the Mni Sose, the Missouri River. The Oceti Sakowin, the Nation of the Seven Council Fires of the Lakota-, Dakota-, and Nakota-speaking peoples, was reborn. No one could have predicted the movement would spread like wildfire across Turtle Island and the world, moving millions to rise, speak out, and take action. That is how revolutionary moments, and the movements within those moments, come about. Freedom and victory are never preordained. A new world at first inhabits the shell of the old. In the colonial context, the old world came before an Indigenous world that never went away, inhabiting the imprisoning shell of the new world, waiting to break free. The dream that became one of the most massive Indigenous uprisings in recent history had been nurtured and carefully brought into existence to save the water. It started with the youth.<sup>20</sup>

The pipeline's news flowed through resident's homes while they reacted with words such as Mni Wiconi, translating to Water is Life. Although young people assembled for the Water is Life cause, indigenous women initially led this movement.<sup>21</sup> Indigenous communities are known to be

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<sup>20</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan, "Water Is Life – an Indigenous Perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector," *Community Development Journal* 54, no.1 (2019): 42-43.

familiar with resisting colonialist views and were more than ready to participate. According to Estes and Dhillon “protestors took a vow to defend treaties and stop the trespass of DAPL.”<sup>22</sup> The significance of Water Protectors sets aside this movement from other Native activist movements.<sup>23</sup> Water protectors challenged legal jurisdiction that only favored settler law. They challenged colonialism’s morality; instead, they emphasized the future of non-humans, land, and water as corresponding to humans. These notions are what are different from today’s society. The protest engaged in protecting land and the environment, a habitat that is usually displaced or concealed the human species’ selfishness. This movement is the largest Indigenous uprising in North America in recent history. It has also announced itself at a critical historical conjuncture, not only for Indigenous peoples but for the entire planet.<sup>24</sup>

Optimism was in place as the Obama’s presidency concluded. Native American society and concerned supporters seemed as though they were ready to move forward on world issues such as climate change. However, Donald J. Trump became President and had different plans. His plans not only reversed much of everything Obama had put in place during his eight-year term but he also openly embraced white supremacy.<sup>25</sup> “Many progressive reforms and achievements for Indigenous and marginalized peoples have been reversed since Trump’s

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<sup>22</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft, “Standing Rock Religion(S),” *Numen: International Review for the history of Religions* 65, no. 5/6 (September 2018): 499-500.

<sup>24</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Bruyneel, “Wake Work Versus Work of Settler Memory: Modes of Solidarity in #NODAPL, Black Live Matter, and Anti-Trumpism” In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, edited bEstes, Nick and Dhillon Jaskiran (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 311-312.



election.”<sup>26</sup> Trump has a record for undermining the need for the greater good, not to mention his favorability to large corporations.<sup>27</sup> It was not long after he took office, actually just a couple of days into office, Trump signed an executive order to fast track DAPL.<sup>28</sup> North Dakota is an oil-dependent state; therefore, when the movement gained media attention, the fact that the state gathered national enforcements for their cause only disturbed the matter more.<sup>29</sup> The Army Corps and North Dakota National Guard arrived at Standing Rock after it declared its state of emergency. Their state of emergency was to evict protesters from the Keystone XL Pipeline to continue construction. However, for those already supporting clean water and demanding North Dakota abide by their treaties, North Dakota’s forcefulness, and unwillingness to compromise only received more backlash.

As rapidly as the movement gained steam, so too did the forces to undermine it. On August 19, 2016, North Dakota governor Jack Dalrymple declared a state of emergency, fearful an Indigenous uprising would imperil oil companies and their profits and negatively impact the state’s oil-dependent economy. Under the powers of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), a federal program that allows states to solicit aid from other states during natural disasters or during “community disorders, insurgency, or enemy attack,” North Dakota enlisted equipment and personnel from more than seventy-five law enforcement agencies from around the country, as well as the North Dakota National Guard, Border Patrol, and Homeland Security.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Coplan, *Live Sustainably Now: A Low Carbon Vision of the Good Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 187.

<sup>28</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Edwin López, “Water Is Life at Standing Rock: A Case of First World Resistance to Global Capitalism.” *Perspectives on Global Development & Technology* 17, no.1-2 (2018): 139.

<sup>30</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 3.

During this quarrel, hundreds of people were treated with violence and were jailed and/or abused.<sup>31</sup> Although protestors experienced extreme police brutality, the movement was considered the movement of youth as they were taking the beating for the land their ancestors had inhabited for millennia.

The movement was more than just battling the oil corporations - it was also a remembrance and fulfillment that the younger generation was stepping up and carried the same morals as their ancestors. The fight against colonialism influences the shared core values of Native youth. The actions of protestors against the monster, which Cannupa Hanska Luger referred to, was just the vision of what the future would hold from the actions of the Native youth.

## **Literature Review**

Material culture studies have lacked for their use in examining contemporary art. Material culture studies traditionally discuss art history as investigating objects from past or pre-capitalist societies. There has been a prolonged debate on the disconnection within this theory. "High art" versus "low art," "fine art" versus "craft" are some arguments of material culture.<sup>32</sup> U.K. based scholarship has found that examining historical material culture overlaps with Marxists views. Marxist theory has branched into economics, exploring material conditions of art production.<sup>33</sup> Art historians such as James Elkins denounced for breaking away from traditional

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<sup>31</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Yonan, 234-235.

<sup>33</sup> Yonan, 235-236.

material cultural studies. Elkin's progressive approach to materiality in his work is labeled "departing from art history," "not relevant to the new directions of the discipline."<sup>34</sup> Comments like this come from his semiotic approach to materiality and mark making. Elkins has also criticized art historians for overlooking essential material elements within art to further understand culture.

The disconnect between present and past material culture usage is still a debating topic that is hard to explain. It is difficult because there has become a distinction between terms like "material culture" and "materialism." Materialists view culture as a class sensitive exploration to understand material economic conditions of the producing society. Materiality derived in recent material culture studies has become a component of interpretation that favors meaning of material in art than visual aspects. The leading scholar in defining relevance within material culture studies is Jules David Prown. Prown's essay "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" attempts to define a comprehensive theoretical and methodological approach for studying material culture, geared perhaps toward the museological context more than a purely academic one.<sup>35</sup> Credited for transitioning the interest in material culture studies within American art history, Prown divides material culture into six different categories.

One, art including painting, sculpture, prints, drawings, and photography. Two, diversions, meaning toys, games, books, meals, and theatrical performances. Three, adornments such as clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, cosmetics, and tattooing. Four modifications of the landscape, including architecture, gardens, and town planning. Five, Applied art such as furnishings and receptacles. Then six, devices broadly defined include machines, vehicles, scientific instruments, musical instruments, and implements of all kinds.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Adrian Lewis, "Elkins' Writing and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 4 (2002): 698.

<sup>35</sup> Yonan, 241-242.

<sup>36</sup> Yonan, 241-242.

Prown has renewed the way material culture is studied. He believes examining a diverse field of materiality reveals aspects of past civilizations, not textually, but through the material meaning and attached values associated with a culture. Values and meanings in materials are principal objects in Native American art, which Luger uses to approach his cultural events and invoking activism.

Cannupa Hanska Luger is a contemporary artist; therefore, the academic literature and scholarly sources regarding his work are scarce. Instead, the content elaborated on within this section falls on interviews and personal communications. Luger is very involved in social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook. One can find, upon visiting his pages on the social websites, that Luger is often conducting lecture seminars through Zoom and/or will post links to access his interviews. His interviews are also on YouTube or gallery sites. His work, specifically *This is Not a Snake*, can be found in texts, such as the book *Shifting Grounds* by Kate Morris.<sup>37</sup> Luger has one interview about *This is Not a Snake*, one specific lecture on Standing Rock, and an entry within a scholarly text regarding the field within Native contemporary art.

In the interview with the Center of Visual Arts at the Metropolitan State University of Denver, he discusses his piece, *This is Not a Snake*, shown at the *Water Line: A Creative Exchange* in 2017. The interview is short; however, Luger addresses essential elements of *This is Not a Snake* and the context behind it. Luger states that the work in this exhibit is to emphasize the expression of extractive resources.<sup>38</sup> He reused materials correlated with the oil industry to

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<sup>37</sup> Morris, 1-6.

<sup>38</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

express the dependency on extractive oil resources. With materials used to extract oil, he creates this large form of a serpent.<sup>39</sup> As stated earlier, he affirms that the use of a serpentine form was not interpreted correctly by the general public. "The world did not understand the context of the snake we were using; we are talking about the shape and not the thing itself."<sup>40</sup> He reiterates the coiling form to be emphasized in this piece and not the actual snake itself. Therefore, he states that the materials conducting the form are what is more important.

In personal communications through email, Luger was able to give further information regarding *This is Not Snake*. In photos, it is not easy to see what objects are on the floor in front of the snake (see Figure 2). The object is standing upright in front of the barbed wire. This cutout is visible in a video on his website; however, there is only melodic audio and no description. In an email interview in July 2020, Luger answered that the piece in front of the barbed wire is a militarized police cutout.<sup>41</sup> Another aspect never noted on gallery sites were the dimensions. Again, it is a large installation; however, the exact dimensions are not precise. In an email interview conducted in September 2020, Luger replied, "[t]he figures are six feet tall, and the serpent sixty feet in length."<sup>42</sup> In response, there is one source that states this piece was thirty feet in dimension. He responded that it is sixty feet long in the material; however, it is flexible and coils, which takes up about thirty feet of space.

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<sup>39</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

<sup>40</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

<sup>41</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, email message to Rachel Vera, July 2, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, email message to Rachel Vera, September 16, 2020.

