

# Cannupa Hanska Luger

## ENGAGING COMMUNITY

by Heidi McKenzie

Cannupa Hanska Luger was born on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota in 1979. One year prior, it became legal to practice Indigenous knowledge traditions in the US.<sup>1</sup> Luger was immersed in his Indigenous heritage his entire life. He is an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold and is of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota heritage, and also has maternal and paternal grandparents of Norwegian and German ancestry. Luger maintains that his mixed ethnicity was never a factor in his lived experience, “I grew up as a real Indian cowboy.”<sup>2</sup> Luger spent his summers with his father on the ranch in North Dakota. During the school year, he lived with his mother, an artist, who moved her five children to Phoenix, Arizona. She was living proof to Luger that making a living as an artist is possible.

### Becoming Involved in Ceramics

Luger started as a two-dimensional visual artist at the Institute of American Indian Arts in 2006. He laughs when he recalls an instructor’s criticism, “When are you gonna push some paint?” When he enrolled in ceramics, it was love at first sight. His instinct was that clay was an opportunity to start from ground zero. He talks about clay as a “she” with whom he collaborates. He credits his instructor, Karita Coffey, with giving him the chance to play, create, fail, and try again. Coffey gave Luger a table at the back of the classroom, realizing that he would learn more from the clay itself than her curriculum. And he did.

I believe it’s impossible to address Luger’s work without first discussing some of his core values. He is adamant that art is a



verb, not a noun, where the beauty lies in the process of creation. He views the world in four dimensions: time, space, land, and histories (with an emphasis on stories). He believes in the power of oral traditions of storytelling that change with the storyteller, explaining, “mutation is life, and how we all got to where we’re at.” Luger believes that the Western world’s emphasis on the individual genius is a myth. Furthermore, that “US rugged individualism is so celebrated that it undermines a blatant honesty—that humanity has never done anything of significant value alone.” Luger leans into the narrative that we need each other. He uses the medium required to communicate his message—which is by no means restricted to ceramics.

### Engagement with Social Practice

At Standing Rock in 2016, Luger put a call out through social media that mobilized an estimated 1000 people to create “mirror shields” that served in the resistance to the North Dakota Pipeline. Together, the front-line “water protectors” literally reflected the militancy of the anti-protesters in an attempt to create a divide that did not separate the two sides, rather reaffirmed the value of water versus the perceived need for oil. The *Mirror Shield Project* was Luger’s first engagement with social practice; however, at the time, Luger had no idea what that term meant, because to him, “all art is social practice.”

Luger is currently working with two buckets of ideas, i.e. series, around social practice: *Counting Coup* and *Future Ancestral Technologies*. Luger describes the space he inhabits as “the skin of the bubble,” that is, living in the periphery, where no place really feels like home. The liminality of his sense of home underpins both these series. *Counting Coup* references the North American Plains Indians’ warrior tradition that is considered to be the highest of honors. In this practice, one approaches an enemy, face to face, touches them, demonstrates a lack of fear, declares his or her identity, and leaves without bloodshed. Luger points out that through this act, identity takes on a currency. This allows him to explore the complex social inequities within the paradigm of Indian relationship with Western culture. *Counting Coup* is also literally about quantifying the generally incomprehensible and tragic numbers of Indigenous victims of violence. The series seeks to humanize data sets of numbers into the tangible through art and action.

### Creating the Unthinkable with Community

My first encounter with Luger’s work was chilling. I hadn’t heard of him. I was at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, Canada, and the lobby installation stopped me in my tracks: a 14-foot by 14-foot mobile hanging of what I now know to be nearly 4000 two-inch beads that depicted, in pixel-like proportion, the image of a young woman in monochrome. The installation, titled *Every One*, started in Luger’s studio. After three days of working on hand making beads by himself in his studio, he realized he would need many hands to realize his vision for this piece. This social collaboration in the raw-clay stage became the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Queer and Trans Relatives Bead Project (MMIWQT Bead Project). Each bead represents the life of a missing or murdered Indigenous girl or woman in Canada and the US as reported



1 Cannupa Hanska Luger’s solo exhibition “New Myth” at the Garth Greenan Gallery. 2 Works in progress at the Archie Bray Foundation for the New Myth exhibition. 3 *Lost*, 4 ft. 8 in. (1.5 m) in length, ceramic, mixed media, 2021. 1, 3 Courtesy of the Garth Greenan Gallery.



