little resistances
Scott Benesiinaabandan

Text by Skawennati

EXHIBITION
05 June - 11 July 2015

OPENING RECEPTION
Friday 30 January | 7 PM

SALON NIGHT
Wednesday 03 June | 7 PM
Resistance Training

A year or so ago, my friend Scott Benesiinaabandan and I brought a visiting Australian artist on a tour of Kahnawake, the Mohawk community where I was born. We were spontaneously invited to the 207 Longhouse. Among other things, this political and spiritual gathering place was a strategic location during the Mohawk Resistance in 1990, also known as the Oka Crisis. Our host showed Scott an area behind the longhouse, behind some bushes, where there were still sandbags piled up in anticipation of an attack by the Canadian Armed Forces. Scott described to me how the sunlight streamed down on the scene, and he got the idea to do a photographic series called “Sites of Resistance”. It would start with that very spot. Unfortunately, that picture was never to be taken. Permission had to be sought, and then winter came and the next spring, after 24 years, someone cleared the area.

But Scott continued to think about these historical sites of resistance; the places and moments and reasons that Onkwehonwe have made stands, fought the government. Where does the strength to resist come from? Does it come from the land itself, longing to be in the possession of its rightful owners? Does it come from our genetic makeup, the blood memory inciting us to take up arms against our oppressors (whose own ancestors might be acting on their own DNA)? Or does it come from training? Learning, day by day, how to move through the world as an Onkwehonwe, in a state that wishes you were dead. It occurred to Scott that it is much easier to record the big sites of resistance, like Oka, Ipperwash and the Chiapas, than it is to capture the memories, psychic events, and knowledges of life in a country that once openly stated: “We want to kill the Indian inside the child.”

Scott was born in 1974, and was “apprehended” at birth. This was the actual term for taking children from their biological families and putting them in foster care. Like the baby is already a criminal. As a child in the system, it was illegal for him to have any information about his relatives.

In the absence of family photos, Scott kept other pictures that were important to him. For years he carried in his wallet a photo of a group of Zapatistas, Indigenous armed revolutionaries who continue to resist the Mexican state. It’s no wonder that he felt a connection to them. Their clear vision of a future based on traditional (that is to say environmentalist, anti-capitalist, democratic) ideals and the way they intelligently and—of all things—playfully fight for them is inspirational. The wallet photo conveys all this and more. The central figure, a man, is seated by a birch tree in a misty, green, lightly wooded area. The landscape is so familiar—it could easily be Kahnawake or Ipperwash. Wearing belts of bullets, a brightly coloured kerchief around his neck, and the now- emblematic black ski mask, he looks at something off camera, to his right and down a bit. Even with his face covered, I can tell he is smiling gently, as if in anticipation of a child approaching. Behind him, backing him up, are three of his brothers in arms, all wearing black ski masks and carrying weapons. The man looks sure of himself, unafraid. He is calm, but ready to do what needs to be done. He makes you proud to be Indigenous.

When he reached the age of majority, Scott began the process of searching for his family history, which first requires that you apply for your birth certificate. Once you have that, you must submit a request to the government to initiate a search for you. These searches typically take an average of seven years (and may come up empty). Scott got lucky. His file came back with enough info that he was able to discover his mother’s last name. He also obtained five photographs of family members he has never met, including his mother. Since then, through dozens of interprovincial moves and international residencies, Scott has held on to these photos, though he didn’t actually feel a connection to them. So why, he wondered, did he keep them? And what was the source of his ambivalence?

In answering these questions, the idea for “little resistances” was born. It is an exhibition that is not quite autobiographical, but that nevertheless demonstrates how the political affects the personal and vice versa.

The show at PLATFORM consists of five large, square images and a textile piece that ties them all
together, like a great big bundle. In answering these questions, the idea for “little resistances” was born. It is an exhibition that is not quite autobiographical, but that nevertheless demonstrates how the political affects the personal and vice versa.

Each work begins with one of his five family snapshots which is paired, using Photoshop, with journalistic shots of well-known Indigenous resistances. Scott's Zapatista image is coupled with the beautifully composed photo of his grandmother, standing with her second husband on a road by Pelican Falls near Sioux Lookout. One of the images seems to be a very personal and intimate memento. Most people would assume it's the snapshot with the grandmother, yet the opposite is true. Putting them together this way illustrates the fundamental connection between the two; showing how one can inform, instigate and ignite the other.