At the Museum of Indian Art, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in February 2019, three years after the Standing Rock protests, Luger gave a lecture called *Beyond Standing Rock*. In this lecture, he discusses the events of Standing Rock and the learning outcome of those events. He states that the force behind this movement was the disorganization of the Native community.<sup>43</sup> However, he appreciates this notion and believes this Native outlook is what pushed protests further because people were coming in from all over the place.<sup>44</sup> A vital aspect noted within this lecture is that he believes it is essential to discontinue the term "protestor" for those who participated in the movement.<sup>45</sup> He believes they should be referred to as Water Protectors since it was not about being against oil; it was about where they wanted to place the pipeline and being pro water. In this lecture, he speaks on a performative movement called *Mirror Shields*, also mentioned in Kate Morris' *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art*.

*Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art*, by Kate Morris, serves as an important work on landscape in Native American art. Morris discusses the current state of the field through representations of landscapes within Native art in North America. Kate Morris states in this text, "Indigenous artists are expanding, reconceptualizing, and remaking the

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<sup>43</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Beyond Standing Rock," Artist Panel Cannupa Hanska Luger, Museum of Indian Art and Culture, February 24, 2019. [http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e\\_-8](http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e_-8)

<sup>44</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Beyond Standing Rock," Artist Panel Cannupa Hanska Luger, Museum of Indian Art and Culture, February 24, 2019. [http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e\\_-8](http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e_-8)

<sup>45</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Beyond Standing Rock," Artist Panel Cannupa Hanska Luger, Museum of Indian Art and Culture, February 24, 2019. [http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e\\_-8](http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e_-8)

forms of the genre still further, expressing Indigenous attitudes toward land and belonging even as they draw upon mainstream art practices."<sup>46</sup> The result of her thesis is contemporary Native American artists are not gravitating to visual representation. Native artists are using all "five senses" ranging from painting, soundscapes, installation (immersive to their environment at times), dioramas and landscape art.<sup>47</sup> Upon examining the current state of the field, Morris reviews the themes residing in Native Contemporary art. The result is that Native Contemporary artists use various themes such as power, resistance, memory, connection, presence, and absence to explore the landscape and the importance of it since it is culturally the history of their cultural representation.<sup>48</sup> His work, such as *Mirror Shields* cast a variety of these themes.

Luger was inspired to make *Mirror Shields* due to Ukraine using the same tactic during their civil unrest.<sup>49</sup> *Mirror Shields* was highly incorporated in the landscape as they were passed all over camps. The mirror was to reflect on opposing halting operators to contemplate their actions within the landscape. The reflecting material is essential to acknowledge since it activates viewers just like *This is Not a Snake*. *This is Not a Snake* is also representative of landscape. The form of the snake is indistinguishable to the winding of a river or a pipeline. It is an oxymoron of natural and unnatural elements situated within the landscape.

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<sup>46</sup> Morris, 1-6.

<sup>47</sup> Morris, 1-6.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, 1-6.

<sup>49</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Beyond Standing Rock," Artist Panel Cannupa Hanska Luger, Museum of Indian Art and Culture, February 24, 2019.  
[http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e\\_-8](http://www.nativemedianetwork.com/beyond-standing-rock-miac-art-exhibit-santa-fe-nm-2019/#mxYouTubeR:84bba9147e8f0d83cc515300fa37d28e_-8)

Artists such as Ginger Dunhill and Nicholas Galanin collaborated with Luger under the same concepts as *This is Not a Snake*. Merritt Johnson and J.G's, "This is Not a Creation Story," a journal article, follows Native artists/activists into Standing Rock to document their group project called *The UnNamed Collective*. They worked "under the flags of many Onkwehonwe and Settler Nations who have come in support of water and land."<sup>50</sup> Under this project, they shared a singular view of the need to protect water. Johnson, an artist herself, would also lengthen the conversation on other indigenous affairs. Johnson is noteworthy to consider as her works also look at predetermined indigenous history since the European settlement. She mentions the concepts of her work in "This is a Creation Story." "My work promotes land and our non-human relatives as survivors in the present moment of conflict and consumption."<sup>51</sup> Her words emphasize Native relatives and survivors who should be acknowledged and not considered mere resources. "Her art asks viewers to participate in a relationship with nature as a responsive agent, both as a method of critiquing past interactions and planning for those to come."<sup>52</sup>

*Open Container* from 2014-2015 (fig.8) is an example of differential Native History being taught. She examines how there is Native American History and "American History." *Open Container* consists of two figures sitting on the floor. They are both skeleton figures dressed in contrasting clothing. The left figure is dressed in a black robe and holds a cup to the right figure's face. The right figure is dressed in Native feathered regalia, but the fabric pattern consists of floral design. The floral pattern could translate as mother nature, or the

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<sup>50</sup> Merritt Johnson and J.G, "This Is a Creation Story," *The Georgia Review* 70, no. 4 (2016): 732-733.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson and J.G, "This Is a Creation Story," 733.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson and J.G, 733.



influence nature has on Native Americans. The right figure fixates on the book with its hand placed on the page, ignoring the container. The left figure resembles the grim reaper while holding the open container that holds the future in front of the faces of the Native figures. The Native figure is ignoring the reaper and showing a lack of interest in its container; however, it concentrates on the history book retelling of what will happen to their culture, such as battling over the landscape. Themes such as, injustices upon Native culture are accompanied with landscape as it informs viewers of further mistrust and resistance with the U.S. government, since they stole Native land.

Johnson and this example are pertinent to what Luger is leading with his work. The context of Johnson's *Container* is what Luger uses in his work; however, he leads in a contemporary fashion, depicting the present and futurism. From *Container* to *This is Not a Snake*, contemporary Native American artists vividly address historical issues among Native communities. Although they have different concepts when approaching their work, the materiality needs to be acknowledged in their work, for it depicts the culture and activates pertinent issues. The landscape is leading the field within Native contemporary art; however, materiality studies are pertinent. Materiality in Native contemporary art is vital to producing advocacy, interpretation, and developing a better understanding of Native culture and current Native or Global issues.

## **Methodology**

To appropriately discuss the symbolism of *This is Not a Snake*, one must first view this piece's materiality and how it relates to Luger's Native American culture while promoting

activism. Material culture is essential within the arts because it informs the viewer of history, purposes, and cultural customs. It is the study of artifacts, cultural beliefs, a particular community or society at a period in time through the artworks materials.<sup>53</sup> Through these objects, one can analyze cultural values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions. Generally, it is used within archival studies to learn about a particular entity within society. However, traditional forms of materiality help better understand cultured communities' fundamentals.

Material Culture Studies is an interdisciplinary field that associated people and their things: the making, history, preservation, and interpretation of objects. Michael Yonan essay "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies" argues,

Materiality, I further argue, has been an implicit dimension of art-historical inquiry for more than a century, one that has suffered at the expense of other artistic qualities. Art history has tended to suppress its status as material culture even as it has flirted continuously with materiality, and this has evolved into a serious intellectual limitation. The prestige recently accorded to dematerializing approaches to art, which have resulted in a diminished concern for materiality in general, has only exacerbated the situation. Moreover, I make the case for viewing material culture not as a methodology but rather as a meta-methodology, an ontological awareness.<sup>54</sup>

Yonan's argument of material culture becoming an ontological awareness is how the material in *This is Not a Snake* will be approached. That ontological awareness is the discussion of objects and their relationships to beings, traditionally and historically. It overviews a range of concepts and categories in traditional and non-traditional items. Reviewing Luger's material choices brings that awareness of beadwork, sewing/crochet to the viewer as symbolic items within his culture. Traditional materials such as beads and sewing represent particular cultures, especially

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<sup>53</sup> Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1.

<sup>54</sup> Yonan, 233.

since regional differences are vast in North America. The conventional materials in *This is Not a Snake* act as signifiers and symbols. Even the snake's non-traditional materials are significant and symbolic as it represents a part of Native history. As a Native contemporary artist, he questions traditional material culture studies by challenging tradition and historical notions with “hybrid materials.”

In her article "Modern Native American Art: Angel DeCora's Transcultural Aesthetics," Elizabeth Hutchinson states that Native materiality in art signifies their culture's qualities. "Hybrid art forms were dismissed as inauthentic, assimilationist, or even degenerate. In recent decades, however, art historians have become interested in how indigenous material and visual culture can express American Indian people's transcultural situation."<sup>55</sup> Regarding material culture Hutchinson discusses the issue of hybrid art forms from Native artists. The “hybridity” in Native art is historically seen as inauthentic due to vast non-traditional and traditional materials within their work. Yonan argues that a vast range of materials bring ontological awareness to the viewer within material culture. The choice to merge both non-traditional and traditional materials only further conveys American Indian people’s transcultural situation, whether political, historical, or cultural.

In this discussion, hybrid art is an issue to contemporary indigenous artists because it battles the stereotype of authentic Native American art. It becomes problematic from a stereotypical standpoint. Native artists are not bound to their traditional cultural materials, and the majority of society has not adjusted to that yet. Authenticity does not lie within a traditional context. Authenticity can be innovative, creative, and original, and it does not and should not comply with the ethical background. Cannupa Hanska Luger, Marie Watt, and Bonnie Donnie

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Hutchinson, "Modern Native American Art: Angel DeCora's Transcultural Aesthetics," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 4 (2001): 740.

take the opportunity to heighten the hybrid materials, so they are more than traditional Native artists; they are contemporary artists. In the text, hybrid materials also mean traditional and non-traditional materials. The categorizing of each artist's work is not to decipher authenticity; however, the breakdown of materials enables a discussion of how cultural context is molded and communicated.

While not examining specific texts from Native American culture, the material within Native arts is paramount to learning about specific North American indigenous groups. Native artists use traditional materials that are meaningful to their culture all the time; however, when they include non-traditional materials, it is suddenly inauthentic, as Hutchinson mentioned. The hybridity of materials in contemporary Native culture does not decrease authenticity; it increases. Native culture is living in a period where their items or materials, while still deemed traditional, include materials that are contemporary to their time. The use of hybrid materials in Native American art reveals to the viewer on their current issues while also providing a history lesson of traditional items. Materiality in the Native arts is essential to their culture because they use non-traditional materials to convey their own time while also exhibiting traditional constituents' notions. This method evaluates and justifies the choices Native artists make when using "hybrid" materials to convey their culture. Simultaneously, they are also breaking down that "Indian art" stereotype of what is authentic from Native culture.<sup>56</sup> Choosing material culture to examine the following artworks will give a better understanding of contemporary Native culture. By examining traditional and non-traditional materials, one can understand their culture's history or current events.