4 MMIWQT Bead Project (Every One) (detail of social collaboration to make beads), 2018. Photo: Robert Mesa, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. 5 MMIWQT Bead Project (Every One) (detail), ceramic beads, ink, 2018. Photo: LeRoy Grafe, Institute of American Indian Arts. 6 MMIWQT Bead Project (Every One) with the Red Shawl Solidarity Society prayer action at the Institute of American Indian Arts. 7 Cannupa Hanska Luger stringing beads for MMIWQT Bead Project (Every One). 8 MMIWQT Every One, 15 ft. (4.6 m) in width, 4000+ ceramic beads, social collaboration, ink, 2018. Courtesy of UCCS Galleries of Contemporary Art.



by 2016. The call for participation went out to the US and Canada, and Luger received enough for the *Every One* installation from participants within two months. Luger then fired, stained in ink, and strung together the work, which features the photograph *Sister* (2016) by Kaska Dena and Jewish photographer Kali Spitzer.

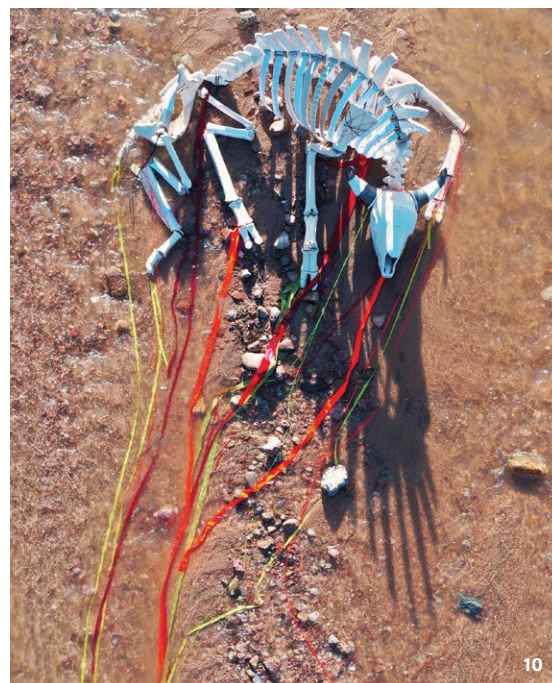
This past spring, Luger worked with a team to realize the piece titled *Something to Hold Onto*. The work was comprised of over 9000+ unfired “fists” of clay, each with a hole through the middle so that they could be strung up in 15-foot strands that formed a labyrinth—a symbol of the cycle and trials of life that one must travel through in order to reach the portal into the next world.

The number of clay fists that comprise *Something to Hold Onto* relates to the number of Indigenous Mexican and Central American bodies found at the US/Mexico border in the past 20 years: 7209. The actual number is unfathomable. The final installation was constructed with over 9000 unfired fist beads, nearly two tons of clay. Luger makes real the unthinkable and underlines the US ethos of subjugation vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples. The work was exhibited at the Mesa Contemporary Art Museum in Mesa, Arizona, from May to August 2021. It was subsequently laid out on the ground in the Tohono desert, a militarized gray zone that dissects multiple Indigenous Peoples’ lands, and serves as a geo-political natural survival of the fittest. Laid out in single file, the beads measured approximately 2650 feet. Ultimately the clay dissolved and returned to the earth.

### Building Bridges to Positive Futures

*Future Ancestral Technologies* is the other social-practice bucket in which Luger creates. This series draws heavily on science fiction as inspiration. It also references Luger’s sense of longing to belong. He believes that the Western world has mythologized the Indian as something in the past, a caricature, “relegated to the dimly lit rooms of museums.” He believes that “not being able to see ourselves as part of the present or the future is contributing to the current mental-health, addiction, and suicide crisis that plagues so many Indigenous communities.” Luger wants to hold space for young Indigenous People to see their ancient technologies as contributing to both the present and the future: his thesis is that the green sustainability movements have co-opted Indigenous ancient technologies using different mechanisms. Furthermore, this remains unacknowledged by the West. By creating *Future Ancestral Technologies*, Luger wants to build bridges with paths to positive futures. He doesn’t see himself as truly being able to cross over those paths, as a mixed-race artist living within marginal spaces. But he does believe that social-engagement work hones the responsibility and accountability of community.

