

IN UNION: In Conversation

Monika Wührer of Open Source Gallery posed some questions to Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds & Keith Christensen

Monika Wührer: I met Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds at his MoMA PS1 show and we have exchanged ideas since then. The collaboration concept with Keith Christensen came up and he was set that he wanted to equally share space for the artwork at the gallery. This idea for IN UNION really is so important for both artists.

MW: So where is the idea for IN UNION rooted?

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: For me the project is rooted in my parents' diligent efforts to support their family via many difficult years of labor working in a Wichita, Kansas aircraft factory. The Beech Aircraft labor union of aerospace workers played a productive role in aiding the six children's survival through urban poverty.

Keith Christensen: I felt it started with a conversation we had together when Edgar visited where I live in Minneapolis in 2021. We went to George Floyd Square, where the infamous police murder happened. It has become a site honoring the man and a place to witness. On that day it was a place where many dynamic, visual voices were crying out. There were sculptures, murals, and portraits of George Floyd. Also many posters, signs, and messages with laments and demands. Edgar said, "This is the place for real art, not in the museums." Yeah, we both connected with the street scene and protests.

As friends and artists we

have shared our lives and ideas for a long time. His first work that I knew of was his assertion that Natives weren't mascots but real people ("WE DON'T WANT INDIANS, JUST THEIR NAMES, MASCOTS..."). It felt strong and loud. It's always been personal to him, and he feels responsible for his people. His practice is formed and inspired by his culture. He has done an immense amount of historical research and has had experiences with Indigenous people all over the world. His work is based on it.

The project developed after we talked about our own work and what we felt was happening. He came around to some of the subject matter of the 1934 strike that I have been working with for a long time. He was intrigued to know that some of the strikers were Indigenous. He told me, "Natives weren't included in anything." So he made the prints about strike participants Holstein and Rainbolt. He knew my figurative work and portraits and suggested we do a collaboration. I happily agreed. I had done portraits of some of the 1934 strikers earlier, so it was appealing for me to do it. I think the treatment of my work's background, what I call the natural elements of fire, land, water, sky, aligned with his view of the world. He has shared often his tribal culture and values that are connected



Keith Christensen, *Game Turn* board game installation at the East Side Freedom Library, St. Paul, MN, 2017.

Monika Wührer is an international artist and educator, originally from Austria. Monika currently serves as the Executive Director of Open Source Gallery.

with nature. I feel that social revolution is a natural act, with all the organic power that it implies. Edgar began to reflect on the strike and the idea grew to include his own experience of coming from a union family. His father and mother were both in IAM, the union for Beech Aircraft Corporation. He suggested the idea of IN UNION. After some discussions I felt we should connect the

project also to current events. Our mutual interest in history is to show its relevance to the present. The 1934 strike has many lessons for today. It's not a template but an affirmation that people who work together can make change happen. Edgar reached out to you and the Open Source Gallery and suggested the project. You graciously invited us to do it.

IN UNION is about solidarity. It is also about this collaboration and connection. We worked together as very distinct individuals with very different artistic vocabularies. We began the work because we want to say something together about history, lived experience, and what we advocate.

The history of the 1934 strike provides unique evidence of Native participation in social change. This is with the understanding that Indigenous people have been long overlooked and marginalized. These strikers, however, demonstrate the inherent potential of all people. Their involvement in solidarity with others made change. These guys shared power and used it to transform their world.

This project also involves the personal side of growing up in a union family. A child grows to be an adult within a family that needs financial support. The union can provide the security an employer can't because it is formed by those who are in a similar situation. I call it empathy and solidarity. The union helped the family gain agency. It became a participation space where all members were able to live and work together.

And finally this project is about what can be. The



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Standing Rock Awakens the World* (detail), 2019. 24 primary mono prints on paper, 90 x 176 in.

water protectors movement is expressing the solidarity of Natives with supporters in order to defend the environment in which we live. Climate change is man made and happening. It needs to be addressed or we all die. As artists we embrace the spirit of democratic, collective action to make this world work better. We support the Native-led efforts to share control of the world and not be ruled by those motivated only by profit.

MW: I have heard many very personal and powerful stories about union involvement from both of you during the meetings. Can you talk a bit about the significance of the personal stories? What are your personal experiences with unions?

EHoB: Unions gave respect to all members and particularly members of color who carefully treaded within a hostile society. My mother told me stories of how the aircraft plant mandated that African-American employees could only hold positions which were detailed to cleaning restrooms or collecting garbage in the facility. Margaret Heap of Birds, my mother and union shop steward, had to battle to gain fairness for these workers as their representative. We resided in a segregated district of Wichita, and those African-American co-workers became cherished family friends.