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<sup>56</sup> Anne Herzog Melanie and Sarah Anne Stolte, "American Indian Art: Teaching and Learning," *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (2012): 85-86.

Native American culture is discussed in general when contemplating the material within *This is Not a Snake*. Material culture studies have often focused on authentic versus inauthentic, fine art and craft, and processes related to Marxism. Throughout art history, Native art is the topic of most of those debates. Phenomenology, ontology, and psychoanalysis are ways to associate materials with humans. Michael Yonan views material culture studies as an ontological awareness that examines objects to comprehend cultures' traditions and history. The materiality of *This is Not a Snake* is as pertinent to the culture as it is to the movement. First, the figures hold a great deal of material that is associated with Native American culture. Dana Carlisle Kletchka and Rhonda Friday state in "Instructional Resources: Continuity and Change: Native American Beadwork," "Native patterns through the lane stitch or lazy stitch tend to be geometric, and colors are highly symbolic, though it is difficult to say what they signify."<sup>57</sup> Sewing and textiles have become a ubiquitous material for Native artists to use, just as Luger did in his installation. *This is Not a Snake*. Beadwork is also very prominent in the Native arts, but it is not just the medium that captivated the artist to want to utilize; it is its history.

Other historical artists known for focusing on materiality to represent their culture are Marie Watt and Bonnie Devine. Marie Watt is an artist based in Portland, Oregon, who utilizes sewing in her work.<sup>58</sup>

Sewing has become integral to my practice. But I started as a painter, and so the formalities of paint, color, and texture are not lost on me." Indeed, she observes her textile works: "I think of them as paintings." Grounded in what she has recognized as the Seneca Nation's protofeminist heritage, Watt embraces and

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<sup>57</sup> Dana Carlisle Kletchka and Rhonda Friday, "Instructional Resources: Continuity and Change: Native American Beadwork," *Art Education* 53, no. 3 (2000): 30.

<sup>58</sup> Cynthia Fowler, "Materiality and Collective Experience: Sewing as Artistic Practice in Works by Marie Watt, Nadia Myre, and Bonnie Devine," *American Indian Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2010): 346.

indeed celebrates traditional forms of women's art-making within the context of her work as a contemporary artist.<sup>59</sup>

She chooses to work in sewing because this was a craft that indigenous women practiced within their culture. "Historically, American Indian women engaged in various crafts related to sewing that was unique to their gender but held equal value to men's crafts. These include the design and making of clothing decorated with quillwork, beadwork, embroidery, and ribbon work, as well as quilt making, a form of creative expression integrated into already existing indigenous women's textile traditions."<sup>60</sup> When one looks at her work (fig. 9) Marie Watt, *Ledger: Ladder* made in 2004, it may appear non-objective. However, this piece consists of reclaimed wool blankets, satin bindings, and thread; together, it retells a part of her Native history. Much like Luger and his tongue in cheek title naming of *This is Not a Snake*, Watt also follows those same aspects when naming her work. *Ledger: Ladder* is reminiscent of ledger art relative to American Indians from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup>

The term ledger art derives from the lined pages of ledger books used by Plains Indians to create drawings, although she used other paper types. Over the last decade, art historians have extensively studied the drawings. They provide invaluable documentation of traditional Native life and the profound changes to traditional ways that resulted from colonization. They also serve as a marker of early engagements with Western forms of art-making by Native North American peoples. It seems appropriate that Watt would refer to the ledger art tradition. Just as ledger artists used Western forms of art-making to recount their own stories, Watt does the same by employing both sewing and painting to recount the histories of Native peoples embedded in her wool blankets.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Fowler, "Materiality and Collective Experience: Sewing as Artistic Practice in Works by Marie Watt, Nadia Myre, and Bonnie Devine," 346.

<sup>60</sup> Fowler, 344.

<sup>61</sup> Fowler, 349.

<sup>62</sup> Fowler, 349.

Therefore, Watt uses her work's materiality to resonate with older works from her indigenous ancestors. In comparison, Luger is using materiality to represent an event and the contemporary elements of Native People.

Another artist to mention that uses materiality to retell her Native history is Bonnie Devine. Devine is a Toronto-based artist who uses sewing to explore issues directly related to First Nations peoples' histories.<sup>63</sup> Coming from an Ojibway culture, Devine knew when using diverse textile materials that they were not traditional to Ojibway craft.

Many of the materials she used, including nylon stockings or acrylic yarn, were not traditional to Ojibway craft. Her ability to build sturdy, serviceable items from them with her fingers and her process of drawing threads of cotton, sinew, bark, or twine through fabrics or other surfaces to form objects both ingeniously made and simple in design were and are characteristic of the old ways of the Ojibway.<sup>64</sup>

However, much like Luger, who uses his materiality to recount the events that his culture engages in, Devine does the same thing. In figure 10, one can see her work called *Canoe*, made in 2003. *Canoe consists of* graphite, tar on paper, cotton thread, twine, and beads and is sixteen feet long. From the outsider perspective, like *This is Not a Snake*, the viewer is engaging with something Native, recounting a story. The similarity behind Luger and Devine is how pristinely they use the material to conduct their history and lead the viewer to learn more. Her piece *Canoe* is of a Native object; however, what about the waters of which the Canoe flows? That is a detail Devine is focused on, although it is not present. "Indeed, Devine's work's complexity lies in her ability to engage traditional and non-traditional practices to document this important story about her people's homeland's poisoning. Poised in the center of the room, Canoe

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<sup>63</sup> Fowler, 349.

<sup>64</sup> Fowler, 349.

appears to float in this complex space, leaving one to imagine the Canoe floating through this work's historical period. Canoe evokes a journey of great consequence due to the heavy load of history with which it was constructed."<sup>65</sup> The form, however, is contrary to the material on the outside.

The outside of the Canoe consists of pages from her thesis. Her thesis recounts the poisoning of Lake Huron's waters from uranium mining in the 1950s. These issues were never resolved. The poisoned waters lead to high cancer rates in Native society. According to Cynthia Fowler in "Materiality and Collective Experience: Sewing as Artistic Practice in Works by Marie Watt, Nadia Myre, and Bonnie Devine," she discusses crucial elements. "Additional pages from Devine's thesis sewn into Canoe provide information about atomic science, drawing clear connections between uranium mining and the larger warfare issue with weapons of mass destruction. Hanging threads dangle from the Canoe's pages just as the fate of this area and its people remain dangling in an uncertain future. Indeed, mining of this area and other parts of Canada continues today, spurred on by the mining industry's claims that it can now engage in mining safely."<sup>66</sup> Sewing pages of her thesis onto a canoe is non-traditional; however, she does render it to look as though the viewer is looking at a canoe made from birch. She creates a contemporary vision with contemporary materials of a traditional object to retell Native history. According to Cynthia Fowler, Devine's practice of sewing was influenced by her Ojibway culture.

Devine's work is more generally related sewing to traditional Ojibway practices, she relates sewing the pages of her thesis for Canoe to traditional Canoe making: Sewing the hundreds of pages of transcribed notes together as if they were birch bark or weegwas (birch trees), I constructed a canoe that reads as a canoe, built

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<sup>65</sup> Fowler, 358.

<sup>66</sup> Fowler, 358.



according to the tradition of the Ojibway navigators. Sewn with thread though and not spruce-root lashings, inscribed with the new language of physics and geology and not the ancient pictographic transformation symbols, it will, I hope, carry far the people's story and the land.<sup>67</sup>

Devine is conducting a relation to the tradition of sewing to retell stories and incidents within her culture. Non-traditional materials such as her thesis combined with a familiar form of a Canoe inform the viewer of what materials and practices mean to indigenous cultures.

Watt, Devine, and Luger have much in common when the intentions for materiality come into play. The use of their material is to reflect their Native history. Through the materiality of *This is Not a Snake*, if one can look twenty years into the future, the materials in his installation will reflect that of the happenings on Standing Rock. The snake's plasticity and metal materials reflect upon the nature of what the snake represents, which is the oil industry. The individuals dressed in crocheted and sewn regalia reflect upon the contemporary notions of Native individuals. The way he represents these individuals through non-traditional materials creates a time and a juncture with an inorganic snake. All these material elements provide this sensibility of an event taking place from a compilation of diverse materials.

Watt, Devine, and Luger share a commonality when using materiality to retell their culture's history or brief the viewer on current events. The choices they make when choosing materials to create something conventional of their culture traces back to their own current time and contemporary culture. They merge the authentic with the inauthentic or traditional ideas with non-traditional ideas. However, the message they are creating when combining such materials helps the viewer understand their history while also understanding its material. Watt chooses to sew because it is not just a female skill within her culture anymore. The skill itself is used to

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<sup>67</sup> Fowler, 359.

comprehend her culture's history. She uses her textiles medium and sewing to recreate ledger books that would have initially been paper. Devine, however, is creating the image of a canoe, a traditional object for culture. The piece only holds the shape of a canoe; the rest is her thesis that implements toxic waters' history within her Native culture. Traditional objects such as canoes would have flowed through these waters once before; however, her choice of the materiality of her own research words on papers suggests that these waters are not safe, and the canoe is now static to her culture. Luger shares the same ideas and use of materials in *This is Not a Snake*. The installation is a whole narrative of his culture's legends and the current situation provided by the materials he chooses to use.

### **Contextual Analysis**

*This is Not a Snake* is a large installation, but its size varies depending on where it is displayed. This piece has been displayed in many exhibitions. For this project, I refer to the installation in the *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, as shown in Figure 1. The human figures are six feet tall and are holding back the snake. Therefore, the snake's head to the bottom torso measures approximately six feet and some inches.<sup>68</sup> The snake's full length is sixty feet; however, the space it encompasses is over thirty feet of space due to the coiling. The materiality of this installation is diverse and contrasts natural and synthetic elements. The figures are dressed in crochet regalia with beadwork. Although crochet is not a specific craft to Native society, it is similar to the weaving medium still found in the Native arts.

