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Cannupa Hanska Luger by Qingyuan
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Interview : Cannupa Hanska Luger by Qingyuan Deng

Building new histories against the old.

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Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Attrition*, 2024, cast steel. Public Art Fund at City Hall Park, New York City. Photo by Nicholas Knight. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, New York.

In his sculptural practice, Cannupa Hanska Luger creates speculative narratives with retrieved traces of Indigeneity burdened by history. Often working with steel, a resource important to westward expansion in the United States, Luger makes

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sculptures that interweave genocide and ecological collapse with the history of capital. The repressed past is conjured into the present, troubling contemporary logics of settler-colonialism. His sculpture, evoking inaccessible archives, gestures toward repair rooted in relations of similitude. Often installing his sculptures in communal sites with histories of both exclusion and emancipation, Luger creatively meditates on what has been made absent.

Born and partially raised on the Standing Rock Reservation, Luger's deep affection for the land that sustains centuries of Indigenous epistemology and metaphysics led to a decision to produce monumental sculptures that narrate the violent transformation of social institutions in North America for the past four hundred years. Luger's archival impulse often results in works concerned with the aftermath of settler elimination of bison, particularly the use of bison bones, which were often reappropriated as a fertilizer in early steel production. Working through the traumas of an extractive economy, Luger renews the social function of large-scale sculpture with spirits of activism and dissent.

The following interview was prompted by Luger's exhibition *Attrition* in New York City's City Hall Park, organized by the Public Art Fund. *Attrition* is a larger-than-life, black, steel skeleton of a bison. Half of the sculpture is underneath the soil, and the visible half is shielded by grass native to Manhattan. *Attrition* is a haunting reminder of New York's Indigenous past and the city's history of dispossession and displacement. Work from Luger's Mirror Shield Project (2016–present) is also currently on view at the Swiss Institute.

Qingyuan Deng I want to start with the idea of geography. You work from New Mexico and are from North Dakota. You're constantly thinking about the history of Indigenous people who have inhabited that land and how different geographies are connected even though they are physically separated. Now, you are presenting a work that thinks about a very specific site in New York City and the Indigenous history attached to that site.

Cannupa Hanska Luger Different geographies are connected because they are physically. There is a learned trait in our society to compartmentalize everything, dissociate from violence, and move toward innocence. I want to challenge that. The lines dividing where one region ends and another begins are fuzzy. My skeleton sculpture is an exploration of histories that have emerged from or taken place somewhere else, while recognizing that what happens to someone else affects us all.

I'm from the Northern Plains. I'm a Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribal member. The whole Midwest is customarily bison country, which runs across geopolitical and state borders. It was impossible for the Midwest to be parceled up and sectioned with buffalo on the land. My people customarily were buffalo people, entangled with a pact we had made with bison. I think about them as an extension of the land. They were annihilated because the United States wanted to clear the land for development.



Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Attrition*, 2024, cast steel. Public Art Fund at City Hall Park, New York City. Photo by Nicholas Knight. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, New York.

QD The idea of distance is fascinating. You made the sculpture in New Mexico and are presenting it in New York City. You are installing a monument that is not entirely specific to the geographies of bison country. How do you maintain a critical distance to your historical references?

CHL Actually, there were entire breeds of bison living in Canada and in Alaska. In New Mexico, the Pueblo people have sustained traditions of buffalo dances. Essentially, buffalos were everywhere on this continent, but we don't really understand the scale of it due to the disassociation of time and space. Was there ever a bison on the island of Manhattan? I don't know. It would be a challenging feat to cross the Hudson. Is it possible? Absolutely. Most likely there were isolated populations that would make their way into the East regionally, and we just don't have that knowledge. My practice aims to allow histories of what could have been more-than-human kin to reemerge in our historical record.

QD Your practice revolves around challenging the production of historical records because historical records form knowledge, which in turn shapes our perception of reality. You are thinking about both what is possible and what was left outside history. Could we talk about the role of time in your practice?

