



STATE OF CERAMICS | February 27, 2021

Cannupa Hanska Luger

Artist as Social Engineer

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1206 Maple Ave., #540 – Los Angeles | [www.a-bprojects.com](http://www.a-bprojects.com) | [@a\\_bprojects](https://twitter.com/a_bprojects) | [admin@a-bprojects.com](mailto:admin@a-bprojects.com)

#### **IN ATTENDANCE:**

Cannupa Hanska Luger, Nicole Seisler, Kenna Dworsky, Jackie Rines, Christina Spellman, Sarah Hayashi, Qwist Joseph, Rosie Brand, Kate Roberts, Teal Stannard, Ariel Gout, Iliana Papadimitriou, Magdolene Dykstra, Stacy Jo Scott, Claire Loder, Samuel Jernigan, David Kruk, Arijit Bhattacharyya, Julia Schuster, Jasmine Baetz, Sarah Fraser, Ilana Crispi, Suzanne Carte, Neha Kudchadkar, Ashwini Bhat, Casey Whittier, Alison Ragguette, S. Lantz, Josh Cloud, Erik Scollon, Andrea Nhuch, Cathy Lu, Phoebe Deutsch, Alyson Iwamoto, Claire Loder, Sarah Kelly, Jeannine Shinoda, Delaney Keshena

#### **QUESTIONS FROM CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER:**

- How can institutions work to maintain culture as opposed to preserving culture?
- What does the maintenance of culture look like? How do we actively involve as many voices as possible in that pursuit, creating participation without possession?
- Is the preservation, or sequestering of culture, a violent act?
- What is difference (or is there a difference) between collaboration, cooperation, participation, facilitation? Who owns an artwork that is collectively made? Is ownership important?
- Ceramics has a long history of collective making. Where is this tradition still visible? How has this tradition changed in the contemporary moment?
- Collective making is arguably one of the most important ceramic traditions to maintain. Do you agree? Which other traditions fuel inclusivity? Are there exclusionary traditions being maintained?

#### **INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT FROM CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER (SUMMARIZED BY A-B PROJECTS ASSISTANT KENNA DWORSKY):**

In a world polarized politically, economically, racially, and sexually we are forced to question our trust. We need one another now more than ever and our trust is the mortar that binds us. But how do we see eye to eye with human groups we don't trust? Enter the artist. If we can subvert the idea art is an object, a noun, then we can reinstate the truth that art is a verb, an action. By developing processes that include society as a medium the act of making, we embed our communities in the outcomes and histories of those processes. People who may not typically engage with one another—whether because of differences or distances—become

connected and create work together. In the field of ceramics, with its deep history of collective making, this is a particularly important tradition and contemporary approach for a more inclusive understanding of our past and future.

Cannupa began the discussion by leading us through his family lineage and ancestry, detailing the connection to riverways on both sides of his family. On his father's side, he is of Lakota decent, and was born in Standing Rock, right by the Missouri River. Cannupa defines where he lives, both physically and ancestrally, as a place of "flow." It is immediately clear that Cannupa is deeply connected to and affected by the physical space he inhabits; this is the tone that is set before Cannupa welcomes us to his studio.

The overarching theme of the discussion is social practice, as it relates to ceramic history, medium in general, and "Art" as a noun and not a verb. Cannupa's ancestors have a rich ceramic history - living along the Missouri River, the clay deposits are vast and the material is embedded in the culture of those who have lived in this region for hundreds of years. This history of knowledge and engagement was threatened by population decimation that resulted from smallpox; Cannupa himself wasn't introduced to clay as a medium until his time in college in New Mexico. Having come into school as a painter, Cannupa's understanding of immediate gratification was drastically challenged by clay as a material. He feels that this inherent nurturing of patience and experience of loss and failure embedded in working with clay made him a better person.

Another component of any ceramic practice that must be considered in the larger conversation about social responsibility is permanence — all fired, ceramic objects we create will outlive us. Cannupa notes that this has contributed to a prioritization of the preservation of culture as opposed to the maintenance of culture. Preservation of a culture inherently involves "killing" said culture — the only way to preserve something is through denoting it as a relic, or as a remnant of something passed. Cannupa recalled the ubiquitous experience of seeing thousands of years of Native American art relegated to a dimly lit museum basement, crammed together on one floor. This treatment suggests that this culture is something of the past, and the justification for this treatment is "preservation." The reality is that the work is othered and kept in the dark. Instead of aiming to *preserve*, we should acknowledge that as humans we are constantly in flux. Culture changes and we adapt; it is our greatest power as a species. Cannupa feels that xenophobia is perpetuated or fueled by the idea that culture should be preserved. If we are in the process collectively of *maintaining* culture, it encourages sharing, interest, mutual respect, and convergence of past/present/future.