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<sup>68</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, email message to Rachel Vera, September 16, 2020.

### **Materiality: Beadwork & Crochet**

Dana Carlisle Kletchka and Rhonda Friday discuss the importance of beads in their essay "Instructional Resources: Continuity and Change: Native American Beadwork. Beadwork is also very prominent in the Native arts, but it is not just the medium that captivated the artist to want to utilize it; it is the bead's history and symbolism. "Before European encounters, Native Americans made beads from shell, bone, pearls, teeth, and dyed porcupine quills."<sup>69</sup> Europeans introduced glass beads as gifts and bartering within Native cultures. Overtime, quills used for beading became a material to adorn their horses. Glass beads are still the most popular form of bead in Native art. In general, objects made from beads such as wampum belts held significant meaning. Wampum belts were of purple wampum beads, shells of Quahog clams found on the East Coast.<sup>70</sup> Wampums are challenging to make as the artist would have to sand down each bead. Beaded work such as wampums are sacred in eastern tribes, as they were present during marriages, meetings, and even traded to colonizers as forms of peace treaties.<sup>71</sup> Wampum beads were prized items and eventually became a form of currency in the early 1700s. Beads, such as the wampums, do not mean all tribes valued this material the same. Many tribes didn't have access to these beads, however different beads within each tribe were deemed as valuable and sacred objects.

According to Dana Carlisle Kletchka and Rhonda Friday, the Lakota/Sioux culture associated beadwork with sacred events, such as a baby's birth. Beadwork was for functional and ceremonial purposes in Lakota/ Sioux nations. Dana Carlisle Kletchka and Rhonda Friday state

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<sup>69</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 26.

<sup>70</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 27.

<sup>71</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 27.

in their essay "Instructional Resources: Continuity and Change: Native American Beadwork" discuss important beaded patterns. "Native patterns through the lane stitch or lazy stitch tend to be geometric, and colors are highly symbolic, though it is difficult to say what they signify."<sup>72</sup> Traditional quillwork captured the designs. Quillwork designs were popular within Lakota/Sioux tribes as they were adopted and used by women.<sup>73</sup> Women would create beadwork that embodied spiritual qualities within their plans. Specific designs such as geometric turtles refer to four directions or stars.<sup>74</sup> The beaded pyramid shapes on a larger turtle design indicate a hill or mountain.<sup>75</sup> Design examples such as these are what make beads a valued material within Native culture in North America.

The exhibition, titled "The Lazy Stitch," refers to an actual stitch that would also be known as "lane stitch," commonly used in beadwork. "The lane stitch (often referred to as the "lazy" stitch) places long rows of stringed beads on a thread with several beads between each stitch."<sup>76</sup> Sewing and textiles are a ubiquitous material for Native artists, similar to what Luger did in his installation. This exhibition revolves around interpreting the concept of the bead itself and its connection with human beings.<sup>77</sup> These concepts consist of land, race, culture, gender,

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<sup>72</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 30.

<sup>73</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 30.

<sup>74</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 30.

<sup>75</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Kletchka and Friday, 30.

<sup>77</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

and time.<sup>78</sup> The University of Colorado Springs invited other artists of diverse backgrounds that share these issues' same creative and critical voices. Once all the artists' worked together, the community exhibited and contemplated the "lazy stitch" and talked about a wide range of topics. The artists of diverse backgrounds, Luger included, conveyed multiple installations of beading and sewing. As mentioned before, the thread feeding through the beaded work relates to how Native culture perseveres. The thread is viewed as the cause, or cultural knowledge, while the individuals are conceived of as beads. It is the thin thread that has kept Native culture active. We see that invigorated through the youth at Standing Rock. The youth are responsible for raising awareness; therefore, the "thread" nurtured by the following generation.

The bead was a metaphorical object; however, it has a hole for the thread to feed through. This hole in the bead relates to the individual having a hole; therefore, we as individuals have a hole somewhere in our minds.<sup>79</sup> The hole could either be mentally and physically-based trauma, injustice, or life in general. These notions come back to the issue and question of land rights, race, gender, and cultural identity, and how time-space are the ultimate factors of those relationships. The thread is also an essential factor, as is the entity that feeds through the bead. As individuals consume the thread, there will also be a waste in the thread not used. The wasted pieces relate to the issue of Native individuals not able to partake in their cultural identity. However, whatever the thread used in one's life, it is still the piece that connects the culture as a whole. For this exhibition, Luger states, "We are all beads, threaded together in a larger work; diverse individually yet together we create a larger social structure dependent on one another and

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<sup>78</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

<sup>79</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

the land for survival."<sup>80</sup> What Luger means with this quote is that beads are not as strong when they are by themselves. The more beads one has, the stronger the connection one can make. Therefore, the thread is protected by the beads. In more realistic terms of how he associates bead and thread to society, the more people a community has, the harder it will be to break a bond, purpose, and the act for survival.<sup>81</sup>

Native culture is like beadwork. It is diverse, colorful, strong when they come together and thread with knowledge and history. When there are contingencies of race, gender, and culture, the mass of beads will keep the thread from breaking.<sup>82</sup> This notion relates heavily to the Water is Life Movement and the whole purpose of *This is Not a Snake. This is Not a Snake* was created out of a protest that was heavily guarded by Native culture. The beads are the Water Protectors and those who came from a distance to protest. They are the beads that make the thread stronger. Even with police brutality evoked on peaceful protestors, they did not break the thread that carried the Water is Life movement, which has influenced Luger's installation. The idea of having this exhibition with collaborative artists stays true to this notion of unbreakable thread because Luger is known as a collaborative artist. Luger believes that collaboration is vital for individuals to collect and share their perspectives and stories.<sup>83</sup> The same is true for the Gallery curators, and that was their intended purpose for the exhibition. Stories have always

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<sup>80</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

<sup>81</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

<sup>82</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

<sup>83</sup> "Lazy Stitch," University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Accessed June 24, 2020. <http://uccspresents.org/events/2017-18/lazy-stitch>

been important in Native art and contemporary Native art. Materials in *This is Not a Snake* play a valued role in briefing viewers on Native culture. The regalia in this piece is significant in revealing it is Native American art.

Figure 3 shows a close up of the vibrant coloration involved in the crochet work. The patterns are significant within the materials because geometric shapes commonly appear in various Native American artistic traditions. The eight-pointed stars on the caps or "headdresses" are prevalent to how Native designs manipulate natural objects such as the sun or animalistic characteristics. Great Plains Natives would call the eight-pointed star a pendleton. This design can be found in a variety of Native apparel, but more so on quilted blankets. Most Native designs resonate with the earthy or animalistic qualities from the land they are familiar with.<sup>84</sup> Another notable feature of the crocheted regalia is the eye forms on the shins. The eye form is not an element utilized within Native design; however, the artist chose to associate eyes closer to the ground while having the figure's faces covered up by the eight-pointed star caps with bright colored fringes. These shapes bring back the notion and ideals that these figures do not have their eyes closed or are blind to the situation; they are now closer to the earth on which they stand. The non-traditional and reused materials add this perspective since this is contemporary regalia. The bright colors are also prevalent within the materiality of Native culture. In Powwows, contemporary dancers intentionally dress in bright color schemes. The contemporary style regalia the figures are wearing could also refer to the figurative individuals coming from the present time. This contemporary notion of the figures feeds through the Water is Life movement as it is a recent 21st-century battle for the Native peoples.

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<sup>84</sup> Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," 1-2.

## Materiality: Snake

The second entity to analyze is the snake. The snake's head is clay, which is the first medium Luger started with in his practice.<sup>85</sup> The clay head naturalistically represents a snake; however, that does not apply to the rest of the body. Looking at Figure 2, one can find the top of the snake's body rearing towards the snake's head. The snake's body consists of plastic material twisted around a rebar structure to mimic a striking snake's stature. Further down the body, the viewer can see material such as reused tires, which leads to a space with coiled barbed wire. In front of the barbed wire, there is a cut out of militarized police at Standing Rock.<sup>86</sup> The snake's head is well rendered. In contrast, the body consists of barrels and barbed wire that indicate the oil industry's carelessness of disposed materials that are causing environmental issues and air pollution.<sup>87</sup>

The concept of *This is Not a Snake* derives from the Standing Rock protest for clean water. The fight for their land and clean water is another paradigm to *This is Not a Snake*. The snake has an organic shape, which is the shape of any snake, but his title of the piece tugs at an art-historical work. That art historical piece is Rene Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe* from 1929 (fig. 6).<sup>88</sup> His play on words references Magritte's painting where Magritte depicts a painted pipe, but

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<sup>85</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger (Indigenous Artist) in discussion with Blue Rain Gallery, September 10, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>87</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>88</sup> Rene Magritte and Louis Quievreux, *René Magritte: Selected Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 108-109.



the painting is not the actual object of a pipe. Luger takes this title and transitions the meaning. Although the viewer can tell it is a snake, the title ensures that what they see is not to be interpreted as a snake but as an oil pipe. He picks up Magritte's declaration that his work may not be a pipe, but Luger's work is not the actual snake but the pipe. Figure 6 shows René Magritte's oil painting; *This is Not a Pipe*, painted in 1929. The way he titles this work is called paralanguage.<sup>89</sup> Paralanguage is when the word is not the thing.<sup>90</sup> In this case, the painting of the pipe is not a real and physical pipe but just a depiction of a pipe. However, when Luger states that it is not a snake, he is actually referring to a pipe, but not a smoker's pipe.. Although he is referring to a different kind of pipe than what is depicted by Magritte, he takes Magritte's title into context. Luger is adept at the concept of Magritte title painting *This is Not a Pipe*, using it to reiterate the snake prophecy and the threat of a literal pipe, not a snake.