KC: I grew up in a union household in Rochester, Minnesota. I was one of six children. My dad was a letter carrier. Mom was a nurse. We weren't poor but money was always tight. We didn't travel or have nice things. The close friends of the family were the Rolstads who

were also union people. They were Catholics, and we were Presbyterians. Neighborhoods and schools separated us by religion. The Rolstads were our comfort zone in the class-conscious, Mayo Clinic-dominated town. I remember my parents' fears during the great Postal Service Strike of 1970. It was the largest walkout ever against the federal government. Nixon vowed to crush it. That didn't happen; they won the strike. That win improved work conditions dramatically and families had more take-home pay. Later I became a union member when I taught at a university. And I collaborated on the St. Paul Labor History Mural commissioned by the local AFL-CIO. Dad came to the opening.

MW: How much were Native workers involved in the 1934 Truckers' Strike?

KC: The backgrounds of both of the figures we know, Emanuel (Hap) Holstein and Ray Rainbolt, are obscure. It was a challenge finding photographs and information about them. That made it exciting to creatively, artistically construct and forefront something of their overlooked lives and influence. They both were well known by the strikers, and there are many book references about them. They both represented how the rank and file workers were passionate and committed to the success of the strike. Both showed their bravery and sacrifice. Their involvement was also a testament to the inclusiveness of the strikers. It was a time of a lot of racial prejudice generally and so the acceptance of the Native workers shows that there was a culture that embraced diversity. They needed, respected, and relied on each other. Holstein and Rainbolt were part of the whole and equal to the others.

MW: A union is in some ways a political community, organized by law and politics. But clearly the community is part of a union. How do you see community and how do you see your involvement?

EHoB: I find the metaphor of a labor union to be very similar to the tribal template of responsibility towards

youth and elders, community at large must be served first. In a United States contemporary society the individual and one's quest for wealth is the focus of life. In the tribal world that singular American perspective does not carry the day. It is our collective lives and values which are enriching for all. As a leader of the Traditional Cheyenne Elk Warrior Society I live my days with the tenets that honor the collective.

KC: My own art practice and activities are grounded in my community involvement. I have used my design skills to help the East Side Freedom Library in St. Paul. It is a local non-profit organization whose mission is to promote solidarity, social justice, and equity. I organized a get out the vote campaign. I also created personal protest posters on issues including racism, immigration, and climate policies. Many were used in numerous demonstrations and posted in neighborhoods as well as on social media. I continue to be active with the Remember 1934 collective that commemorates the Minneapolis strike.

Can you talk a bit about how you connected with the water protectors?

EHoB: Our Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes supported the Standing Rock camp and its citizens by providing bison meat from our tribal herd. We felt committed to advancing rights for this Earth as evidenced in our own ceremonial practice and the efforts of Standing Rock peoples. Water is at the center of tribal renewal and perseverance, thus water protection is and always will be a main task for the Indigenous.

KC: I was able to tie in with the water protectors in large part from knowing John Kim who is an activist, educator, and artist and deeply involved with the Line 3 protests. I collaborated with John on a project supporting the demonstrations. He encouraged the ideas of IN UNION and has provided reflections on the activities and messaging for the project book. He introduced me to Keri Pickett who is a highly accomplished filmmaker. She has documented the beginnings of the movement in her

moving film *First Daughter and the Black Snake* (2017) about Winona LaDuke's role in the struggle. Keri provided photographs for this book.

We included the water protectors movement as a featured part of this project because it exemplifies the importance of the Native role in addressing problems and making change. It began at the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota where Native communities protested the Dakota Access Pipeline. The protest stemmed from the fact the pipeline was to be built on the land of Indigenous communities, and was endangering water sources that those communities depend on. The more recent confrontation, in Minnesota, was meant to stop Line 3, another oil pipeline from Canada. The fight continues with a Stop Line 5 campaign in Wisconsin-Michigan. The connection between Natives active in a historic labor strike and today's environmental protests demonstrates how Indigenous people were and will be a presence in social change. The water protectors also show the now-central role of Native leadership in the environmental movement.

MW: What dialogue do you expect to open with a community organization like Open Source Gallery?

EHoB: As in all artistic expressions, a creator seeks to launch notions and sentiments for communities and one's self. The breadth of understanding is given by those who care to receive and participate in artistic notions rendered. That unpredictable exchange is the exciting and fruitful sphere sought. Open Source Gallery will enlighten us as artists by the audience and their personal experiences to be shared. I forever accept that which is offered from the viewer; the circle is formed and deepened after an audience responds. My prediction is that themes of family, care, protection, and progression will be noted from the Brooklyn fellowship and environs.