Luger recently completed an artist residency at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. For his closing exhibition, “New Myth,” he incorporated a series of sci-fi Indigenous regalia donned by “new monsters, to transmit old stories.” Luger asserts that every culture has its own monsters, and



9 (Be)Longing, approximately 6 ft. 7 in. (2 m) in diameter, ceramic, steel, ribbon, fiber, video, 2019. Photo: Kate Russell Photography. 10 (Be)Longing (video still), 2019. 11 *Something To Hold Onto*, call to action for “The Body, The Object, The Other,” Craft Contemporary Clay Biennial, Los Angeles, California, 2020. Courtesy of Craft Contemporary. 12 *Something To Hold Onto* (detail of unfired clay beads, made using social collaboration), 2021. 13, 14 *Something To Hold Onto*, approximately 42 ft. (12.8 m) in width, immersive installation, social collaboration, 9000+ unfired clay beads, 2021.

with these works, he is exhibiting his present, while simultaneously making reference to both the past and the future. He explains that the Indigenous sense of time and space is an elliptical spiral, unlike the Western ethos of a linear, cause-and-effect, time-space continuum. The other important aspect to the *Future Ancestral Technology* series is the myth making, or rather the mutation of myths passed down from generation to generation and adapted by the storytellers, who add pieces of themselves into the story. Luger feels that myth is an important component in the communication of technologies that our current scientific community has completely discounted.

### Fostering Inclusion

Luger maintains that his studio practice feeds his social-justice practice. His multimedia work *Belonging* is a life-sized buffalo sculpture. The sculpture was placed in a riverbed and documented in video with a voiceover of an Indigenous creation myth: “The land is, the ocean is, the sky is, the earth is, and long before we are, but we are the living things, and in this rhythm is our place not separate but belonging to something much greater than any single beat . . . There is a story of belonging that began as a blood clot drying on the grass on the land . . .” *Belonging*, at its core, seeks to convey Western society’s attempt to annihilate both the buffalo and the Indigenous Peoples themselves, the livelihoods and spirits of the two, human and non-human, which Luger believes are irreversibly intertwined. Luger, himself descendant of the “dripping earth” clans, a buffalo People, expresses guilt over having survived as a species, while tens of millions of buffalo experienced genocide at the hands of the white settler, and bits and pieces of the buffalo were extracted and commodified into Western consumer products.

Luger has been working on a series of slip-cast, handbuilt ceramic and multimedia buffalo skulls. He calls his series *Emergent*,

and envisions each piece emerging from the earth, resurrected. One of these sculptures is included in the 2022 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) Annual exhibition, also titled “Belonging,” in Sacramento, California. The curator, Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy, included Luger as one of the five invited artists. Vizcarrondo-Laboy’s vision seems to sum up the ethos of Luger’s modus operandi as an artist. She states, “the exhibition, *Belonging*, will showcase the coded ways in which we navigate inhospitable environments and push back against oppressive systems that deny belonging, [as well as] the role of community in fostering inclusion.”<sup>3</sup>

After having spent time with Cannupa Hanska Luger, and listened to his message, I believe that Luger is a visionary artist writ large. He is cultivating future opportunities to recreate ways in which his ancestors engaged with clay—ways that were lost due to the flooding of 40 percent of his People’s land due to the large dam projects in the 1940s and 1950s. He plans to build fire pits, an earth lodge, and an educational center for Indigenous ancestral ceramics, and to travel to study the remnants of his Peoples’ ancient pots scattered in museums around the world. He has been awarded both the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship at the National Museum of the American Indian and the Centre for Craft Research Fellowship for this multi-year initiative. Luger calls this new project *A Way Home*.

**the author** Heidi McKenzie is an artist, author, and curator living in Toronto, Canada. Learn more at [www.heidimckenzie.ca](http://www.heidimckenzie.ca).

1 The American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed in Congress in 1978.

2 All quotes by Cannupa Hanska Luger are from an interview with the author on October 22, 2021 or from Cannupa’s talk hosted by the Archie Bray Foundation on September 20, 2021.

3 As cited by Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy during her presentation at NCECA’s Cultivating Community Symposium on October 13th, 2021.



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