The snake, viewed from multi-directions, like a pipe, a prophecy; however, the snake's shape could also relate to the landscape of which the oil pipes laid. In an interview for his recent exhibit, he talks about how the landscape is one of the many things he considers when creating work:

The landscape itself is a member of the performance. That, I think, is a paradigm to the indigenous background I come from. The idea that we belong to the land other than the land belonging to us seems to resonate. This is something I am interested in expressing through performing this work on the land.<sup>91</sup>

His intentions to interpret the snake as a winding pipe can also correlate to its construction into their ancestral lands in Standing Rock.

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<sup>89</sup> Magritte and Quievreux, *René Magritte: Selected Writings*, 108-109.

<sup>90</sup> Magritte and Quievreux, 108-109.

<sup>91</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger (Indigenous Artist) discussed with a spokesperson for The Industry, February 8, 2020.

Since there are various types of snakes, in this installation, it is evident that the artist is conveying a black snake. Typical black rat snakes, in realistic terms, are not venomous; however, they are known to strike and bite when they feel threatened.<sup>92</sup> They are not known to be an aggressive species and are mostly out to eat rats and mice for food; however, they kill by constriction.<sup>93</sup> They are part of the standard food chain that helps maintain other pests.<sup>94</sup> One way to decipher that this is indeed a black snake is the depiction of smooth black plastic objects on the snake. It resembles the glossy black, bluish color on their scales. As previously mentioned by Luger, the snake's actions are not for the viewer to interpret as a vicious reptile.<sup>95</sup> Snakes are good since they serve their purpose for the environment; however, society views them as aggressive and sneaky beings.<sup>96</sup> The views in which we place snakes are what Luger is referencing with the black snake. Conveyed as the snake is out for the rats or mice, equal to the oil corporation out for the smaller and less powerful individuals.

Although the oil corporation is not venomous, they cannot do physical harm if things go their way; they will indeed metaphorically strike and bite when they feel threatened or do not get their way.<sup>97</sup> That scenario rings true with the Water is Life Movement in Standing Rock. Things

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<sup>92</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>93</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>94</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>95</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>96</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>97</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

were halted and stopped by bringing out reinforcements despite an oil spill warning under the United States' most extensive water supplies. These reinforcements from the oil corporations are better known as the "kill by constricting" behavior, as noted by an actual black snake.<sup>98</sup> The constrictions represent the media masking the protests, hosing protestors down in freezing temperatures, firing rubber bullets, and using tear gas.<sup>99</sup> Oil corporations constricted the wants and needs of the Native community from Standing Rock. From this backlash of not respecting treaties and environmental health issues, the protest grew. As one knows, the smaller the prey, the easier it is for the predator. Therefore, in this case, the prey outgrew the predator's size and could not hold constrictions.

The snake, as indicated before, is not a snake at all. The title refers to this snake as a pipe tearing through the sacred Native lands in North Dakota, explicitly Standing Rock. It engages the viewer to be curious about the giant snake's striking composition. This figurative snake in which he refers to a pipe represents the oil industries' greed for petroleum. The snake's figure and the snake's material is reminiscent of oil industry products or corporations' pollution. Luger's snake depicted is a figurative display in his work, which symbolizes petroleum and plastic products, products unnecessary for us to live. His placement of his actors within this visual is essential to this installation's representation. One figure has a reclined stance with their arm spread out in an upward diagonal line locating the left hand inside the snake's mouth. The parallel figure has its right arm clutching the snake's neck. Anatomically speaking, snakes do have necks. He makes

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<sup>98</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>99</sup> Tomoki Mari Birkett and Teresa Montoya, "For Standing Rock: A Moving Dialogue," In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, edited by Estes, Nick and Dhillon Jaskiran (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 263.

these decisions to create an image of the figures pushing the snake back. They grasp the snake, sharing the determination of the protests in Standing Rock to take down the element that could destroy their planet.

However, he creates a space or illusion of transpired events by placing his figures as actors within this narrative. The narrative creates this tense relationship between the figures and the striking snake. The inspiration for *This is Not a Snake* comes from the recent narrative of Water Protectors fighting for clean water and desecrated burial sites. These aesthetic concepts are portrayed directly in the narrative of the artwork. At first glance, one can see two individuals are fighting a black snake, but why? First, the black snake's illusion is larger than the humans, which indicates to the viewer that the snake serves as a metaphor for something else.<sup>100</sup> The snake's materials throughout the body are another visual that this is not about a snake, but there is some hesitation that this may still seem to relate to a snake. The position of the snake creates this space of intense interaction between humans and reptiles.<sup>101</sup> In the real world, this would not be a casted scenario. This narrative of *This is Not a Snake* contains more significant issues than the presentation within this installation. It creates questions, interests, and the desire to learn more.

Second, to examine the human figures, they provide half of the installation's scenario and are important figures within the piece. The human figures have their faces down and covered by colored fringes on their headpiece. The elimination of the figures' faces creates the illusion that

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<sup>100</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>101</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

this could be anybody.<sup>102</sup> The figures do not point at a specific person; however, they represent a specific group of people, which is the Native American community. Although the regalia the figures are wearing are not traditional in a sense to the Native community, the way Luger presents the regalia in a futuristic fashion indicates that this could be an issue that they will be fighting for quite some time.<sup>103</sup> The events of Standing Rock were recent; however, the contemporary style of regalia conveyed as a group of Native Youth fighting for the same issues is in the future.

Third to examine is the relationship between the figures and the snake as they are very contrasting figures. With this contrast, the artist makes the narrative conflicting and powerful. It is powerful in the sense of the scale of the snake versus the smaller individuals. They represent courage from a culture attempting to cast away the unwelcome reality behind the snake. They are chasing away the unfavored oil industry that has impacted their reservation and many others around the nation. Luger creates this illusion of the snake's large size to strike down human figures while the human figures fight the snake. He even places the one figure's hand directly in the mouth, a place where one would be afraid to touch a snake due to not knowing if it is venomous.<sup>104</sup> This illusion is the narrative of humans fighting for a cause and handling the most

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<sup>102</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>104</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

sensitive and undetermined areas in a situation.<sup>105</sup> Those who do not know the back story or origin of *This is Not a Snake* can learn the relationships conducted here.

However, whatever the relationship is between the subjects, the whole composition can also depict their relationship to the landscape. Luger creates an organic animalistic entity with inorganic materials to portray an inert pipe laid down within the landscape.<sup>106</sup> The snake's relationship with the pipe is conflicting because viewers who do not know the backstory are not sure why the snake is massive or portrayed aggressively. Luger intentionally makes it this large entity, larger than the human figures. He does this because it is what the oil industry is vast and scary. Large corporations usually do not have respect for the land. They are focused on the constant building of convenience in fast-paced modern life.<sup>107</sup> The figures, in contrast, represent respect for the landscape. It creates this narrative that these individuals do not wish to accept the aggressive notions of large corporations' indifference to their sacred landscape.<sup>108</sup>

Luger's intentions to combine colorful individuals with a dark and petrifying snake should not be perceived as Natives are afraid of the animal prophecy. Instead, Natives' relationships with high corporations and governments is malign since it seems the government still seeks to overrun minority groups. The composition and humans' gesturing to stop a vicious attack from this figurative snake, which is supposed to symbolize the overbearing powerhouse of

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<sup>105</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>106</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>107</sup> Manning, Sarah Sunshine. "Standing Rock: The Actualization of a Community and a Movement." In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, edited by Estes, Nick and Dhillon Jaskiran (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 290.

<sup>108</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

the oil industry with impudent qualities and uninterested in their landscape, is the extent of their relationship with one another. In shorter terms, it is abysmal. The intent of these figures could also symbolize that they will still fight no matter what takes place.

With the snake, it is not Luger's intention to create the narrative that snakes are unfavorable creatures. Natives usually associate animals within legends to convey real-life tales or prophecies. One must understand this relationship between animals and humans to truly understand their culture's meaning embedded in their traditions, storytelling, and art. It is essential to relay what Native culture and animalistic qualities can personify within Native art. Dana Carlisle Kletchka and Rhonda Friday explain how animalistic characters are elucidated and essential to their culture. "Human beings from many cultures associate certain characteristics with animals. We think that lions are powerful and strong, while eagles are graceful and fierce. Think of one animal and explain how its behavior leads us to associate it with certain attributes."<sup>109</sup> How this relates to the snake and what it means to Standing Rock goes back to the prophecy. The prophecy discusses issues that will appear in the future that are problematic to Native Culture. Although the Standing Rock protest was not merely about preserving their sacred Native land, it was also to address a possible calamity that could harm millions of people's resources.

### **Iconography & Interpretation**

The subject matter behind *This is Not a Snake* revolves around the beliefs and prophecies from Standing Rock. This belief is prevalent in the Standing Rock Sioux's relationship with the

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<sup>109</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, Interview by Center of Visual Art MSU Denver, August 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc902CHGirQ&t=1s>, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

land and the sacred, respected tradition their ancestors have maintained in their territory.<sup>110</sup> Their appreciation for the land relies on retrieving only necessary materials, whereas the pipeline portrayed in *This is Not a Snake* is unnecessary.

Luger's choice in making the figures dressed in new regalia was intentional. He combines a stylistic notion that has the regalia read as contemporary since the subjects that would have been spreading most of the awareness were also contemporary individuals.<sup>111</sup> Younger people would have to live with the consequences of the present actions for the rest of their lives. It is fitting to understand the figures as youth.

The unfolding narrative is these two youthful individuals resisting a pipeline that could harm half of the Mid-Western United States' water supply. Oil industries were persistent in supplying this pipe even if laid under a massive water supply. For Standing Rock, this was not a risk they were willing to take as they had been warned previously of such happenings through their snake prophecy. Figure 1 shows that the figure's resistance to the vicious attack is highly symbolic of the material incorporated within the rest of the snake's body. It is significant to the Standing Rock community. They are not only making sure their cultural prophecy does not come to fruition, but they are also fighting back against all the materials used by government and oil industries against them. Although Luger positions the figures clutching the snake in what would seem aggressive does not compare to the actual aggressive activity from militarized police Standing Rock.