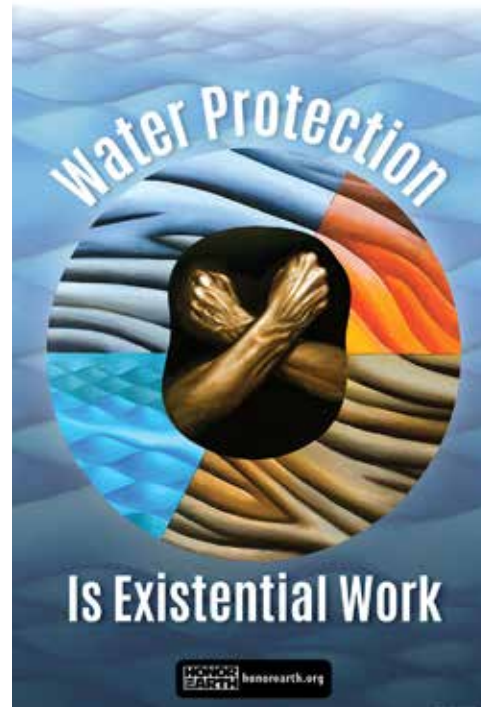
KC: We believe this project has universal relevance because it proposes solidarity as a necessary way to change society. Problems are solved with solutions. People need to know that they matter and must act accordingly. We want to shed a light on an under-recognized yet meaningful history. It demonstrates that there

was inclusion of minority people in a social change. It speaks to the fact that the Native workers were themselves activists and it shows their comrades accepted them. And they won that battle, however briefly. It occurred at the personal and family level also. People survived by connecting with others for mutual benefit. And the Indigenous-led environmental movement is attracting very wide support today. This is promising for everyone.

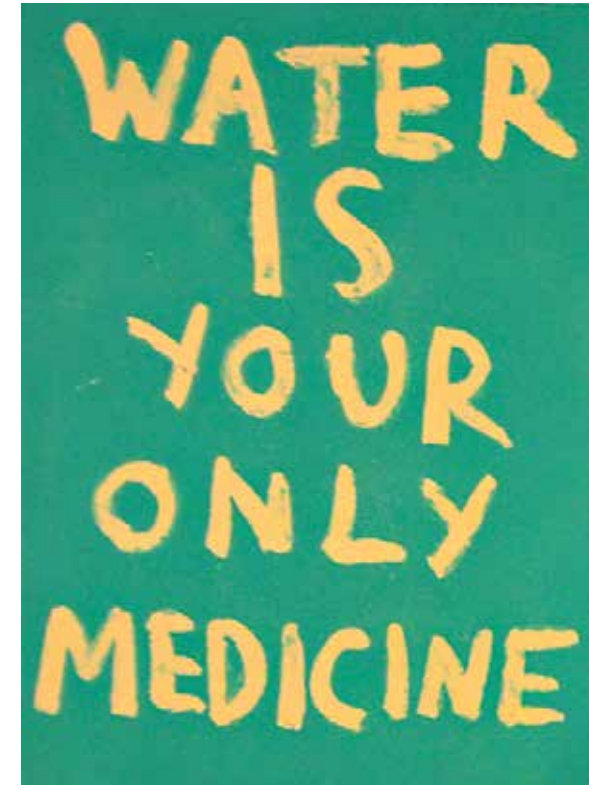
I lived in NYC for many years and was active as an artist. I was the art director for *Upfront* magazine, a publication of PADD (Political Art Documentation and Distribution) in the 1980's. I was also an active muralist

with Artmakers, a community murals group that created work from Harlem to Bed Sty. And I was a part of the Repo History project that installed signs in Manhattan shedding light on social struggles. I felt then as now that NYC is a cultural think tank for the world. People here are often from somewhere else and many, like me, go back to where they came from or on to new stops. It's never been a static place; it's kinetic. Brooklyn is a vital site of reflection and action. It has deep, deep roots. That's why this is a great place for this project. People from Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Brooklyn must do things together to turn things around and make a better way forward.

MW: We are so excited and we are going to do all we can to communicate this concept, exhibition, and energy to our community and beyond!



Keith Christensen, *Existential Work*, 2023, digital print, 12 x 18 in.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Water Is Your Only Medicine*, 2020, mono-type print, ink on rag paper, 22 x 30 in.