The three children in another family photo are Scott's mother and her siblings, themselves in a foster home, at Christmas time. He matches it to a famous image from the Mohawk Resistance at Kanehsatake, of a warrior wearing green army fatigues, standing on an overturned provincial police cruiser, rifle raised high above his head in defiant triumph.

Once Scott had paired all five of his family photos with iconic images from his youth, he printed them. And then he folded, scored and scuffed them. He crumpled them into balls. He pretty much ruined them! I mean, to me, a crumpled photo has been deemed worthless. It has been discarded because it displeased. Or it was perhaps too painful a memory. But the balled-up pictures can also be seen as a reconfiguration. The face of his grandmother now approaches the face of an RCMP officer. The foster home's Christmas tree now grows in the Kanehsatake pines.

Even the physical gesture made by the hand during the act of crumpling—a fist—suggests violence. But it is also a symbol of solidarity, and of power. It means destruction, but also holding on to things. Like Scott says, "It's just like the resistance movement."

Now the images are objects. They've become; new little worlds, even, with their own topographies. One at a time, somewhat perversely, Scott places the crumpled balls and not-exactly-origami on a scanner. The machine's unique image-making properties—its moving light and lens—re-flatten each object. Back in Photoshop, Scott composes the images, cropping them into tidy squares, the scrunched paper in the centre of each one. They are printed big, enlarged to way more than life-size, on self-adhesive vinyl and then affixed to wooden panels four feet by four feet and three inches deep. Once again, the two-dimensional gains a third, and image becomes object.

The textile piece is a 30-foot length of cotton broadcloth, the same kind of fabric once used as trade cloth and today often given as offerings. It resembles a gigantic prayer flag, the type used in the Sundance ceremony. The words printed on it are Scott's own, remixed with other important texts. Most notable is the farewell speech of Subcomandante Marcos, a manufactured identity who was nonetheless one of the main ideologists of the Zapatistas. Another co-mingling of the personal and the public, the textile softens the strict edges of the square panels.

The individual works—and the exhibition as a whole—boast an interplay between micro and macro, and between 2D and 3D. The form exemplifies the reciprocity between the personal and the political, itself expressed by that original pairing of images. The little resistances, like refusing to let your Native identity be erased, lead to the big resistances; the big resistances inspire the little resistances, like using your Indian name even if you have to help people pronounce it every time. Eventually, these resistances, big and little, will lead to change. This exhibition is evidence that they already have.

Skawennati
Scott Benesiinaabandan is an Anishinabe intermedia artist that works primarily in photography, video, audio and printmaking. Scott has completed international residencies at Parramatta Artist Studios in Australia (2012), Context Gallery in Derry, North of Ireland (2010) and has most recently been awarded the University Lethbridge/Royal Institute of Technology iAIR residency 2013, along with international collaborative projects in both the U.K and Ireland. He is currently based in Montreal, where he completed a year long Canada Council New Media Production grant through OBx Labs/AbTeC and Concordia. In the past four years, Benesiinaabandan has been awarded multiple grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, Manitoba Arts Council and the Winnipeg Arts Council. Benesiinaabandan has taken part in several notable group exhibitions across Canada and internationally, most notably in Harbourfront’s Flatter the Land/Bigger the Ruckus (2006), Subconscious City at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (2008), GHOSTDANCE at Ryerson Image Centre (2013), solo exhibitions, unSacred, at Gallery 1C03 (2011), in Sydney, Mi Ooma Ayaad/Oshiki Inendemowin (2012), and Melbourne with “Blood Memories” (2013).

Skawennati makes art that addresses history, the future, and change. Her pioneering new media projects include the online gallery/chat space and mixed-reality event, CyberPowWow (1997-2004); a paper doll/time-travel journal, Imagining Indians in the 25th Century (2001); and TimeTraveller ™ (2008-2013), a multi-platform project feature nine machinma episodes. These have been widely presented across Turtle Island in major exhibitions such as Looking Forward (L’Avenir) at the Montreal Biennale; Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years, and Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 3. She has been honored to win imagineNative’s 2009 Best New Media Award as well as a 2011 Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship. Her work in is included in the collections of the Canada Art Bank, Edd J. Guarino, and the Aboriginal Art Centre at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, among others.

Born in Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, Skawennati graduated with a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal, where she is based. She is Co-Director, with Jason E. Lewis, of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), a research network of artists, academics and technologists investigating, creating and critiquing Indigenous virtual environments. Please visit www.skawennati.com to see more.

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COVER IMAGE
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