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<sup>110</sup> Shiri, Katie Mazer Pasternak, and D. T. Cochrane, "The Financing Problem of Colonialism: How Indigenous Jurisdiction is Valued in Pipeline Politics," In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, edited by Estes, Nick, and Dhillon Jaskiran (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 222-223.

<sup>111</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).



Rigid materials within the snake are also significant to Standing Rock's protests. The snake materials, such as the barbed wire, represent what militarized police used to barricade the pipeline construction site entrance.<sup>112</sup> The tires are reminiscent of the heavy tractor equipment used to dig through their land to lay down a partial pipe.<sup>113</sup> Water protectors attached banners that read "Water is our First Medicine" to parked bulldozers on the construction site. Then they were treated with acts of violence from militarized police. David Archambault essay speaks on militarized events in *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL*

*Movement* stating,

In recent weeks, the state has militarized my reservation, with roadblocks and license-plate checks, low-flying aircraft, and racial profiling of Indians. The local sheriff and the pipeline company have called our protest "unlawful," and Gov. Dalrymple declared a state of emergency. It is a familiar story in Indian Country. Sioux Nation's lands for extracted resources have been threatened for the third time, without regard for tribal interests. The Sioux peoples signed treaties in 1851 and 1868. The government broke them before the ink was dry.<sup>114</sup>

Protests were lawful but their use of the term "unlawful" was their only justification for using unlawful militarization. The choice to use barbed wire to represent violence organized by militarized police is contradicted by how Luger chooses to represent high power individuals by conveying them in a small fashion.

An important but small piece compared to this installation's extensive scale is the cutout placed on the floor in front of the snake. The cutout of the militarized police plays an essential

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<sup>112</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>113</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>114</sup> David Archambault, *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 37-39.

role in this narrative. The small scale is reminiscent of how Water Protectors perceived militarized police. The small scale could also indicate the importance they had in addressing a real issue that could harm the same way they live in the future. It is a paradox.

There were police and military arrested more than eight hundred Water Protectors. The most powerful state in the world's history, with its military and police hand-in-hand with private security forces, waged a heavily armed, one-sided battle against some of the poorest people in North America to guarantee a pipeline's trespass. That Water Protectors held out against the ritualistic brutality of tear gas, pepper spray, dog attacks, water cannons, disinformation campaigns, and twenty-four-hour surveillance is a pure miracle and a testament to the powerful resolve of the Oceti Sakowin, Indigenous peoples, and their allies. Yet the wounds inflicted are long-lasting and descend from a long history of colonial violence.<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, the militarization indicated by the cutout has been a part of Native culture before, and Luger chooses to display that through a cutout, not giving it too much attention, as the snake metaphor is of more importance.

Continuing along the snake's body, after the barbed wire, the rest of the tail consists of sliced tires, empty five-gallon buckets, small oil barrels, orange cones, and more clay and plastic ornaments. The end of the snake is in clay, just like the snakehead shown in figure 4; however, the portion is a series of mouths with prominent teeth associated with a snake's rattle. Luger uses the inorganic products within the snake's body to contrast the semi-traditional material in the individuals charging the snake. As most Native components inhabit the natural elements, the snake also has reminiscent components of Native culture.

In general, the snake is part of the Sioux culture, as it was the prophecy of a hierarchy power desecrating and threatening their lands. The snake's context and purpose in this

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<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Ellis, "Centering Sovereignty: How Standing Rock Changed the Conversation," In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, ed. Estes, Nick and Dhillon Jaskiran (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 174.

installation derives from their elders' words. The snake prophecy is the traditional Native component. However, the inorganic materials are not traditionally part of Native culture until the Water is Life protests. The fight for clean water against oil industries is forever embedded within this tribe and is something all Native communities advocate.<sup>116</sup> This piece in history, and the materials associated with it, have now become a part of Native history. The tires, barrels, and barbed wire are non-traditional materials, which further advocates the break down of stereotypes within Native art.<sup>117</sup>

Luger's style revolves around 21st-century indigeneity.<sup>118</sup> This labeling is significant because it arranges the predicaments. Native communities face within the 21st century. The individuals wearing futuristic Native regalia demonstrates that what one is looking at is 21st-century indigeneity, but it is the snake that overwhelms this notion. Analyzing the snake's tail helps further understand the 21st-century materials used to conduct the contrasting narrative in *This is Not a Snake*. The tires placed after the wrapped plastic upper body represent vehicles or large machinery involved in this conflict.<sup>119</sup> Plastic buckets are a heavily manufactured item that can carry things that are inorganic or organic.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, this item can connect the manufacturing world with the consumer. The artist plays on this idea of consumer and distributor

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<sup>116</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>117</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>118</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>119</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>120</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

and how Native communities process this notion. However, the metal buckets are a manufactured item to carry things like crude oil or other toxic substances. The substance of what these buckets have carried is not for the apparent eye— they were instead intended to correlate with the toxic substance of the oil industry and how one perceives snakes as also being toxic or venomous.

The one orange cone at the end is a subtle but essential piece. That one piece of material continues the narrative that this conflict positively resides on something involving road work or construction site-building. Including this small piece helps the viewer decipher the narrative they see while keeping them interested in asking questions and learning more. Luger also ties in ceramic cylinders towards the end of the tail. They are unclear; however, one could say they are important since he specializes in ceramics. The ceramic pieces could also represent the earth itself. The tying in of traditional materials and mediums ensures that the work is connected to Native culture and Luger's own background. The ceramics from the end of the tail correlate to the Snake's head. Though highly symbolic of manufacturing items, the snake does not shy away from the traditional materials of the artist and Native communities, specifically ceramics. Ceramics a traditional material is as significant as the inorganics materials. When they come together they activate the Water is Life movement.

The Water is Life movement pertains to the materiality in *This is Not a Snake*. Although these materials are not the usual things one would see in traditional Native art, they still have impacted Native history. The emphasis Luger suggests with the inorganic materials is now part of the present culture of Native Americans. The plastic materials, such as the paint buckets and scraps, harm the environment and create environmental injustice. The metal barrels relate to the oil industry, consistent within the snake's body, which is the outcome of a laid pipe—then

distributed through barrels. The used tires suggest how bulldozers and trucks demolished and altered their lands. However, the most poignant material is the barbed wire. This material is paramount to the Water is Life movement because this was the material used to keep indigenous people out of the construction site. Barbed wire has the demeanor of violence, used to ensure harm to those trying to cross, the same harm inflicted through pepper spray, rubber bullets, water cannons, and dog attacks.<sup>121</sup> These pivotal events are what have distinguished the hardships of Native culture.

Inorganic materials in *This is Not a Snake*, attribute to Standing Rock's Water is Life movement and associate with the 21st -century Indigenous history. *This is Not a Snake* is a piece that initially creates this narrative to the viewer, it is also a response to current events. One can see that the snake's head does not carry the realistic qualities of a real snake. The artist intentionally glazes the whole head black, even the eyes. The artist does not want the viewer to focus on the snake's details; however, he places a hint of what the snake symbolizes with its fangs. If one gets close enough, as seen in Figure 5, one can see the fangs are actually in the shape of gas pump handles.<sup>122</sup> The sharp fang part resembles the pump's end that goes into the car and where gas flows from the handle to one's gas tank. He also pays close attention to the hollowed-out detail of the gas pump end that associates with a snake's fangs. Venomous snakes have hollow fangs to push out venom when striking their prey. Hollow fangs are reminiscent of the hollow nozzle in a gas pump handle. It is possible Luger could even be associating those same qualities with petroleum.

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<sup>121</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>122</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

The thought of petroleum being the venom of the human race is another creative message to the viewer. The glands resemble the gas pump handle, where one would grasp to let the gas out of the nozzle. The handle part is black like the rest of the snakehead, except the nozzle part is of a deeper gray tone, which also is another clue that this detail is evident to the eye that these are gas handles. The irony Luger is using here can be interpreted in many forms. However, upon looking at the snake as a whole, it is clear it's inorganic, but the pump handles lean towards mechanical.

Gas pump handles as fangs can give the viewer an outside look at society's dependencies. American society has become dependent on a source that is not necessary for living. However, each of us gets up most days, goes to a gas station, and pumps petroleum into our vehicles. Viewing *This is Not a Snake*; it can represent a society pumping venom into our lives every day and paying for it. Society pays to have something one does not necessarily need to be dependent on, but still, several do, and the snakes keep growing. The snake becomes this sort of metaphor for the Sioux Nation as this prophetic object that doesn't bring wellness to the world. Instead, it poisons the very way of life. From an outside context, they do not refer to a real snake, but what people perceive in snakes is carried within the oil industry. The oil industry supplies thousands in employment.<sup>123</sup> However, the very thing they drill and distribute is not permanent. In history, European colonizers have also been deemed Native peoples as temporary. Native people have remained permanent and are willing to fight temporary oil corporations.

The fangs as gas pump handles make apparent the notion that this narrative between the snake and the Native individuals conspires around oil distribution and how it affects Native

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<sup>123</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020)

communities. Like the orange cone, a subtle clue that building and construction are involved, the same goes for the gas pump fangs. They are both small inclusions by the artist on an issue that is large. However, Luger's intention is to hide Easter eggs within his work. This is a tremendous skill because it keeps the viewer engaged and leads them to find more clues.

One could also conclude that Luger deliberately made these details harder to find because it is not the oil they are fighting. The oil is the object distributed through a larger corporate entity, represented in the snake. Oil does not ask to be drilled, managed, and sold. It is only carrying on its earthly purpose to tectonic activity.<sup>124</sup> That is until humans learned of its capability to run automobiles. Indeed, the evil of the oil industry's venomous component is not the oil; it is those who make society reliant upon it. As a whole context, we all participate in this notion; however, in society's defense, what other options are there. The oil industry actively continues to pump out oil as a necessity, and nations will continue purchasing without correcting the issue. The Water is Life movement attempts to address those issues to the nation and worldwide. Their message involves confronting the oil industry first so that consumers can become involved in a healthier and more sustainable global environment.<sup>125</sup> Doing those things can detach us from pumping venom into our daily lives that harms the very thing one breathes, and the land one lives on.