Cannupa feels that ceramics is one area suited to not only affirming the existence of culture, but to call attention to the ongoing, intergenerational contributions of Native American tribes to the field of art. His involvement in social practice arose from necessity in response to the Dakota Access Pipeline — he came up with a way to make a mirrored shield and made a short video to share on social media with instructions for how to make them and where to send them so that they could be redistributed on the front lines. This project was a means for one individual to make an impact and actively fight alongside those on the frontlines. These shields would not only create protection but would also reflect the menacing image of officers armed

with riot gear. Moreover, we all need water; the reflectiveness of the shield was intended to also remind the police that they, too, need water.

Creating art in this way that prioritizes action. An individual's capacity for to create impact has shifted the way Cannupa thinks about making work. His next project was in response to missing indigenous women in Canada, who were estimated to be 4,096 — he felt that this matricide was a response to dehumanization, and sought to humanize these missing women through rolling 4,096 beads. This repeated process of making acted as a mantra, "This is already too many;" this process and this thought became the work. Cannupa made another short video to share so that people might experience this same piece of art; many individuals wrote letters detailing their experience of making these beads, which amassed quickly with the help of strangers across the country. Cannupa ultimately fired these beads, which he now regrets. The firing of these objects seemed to reinstate the importance of a product as opposed to the experience, and now when the work is installed, he fears that the objects themselves may be viewed with greater value than the lives they represent.

Subsequently, Cannupa wanted his next project, "Something to Hold Onto," which opens in May of 2021, to be unfired. It is simply a piece of clay that can be squeezed in one's hand; the action of squeezing creates the void of something to hold onto. The work comes from a dataset of bodies found along the US and Mexico border that will be exhibited once before being taken to the border and returned to the earth. The process of making and sharing something allows art to become a verb as opposed to a noun — the maker can have ownership of the work, without having to possess it. This concept is central to Cannupa's understanding of social practice, and he opened the discussion to the group after describing this experience.

### **SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION (WRITTEN BY A-B PROJECTS ASSISTANT KENNA DWORSKY):**

The discussion began with an attempt to understand and explicate the difference between preservation and maintenance of culture. It was noted that not only do Western cultures seek to preserve Indigenous and non-Western cultures, this is also something they do to themselves. This desire to preserve, Cannupa noted, is even embedded in our noun-heavy language. This aspect of the English language seems inherently static and leads to compartmentalization, whereas Indigenous languages are verb-heavy and action centric. In Western education, we learn about things, including culture, in a way that implies fixity and permanence. Ideas are introduced as concrete instead of in flux. What kind of effect does this outlook have on our society? What would an outlook that accounts for change and growth do to our understanding of culture? Perhaps "this is the way we've always done it" no longer suffices as an explanation or justification for how we engage with culture; we are a global society and need to reassess our methods of engagement and understanding.

Direct dialogue and communication seem essential to maintaining culture. Sharing and approaching each other with curiosity will inevitably lead to deepened understanding. Clay is a responsive material — it is chemically made from different material reactions, it can be

embedded with the physical trace of the maker, and frequently ceramic objects are meant to be engaged with. Does this material lend itself to a deeper understanding of fluidity and change?

Viewing culture as something that should be maintained as opposed to preserved necessitates engagement with the realities and experiences of all individuals (not those on the 'inside' or the 'outside') — how do we facilitate this and make it part of our social practice? For Cannupa, this entails direct and consistent engagement with his community. Social practice, for him, is only meaningful insofar as it is something his community wants to exist alongside and engage with. The more we sought to define culture for ourselves as individuals and as a group, the more we realized the impossibility of the task. Culture is not rigid and defined; it is malleable and fluid. Neatly describing and encapsulating one's culture is an act of privilege that many if not most individuals cannot access. Moreover, even the aspects of culture that seem fixed usually have a much more tangled, transcultural origin. All of these various forces seem to push culture outside of the realm of objectification. Our task, then, becomes figuring out how culture can be engaged with outside of these traditional, clean, object-based parameters. Cannupa believes that ultimately the acknowledgment of culture's fluidity will become our strength as individuals and as a society.