



Native Engagements

**A project highlighting the Native role in a labor strike,
a union family, and environmental protests**

A Collaboration of

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds & Keith Christensen

*Dedicated to Charles and Margaret Heap of Birds
and the collaborative spirit and commitment of the labor strikers
in 1934, union families, and the water protectors movement*

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space, community, and conceptual
context for creative play and
critical commentary.
<https://open-source-gallery.org>

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Preface

IN UNION is an exhibition and book project that affirms the value of Native roles in social change. It presents the facts of Natives' engagement in a historic labor strike, one Native family's reliance on and participation in a union, and Natives' connection with an ongoing Indigenous-led environmental movement.

The collaborative artwork is tied to family support and political activism. Banners are presented with the expressive letterforms and poetic language of Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds merged with the symbolic portraits and figurative work by Keith Christensen.

The intention for creating the book was to give some context for the artwork and provide connections to the larger meaning of solidarity. It starts with a conversation with Open Source Gallery's Monika Wuhrür and the artists about the project. Edgar provides a reflection on the impact of a union for a family. It contains information and photographs of the Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934 where Ray Rainbolt of the Dakota and Emanuel (Hap) Holstein of the Anishinaabe were part of the struggle for self representation as workers. The two were embraced by fellow strikers as essential to the campaign to form a union in an uphill battle for equity. The tie to the water protectors movement demonstrates that the spirit of solidarity is significant and ascendant. Clearly, climate change is man-made and a result of the grasp for corporate profits. More disasters are coming. Democracy is the means for addressing the problems, however government is not functioning. This political moment shows the need for collective action in order for all of our people to survive. In unity. IN UNION.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the contributors and many supporters of the project.

We are grateful to Monika Wührer from Open Source Gallery who reached out and encouraged the project and exhibition.

Shauna Sorensen wrote the foreword and shared the Open Source Gallery's perspective on the project.

Winona LaDuke is an inspirational force of the environmental movement. She generously contributed her organizational work of Honor the Earth and remarks on Native identity for the book.

Keri Pickett shared her insights and wonderful photography for the book.

John Kim wrote on the water protectors and introduced several of the contributors to this project. He is an inspiring force in this Anthropocene time.

Yates McKee provided his thoughtful analysis as an activist and art historian.

Mike Alewitz has been on the front lines of labor art activism for decades. His historical perspective and passion helped bring the section on labor history alive.

Peter Rachleff is an amazing community leader and labor historian whose support for the project has been highly encouraging.

David Riehle, labor historian, provided background and deep understanding of the labor movement.

Nan Wedlund and staff at Shapco Printing in Minneapolis produced the banners. Their professionalism helped the process move along smoothly.

Patti Jones provided proofreading with her thoughtful professionalism for the book.

Special thanks to Carina Jacobsson who has been a strong supporter of the project during its development and completion.

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Foreword

WE ACKNOWLEDGE that Open Source Gallery is located on the traditional territory of the Lenni Lenape, called “Lenapehoking,” this land’s original people whose relationship continues with this territory.

For over 15 years, Open Source has presented accessible, yet challenging, conceptually-driven art experiences for a wide community. Through art, our artists and audience collectively explore social issues and find ways that we can fill cultural and educational gaps, collaborating to figure out how we can become a more open society. We facilitate projects that center on the interests of artists while ensuring programming is accessible for all. Exhibitions at Open Source are most often site-specific, encouraging artists to embed themselves in and engage with our unique space and community. Artists create and curate their own site-specific projects with Open Source staff offering support and guidance to make their ambitious, and often experimental, ideas come to fruition. In this way, artists have the freedom and funding to explore ideas that will advance their practice, but may not otherwise be possible.

IN UNION is an elegant merging of three topics that are now more important than ever. Placing focus on the environmental protest movement, IN UNION explores Indigenous involvement in a labor strike and in union participation: the protection of both land and people. We are thrilled to work with Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds and Keith Christensen on this project not only because of their stellar work, but also because of the important conversations that it can open in our community through the merging of several themes. As a small organization, this is for us an ambitious project, but it represents an incredible opportunity for our community to engage with a project from a world-renowned artist and join a far-reaching conversation.

Over the past several years, recognition of and action against inequity has reached a zenith. From Standing Rock to Flint to the George Floyd protests, people have been fighting for change in all aspects of American life. While each new issue has sparked new action, each protest has addressed long-standing problems with inequity stemming from capitalism, racism, and colonialism. The pandemic exacerbated awareness of injustice and the movement for worker’s rights joined the fray. Arts workers from institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum and Philadelphia Museum have unionized and continued to use protest to demand higher wages. Even at goliath corporate institutions like Starbucks and Amazon we are seeing the impact of people fighting for their rights. It was in this milieu that we began the discussion about this project with Edgar and Keith.

As an artist-run, non-profit space, we facilitate artists’ site-specific projects that may be difficult to realize elsewhere while ensuring they are compensated for their labor. In a time of extraordinary inequity that is only growing, we relish the chance to facilitate meaningful change through art while supporting the artists themselves. We recognize the importance of not only offering opportunities to artists to experiment, but to support them in a concrete way through compensation in accordance with the guidelines set by W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy). IN UNION brings this conversation to the forefront.

Projects like IN UNION are an incredible opportunity for our organization to bring our behind-the-scenes support of the labor of artists to the forefront, with the additional benefit of an opportunity to learn about the history of Native involvement in unions and protest. We want to ensure that land acknowledgments do not become empty words, but an ongoing dialogue that encourages reflection and engagement with the legacies of colonialism. We continue to reside on unceded land and our recognition cannot end with land acknowledgments, but they can be a genesis for real change.

Shauna Sorensen, Development Director for Open Source Gallery

Introduction

THIS BOOK ACCOMPANIES an exhibition of the collaborative work of Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds and Keith Christensen. The banners in the exhibit show the integration of the artists' distinct styles that were intended to complement each other's work. The whole is more than the sum of parts: 1+1=3.

This project is an attempt to use artistic means to convey the stories of individuals who were more than figures of a dead history. Its purpose is to connect the past to the present, demonstrating, as one point to another, that Natives were engaged in social change then and are doing so now. Indigenous people fought collectively before as they do today.

Within the book the artists engage in a conversation about the project. They discuss their backgrounds and relationship as well as the meaning of IN UNION.

The IAM Union in Wichita, Kansas provided some meaningful support for a Cheyenne-Arapaho family in a time of estrangement and stress. It also was the means for connecting with other workers and the way to share power and obtain solidarity. The personal and granular view of a union household is recalled by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds.

The Minneapolis Truckers' Strike of 1934 was a pitched battle for the right of workers to represent themselves. It was a collective action that involved Native workers Ray Rainbolt and Emanuel (Hap) Holstein. Mike Alewitz knew some of the participants in the 1934 strike and shares his perspective on what the strike means today and going forward.

The water protectors are changing the world. The pipeline protests in tribal lands in Minnesota are a recent manifestation of an intense political, social, and cultural activism. They have been led by Indigenous groups that include the Honor the Earth organization co-founded by Winona LaDuke. She contributes her views asserting that Native values are needed to transform the ecosystem. Keri Pickett shares her understanding of the issues with photographs of the protests. John Kim writes about the participants' messaging and how it relates to international cultural action. And art historian Yates McKee makes connections between the artists' work, the historical context, and the ongoing movement.