The only other aspect that is not black on the snake's face is the tongue. A viewer would know the tongue of a snake is red; however, the tongue appears wrapped in electrical tape. With

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<sup>124</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

<sup>125</sup> Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft, "Standing Rock Religion(S)," *Numen: International Review for the history of Religions* 65, no. 5/6 (September 2018): 499-500.

snakes, the tongue is used to pick up scents on their prey.<sup>126</sup> Luger creates this tongue out of some cloth, fabric, or crochet yar, the same on the individual regalia. He has this tongue structure attached to this hallowed tube inside the mouth that is also colored red and black.

Luger wraps the tongue in a thin black plastic that resembles electrical tape that mimics how the neck is wrapped in plastic strips—going back to the notion that the tongue is used to pick up on scents of their prey. The way Luger has the snake's mouth open, fangs pulled back, and the tongue sticking out could be an indicator that the snake is upon its prey. The prey in this predicament would be the community at Standing Rock and the Native community as a whole. The metaphorical tongue picked up the wrapping of black tape of those senses at first red, the tongue at its natural state. The tongue wrapped in black plastic or tape is another visual that a manufactured product has tainted this organic entity.

One would relate this similarity to what happened in 2010 with the BP Oil Spill, also known as the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The BP Oil Spill was the largest marine oil spill of petroleum history, where 4.9 million barrels spilled on the Gulf Coast.<sup>127</sup> Animal rescuers pulled birds and marine wildlife from shores caked in oil.<sup>128</sup> The tongue is a sensory object on a snake's body. Luger has it wrapped with inorganic material to address the harmful actions that the oil industry provides in this world. Those tainted actions demonstrate that humans and wildlife environments are not being able to live up to their full potential. Luger contrasts this with colorful individuals who convey their perseverance within this plasticity. Although Native

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<sup>126</sup> Gabriel Blouin-Demers and Patrick J. Weatherhead, "Habitat Use by Black Rat Snakes (*Elaphe Obsoleta*) in Fragmented Forests," *Ecology* 82, no. 10 (2001): 2882-2884.

<sup>127</sup> Stuart Kirsch, "Guest Editorial: Sustainability and the BP Oil Spill," *Dialectical Anthropology* 34, no. 3 (2010): 297.

<sup>128</sup> Stuart Kirsch, "Guest Editorial: Sustainability and the BP Oil Spill," 2.



communities and the United States will be dependent on oil for a bit longer, taking action into stopping the full force of greed upon their lands is a positive step in taking back their land and fighting for clean water and the environment.

The snake scales are also there but in a contemporary fashion similar to the individuals' regalia. Scales on a snake serve the same purpose as the tongue – to detect a prey's scent. It is another detail that creates this notion that the entity is a snake. The small amount of detail of scales transitions back to the idea that what the viewer sees is not about the average thought. Luger places what looks to be a metal or ceramic piece with characteristics of what represents scales. It is the only indication of scales besides what is on the snake's head. This piece is vital to the verification that this is a snake; however, it is also a gateway to the artwork that shows various items that do not correlate with a snake. Scales on snakes help the reptile's locomotion, aides in camouflage, and can help capture prey.<sup>129</sup> Ironically, Luger places the individual's arm around the areas where the preconceived snake scales are. It's ironic because the snake's scales are used to constrict and capture prey. In this scenario the humans are the ones constricting the snake. Also, scales help in locomotion and are stopped by the human's right arm to disrupt its movement. While the top part of the snake is camouflage, it is also disrupted with this scale because it stands out from the rest of the top portion since it is not black. The placement of the individual's arm on an anatomical part of the snake deemed most important is a particular notion that humans can weaken the higher power that is symbolic through the snake.

Also, another important factor when discussing style choices by Luger is scale. The scale he perceives the snake also indicates how Water Protectors interpreted the situation. Water Protectors knew this battle they were fighting would be long, scary, and dangerous. Therefore,

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<sup>129</sup> Gabriel Blouin-Demers and Patrick J. Weatherhead, "Habitat Use by Black Rat Snakes (*Elaphe Obsoleta*) in Fragmented Forests," 2884.

the artist's response relies on the size. His interpretation of the situation is not that of a light situation since this is the same place where he was born and is where his beliefs lie. His choice to respond to this event would be to engage in protest and be present with the fight. Artistically, his response was to make something large. Something to this extent that weighs heavily upon the Native community is not expressed in a small fashion.

His activism, much like in his other works, play a large part in *This is Not a Snake*. He combines many aspects that indicate this idea. The installation's size creates an opportunity to use a variety of different materials, including his traditional materials. The size takes up a potential sixty-foot space. While the figure is six feet tall, it does not compare to the size of the snake. His stylization of having a large snake is the gravity of the Water is Life movement. He created this installation with reused materials from the manufactured world, especially for the snake. To grasp these products' gravity and demonstrate that they will be around long after we are gone. It is to engage the audience by saying that the snake elements are urgent factors for the Native community and should be for the nation. The broad concept of having a snake incorporated into manufactured products weighs heavily on the humans holding back the snake. It is a message of what humans are willing to take on.

Through scale and the life-size concept of the real issue in *This is Not a Snake* is the tone of activism, which is to become larger from the Native individual's perspective. One must join in union with others who share the same beliefs and unite to take on the monster that Luger previously mentions. Luger incorporates a small cutout at the bottom of militarized police that initiates this event's artistic form of activism.<sup>130</sup> He challenges the large scale to small scale.

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<sup>130</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, email message to Rachel Vera, July 2, 2020.

Luger intentionally makes the police smaller to gain a better grasp of psychological size. It is mental size, which depends on the role of others. The individuals who are large, compared to the militarized cutout who contradict their perceived roles in society. Luger creates a situation where the Water Protectors are larger and able to surpass the suppression by the militarized police, where the mind makes them mentally smaller, through their role. In this particular event with the Standing Rock protests, militarized police's involvement ultimately seemed like a low blow from the state via the oil industries. Meaning the destitution provided by the visually small cutout is not something that the Native community has not seen before.

The final element that coincides with the activism of scale is the length of the snake. The length of the snake consists of various elements that carry on behind the snake. However, the way Luger has the individuals at the head of the snake holding it back could also indicate or symbolize that this is only the beginning of defending their sacred lands and their belief in clean water. He does not place the humans at the midsection or the end of the tail for this very reason of facing things "head-on." However, the snake's tail's length could indicate the long road ahead for Native communities to address the oil industry and high corporate trade. To conclude this analysis, the result of the contrasting traditional and non-traditional materials creates this symbolic language of the movement, Native contemporary art and the importance of materials in Native art.

## **Results**

With all the elements combined to make this installation, how does this translate into a symbolic language for the Water is Life movement? The symbolic language depicted here is

activism joined with the materials. It refers to the use of figures or images to indicate concept. Through lengthy research symbolic language can be found in the installation and in the real participants of the Water is Life movement. He sets this up through the figures and the snake. The composition of the three together conducts this language of what happened at Standing Rock and what actions the Water Protectors took to stop the snake prophecy. The artwork itself is the language of this movement, and that itself creates this historical language. The Native contemporary style is also a part of its historical language. *This is Not a Snake* is a piece that appraises a time in Native history. As mentioned before, symbolic language can also be found among protestors. The Native youth alerted communities about the pipeline, therefore their concept of activism can be interpreted as a symbolic language of their culture.

According to Alexander Zaitchik in "On Native Grounds: Standing Rock's New Spirit of Protest," explains how the pipeline was the last straw for the youth due to their already unfortunate circumstances.

The pipeline was the last piece of a perfect storm in many indigenous communities. The tribes are rising against neglect, poverty, the feeling of being unwanted and unnoticed as U.S. citizens. We have no political power. That's why the company knew they could build here. Drugs and alcoholism are rampant. The Bakken oil boom brought the meth epidemic. Heroin. Pills. Some of the kids you see down at the front lines were raised in the system, in and out of jail. But down there, they're focused. They thrive. They're A leading the prayers and actions, releasing productive anger. I'm glad about the attention on the pipeline, but there's a broader struggle here every day.<sup>131</sup>

Referring back to Estes and Dhillon's quote, "a new world at first inhabits the shell of the old. In the colonial context, the old world came before, an Indigenous world that never went away, inhabiting the imprisoning shell of the new world, waiting to break free. The dream that became

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<sup>131</sup> Alexander Zaitchik, "On Native Grounds: Standing Rock's New Spirit of Protest," *The Baffler*, no. 34 (2017): 109.

one of the most massive Indigenous uprisings in recent history had been nurtured and carefully brought into existence to save the water. It started with the youth." Estes and Dhillon point out something important in the last sentence that is similar to Zaitchik. When they say it started with the youth, they mean that it was the younger generation that spread awareness of what was happening to their reservation. They did this by going door to door alerting those who believed that protecting water was quickly something they could stand behind as was incentivized within their culture. The youth, even under harsh circumstances, felt this was something they could help fight.

In the spring of 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe captured the work's attention as they took on global oil corporations and the federal government on the American Great Plains. IN 2015 Energy Transfer Partners (ETP), the company behind the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), announced plans to run an oil pipeline through the Standing Rock Sioux treaty lands. This pipeline would cross over sacred sites, gouge through the burial grounds, and pass under Lake Oahe, the reservoir that provides the reservation's primary drinking water source. More importantly, this pipeline would be built against the wishes of the Standing Rock Sioux tribal government. In early spring 2016, this conflict escalated as ETP began the physical construction of the pipeline. Looking for help, La Donna Barebull Allard, a tribal historian of the Standing Rock Sioux, invited supporters to camp on her lands along the Cannonball River and stand with her and the Standing Rock Sioux as they placed their bodies and prayers in the path of the pipeline. Incredibly, then thousands of people answered her call and traveled to Standing Rock Sioux territory.<sup>132</sup>

Elizabeth Ellis describes clearly from said quote what was going on in the world when Standing Rock Protests were about to take place. Due to undermining the wishes of the Sioux tribe, the oil industry began construction regardless. Even after having logical reasoning for not wanting it

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<sup>132</sup> Ellis, "Centering Sovereignty: How Standing Rock Changed the Conversation," In *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, 172.

built, they went ahead and began to dig. This historical context radiates in Luger's *This is Not a Snake*, *what* this movement did for the Standing Rock Sioux and the rest of the nation.