CHL In most other non-Western cultures across the globe, the linearity of time is merely consequential, only relative to our immediate experience. As an elemental force in the world, time is spherical and emanates in every direction. The omission of histories is a way to manipulate time and force a population to not understand the totality of its history. My intervention wants to make sure the public is being accountable to the future, as we are borrowing time from future generations and indebted to the past. Specifically, part of my lineage survived the war of attrition. I do have survivor guilt. I survived the destruction of a biological network that is much older than the borders we've developed since.



Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Attrition*, 2024, cast steel. Public Art Fund at City Hall Park, New York City. Photo by Nicholas Knight. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, New York.

QD I also like how you describe the killing of bison as an attrition warfare and a genocide.

CHL Every human-made law is proof that we have failed taking care of one another. This is why we need to use more-than-human terminologies to amplify the agency of nonhuman species. I use objects to give dignity to oral traditions omitted from official history and form contradictory narratives to counter current historical records.

QD Inviting contradiction to the process of knowledge production feels essential to your practice. How do you relate that to your interest in social-engagement projects, such as hosting bison beading workshops? You said you never quite know what you will do with those beads until the very last moment. I like the unknowability.

CHL I like that it takes a lot of effort to do socially engaged projects, as all these projects I do are often grassroots and unstructured in nature. They allow me to refocus on the community. When I am in the studio, I am not with my family and my community. How much does that cost? These participatory projects mold me back to pay attention to acts of exchange that are not monetary and from a place of altruism.

“I have faith that my efforts made in preserving historical records and intergenerational knowledges will proliferate and impact the collective.”

— Cannupa Hanska Luger

QD Elite cultural institutions still collect actual objects rather than participatory projects. These institutions are also defined by their history of excluding Indigenous art. How do you assert Indigenous epistemology within an institutional context?

CHL I am constantly reminded of the hypocrisy of my life and practice, given my acceptance into these spaces. Still, I understand it is not about me. I am playing the rigged game of an art market because I want to manipulate the system, which is just a set of repeated processes that you can push and bend. I have faith that my efforts made in preserving historical records and intergenerational knowledges will proliferate and impact the collective. Museums will preserve my works far greater than I will, as they will value my works as objects of economic value, more than just byproducts of my art. My works will become points of reference for future generations to come. I am looking beyond expectations of the now and the concerns of a singular artist or curator.



Installation view of Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Mirror Shields*, 2024, MDF board, reflective mylar, paracord, and social collaboration. Swiss Institute, New York City. Courtesy of Swiss Institute.

QD I like what you said about obligation to future generations. A lot of your works are speculative fictions, despite historical references. The future is literally embodied in your works, from materials to installation methodology.

CHL My works are make-believes. I present them as three-dimensional sculptures that require spatial navigation and take up space. In a sense, where my sculptures stand becomes Indigenous land, which is a slow and inevitable way to get land back. My work imagines possibilities that are not yet available. The United States loves its freedom, but it's a freedom that you will fight tooth and nail for, and it's a freedom to choose between binaries. I am interested in recognizing a freedom that we don't fully comprehend yet, a freedom beyond national boundaries, a freedom that asks us to submit to the will of something much larger, perhaps the biological system itself.

QD I like that you are describing a will to inhabit another world or another history where we don't have to constantly repair.

CHL I want to live in a world where we don't have to repair anything. The preservation model assumes removing human activity and allowing nature to come back to equilibrium. However, we have always been part of nature. To maintain a separation between the two is a losing combat. Also, preservation often annihilates possibilities of development and redevelopment. The same goes for museums and institutions. You do not become expert on the cultural other by sequestering an object in glass and putting it on a shelf. You have to learn to live with the culture itself.

Cannupa Hanska Luger: *Attrition is on view at City Hall Park in New York City until November 17; Luger's work can also be seen in the group exhibition Energies at the Swiss Institute in New York City until January 5.*