Elizabeth Ellis, in her chapter called "Centering Sovereignty, How Standing Rock Changed the Conversation," speaks heavily on how the events took place and what was happening globally.<sup>133</sup> After many lawsuits and court orders to halt the construction of DAPL, things took a turn when Trump took office. Referring back to Ellis' quote, "when President Trump took office, he promptly reversed the Obama administration's decisions. Trump's January 2017 executive order expediting the pipeline negated the Obama administration's mandate for complete environmental impact assessment and stifled the period of public comment."<sup>134</sup> Thus, they began drilling and digging again after Trump's executive order. As this matter continued, protests would draw in more water protectors from all over the nation. Ellis states, "Yet, the immense breadth of solidarity of the Standing Rock movement is wholly unprecedented in American history."<sup>135</sup> As she states, these events are a significant part of modern history; this goes to say Luger's *This is Not a Snake* and the materials incorporated will also be a part of the response to the Standing Rock protests.

Since the protests and executive orders, the text *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* written in 2019 could not incorporate the latest news of Standing Rock. As stated in a recent lecture, Luger spoke about recent Standing Rock activity and mentioned that, Standing Rock reservation did win their lawsuit in March 2020.<sup>136</sup> After four

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<sup>133</sup> Ellis, 172.

<sup>134</sup> Ellis, 173.

<sup>135</sup> Ellis, 175.

<sup>136</sup> Cannupa Hanska Luger, "Cannupa Hanska Luger Artist Lecture" (Installations and Sculpture with VASD Program, Center for Visual Art Metropolitan State University, Google Virtual Meet, August 26, 2020).

years of perseverance, they commemorated a legal win for the Native peoples. However, as of late 2020, talks have been circulating of reopening construction. *This is Not a Snake* does not incorporate the wins of the tribe, but it does associate with the perseverance of Native peoples to fight for the water and earth. The bright colors conveyed to the individuals holding back the snake could not have been represented better.

The colorful notion of the Native peoples expressed through their clothing is the final touches of this movement. The environment in jeopardy was to be translated as dark as the snake. Environmental protests are bright and vibrant much like the figures in regalia. This acute approach of contrasting colors within objects promotes this form of activism from the artist. In some way, Luger was just representing the traditional yet futuristic notions of his culture while also activating the Native community and distinctly portraying history in time for Native individuals. However, when choosing these materials, the individuals' colorfulness could also be interpreted as the hope when encountering a dark subject. Luger's motives to create the likes of a snake are apparent; however, it's not just his relative similarity to nature that has people wondering what is going on in this piece. His use of repurposed materials that correlate with the oil industry is what makes this piece so striking. One can gain from this reading how Cannupa Hanska Luger's installation *This is Not a Snake* was the outcome of the Water is Life movement. While the Native activism influences this work in Standing Rock, the movement itself has influenced several nations to protest environmental injustices.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, Cannupa Hanska Luger's work depicts voices awakening at the actions of "the monster," which he depicts as a snake. His style of merging Native contemporary art with contemporary Native issues invokes his activism. The snake is the pipeline that stems from the oil industries in Standing Rock, wrecking sacred burial ground, breaking treaties, and contaminating a large water source. The content that Luger communicates in this installation is what has changed the conversation of present Native issues. He associates inorganic materials with the oil industry to convey this particular NODAPL issue as it is now a part of Native history.

If one can look 20 years into the future, they would see that the materials in his installation reflect that of the happenings at Standing Rock. The snake's plasticity and metal materials reflect upon the nature of what the snake represents, which is the oil industry. The individuals dressed in crocheted and sewn regalia reflect upon the contemporary notions of Native individuals. He represents these individuals through non-traditional materials to create a time and a juncture with an inorganic snake. All these material elements provide this sensibility of an event taking place from a compilation of diverse materials, and the composed nature of the subjects in *This is Not a Snake*.

The 21st-century concepts of the Native artist in the Americas are now changing and initiating new conversations across the world around us on profound issues. Artists such as Luger, Watt, and Devine achieve this through material culture by associating materials used within the art with current events or historical events. Luger does this both ways in *This is Not a Snake* by taking a primordial prophecy from his culture and merging it with recent events. He does this by using traditional beadwork and sewing, creating a notion of Native futuristic regalia. On the other side, he contrasts the individuals wearing semi-traditional regalia to a snake that is



hard, rigid, and made up of buckets, tires, and barbed wire. All these materials were to be found along the protested landscape at Standing Rock.

Some may already know that this movement has been an eye-opener to viewers around the world. The movement has activated what would be seen as smaller voices, coming from minority groups, like the one fighting for the more significant causes, the preservation of purer innate ideals, and disposing of capitalist greed. *This is Not a Snake* is a result of all those controversies arranged into one installation by combining contrasting materials. It is also a product of the Water is Life movement as much as it is a product of artist activism. It promotes clean water as it promotes Native resistance to high corporate companies. *This is Not a Snake* acts as a window or eye-opener to the viewer as it is an opportunity to learn about Standing Rock's events through materiality. As a Standing Rock local, Luger reveals a part of his Native culture with a deep concern for the environment. With their fight for environmental concern comes profound Native injustice. What one can take from *This is Not a Snake* is a lesson on history, material cultural, environment, activism, but more than anything, lesson in morality.



**Figure 1.** Cannupa Hanska Luger, *This is not a Snake*, The *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, 2016.



**Figure 2.** Cannupa Hanska Luger, *This is not a Snake*, The *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, 2016.



**Figure 3.** Cannupa Hanska Luger, *This is not a Snake*, The *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, 2016.





**Figure 4.** Cannupa Hanska Luger, *This is not a Snake*, The *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, 2016.



**Figure 5.** Cannupa Hanska Luger, *This is not a Snake*, The *Lazy Stitch* Exhibition, 2016.



**Figure 6.** René Magritte, *This is Not a Pipe*, 1929. Oil on canvas.





**Figure 7.** Cannupa Hanska Luger, *This is Not a Snake, Water Line: A Creative Exchange Exhibit*, 2017.

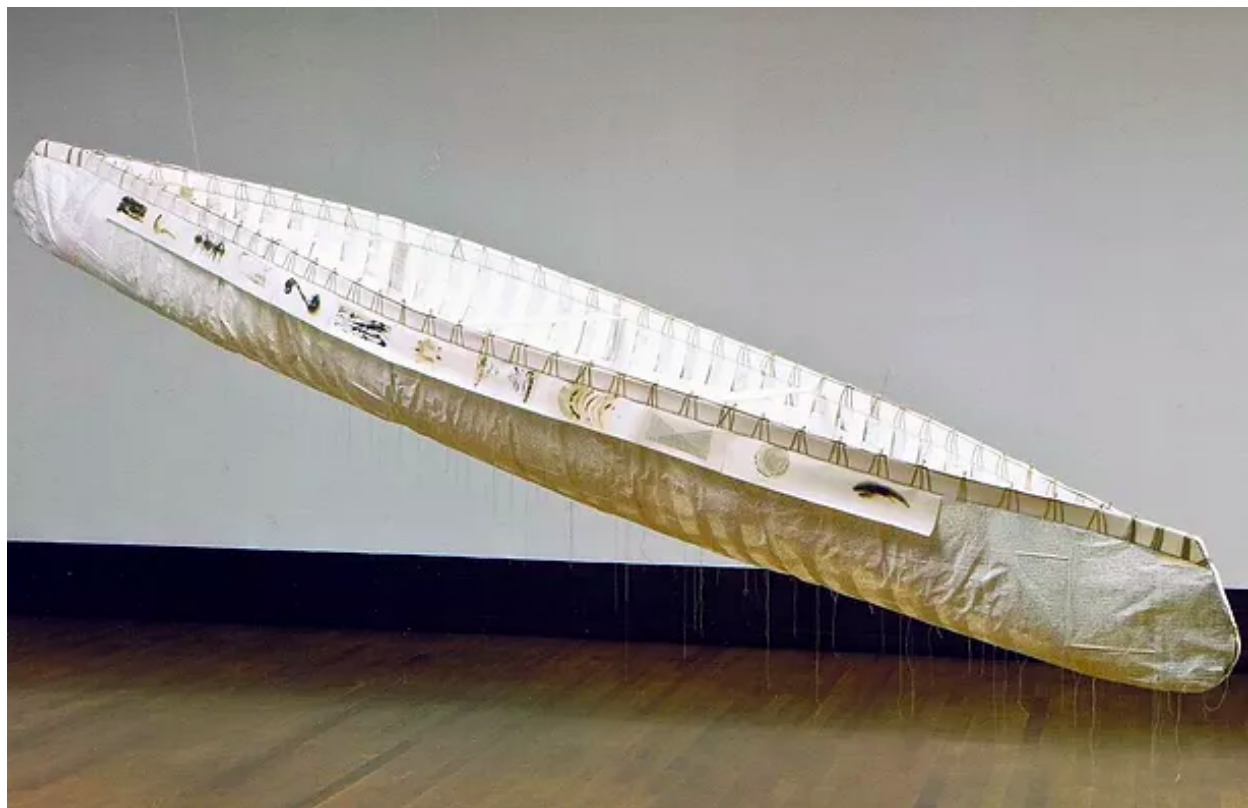




**Figure 8.** Merritt Johnson, *Open Container*, Sculpture, 2014-2016.



**Figure 9.** Marie Watt, *Ladder: Ladder* (2004). Reclaimed wool blankets, satin bindings, thread, 13 x 10 in.



**Figure 10.** Bonnie Devine, *Canoe*, 2003. Graphite and tar on paper, machine sewn with cotton thread, secured by hand with twine and beads, 16 ft. long.

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