

Sky Hopinka: Dislocation Blues



University Art Museum
University at Albany
State University of New York



Above and cover image:

Sky Hopinka

Dislocation Blues (still), 2017

HD video, 00:16:57 minutes, color, sound

Images courtesy of the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, www.vdb.org

Sky Hopinka: Dislocation Blues

Sky Hopinka explores identity, language, politics, and history throughout his filmmaking, photography, and poetry. His short film *Dislocation Blues* (2017) looks at one of the largest Indigenous gatherings in the long history of Indigenous resistance: the 2016-17 Standing Rock protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) that threatened to poison water resources, destroy ancestral burial grounds, and violate Indigenous national sovereignty. Themes of personal and political dislocation and the plaintive mood suggested by “blues” in the title circulate throughout the film, which highlights the voices of two protestors, or Water Protectors, and presents footage from Hopinka’s perspective as a dislocated observer—a Native filmmaker standing in solidarity on tribal land that does not belong to his tribe.¹

Dislocation Blues offers glimpses of law enforcement² and the news media at Standing Rock, but its emphasis is on scenes that embody ambivalent feelings of belonging and fear within the camp’s diverse community: the stillness of the camp waking at sunrise; the texture and atmosphere of land and sky; footage of drumming and dancing; moments of leisure, as when a person bodysurfs downhill on a skateboard; people gathering to march on foot or ride horseback. An extended camera pan showing a line of tents and their upside-down reflection in the water below captures the impermanence and uncertainty of the protests at Standing Rock.

Water Protector Cleo Keahna reflects on his experience at Standing Rock as he appears via Skype on a laptop screen, dislocated in space and time. He had arrived at a moment when he had been navigating his gender identity and was welcomed within the Two-Spirit Camp, one of many camps that gathered in solidarity at Standing Rock. (The term “Two-Spirit,” popularized in the 1990s, refers to Native non-binary gender traditions and activism.) Keahna recounts that his own feelings of bodily dislocation were ameliorated by participating in something larger than himself. Surprised by his own nostalgia as he recalls the protests, he stumbles and pauses on words

and asks the interviewer if he is making sense. These gaps in speech bear witness to new meanings—and mirror much of Hopinka’s own poetry in which wide gaps between letters disrupt words and their denotative meaning but also create spaces where previously unexpressed emotions can circulate.

The second voice we hear is Terry Running Wild, who Hopinka interviewed onsite during the protests. We never see Running Wild on camera; he is a voice dislocated from a body. Hopinka’s shots at waist or chest height that immerse us among the protestors, or camera tilts that capture a surveillance drone in the sky, amplify the urgency we hear in Running Wild’s words. He speaks of the solidarity and comradery he finds in the camp, expresses the conflict he feels being away from his daughter even as he protests for her generation’s sake, and points out suspected government and law enforcement informants who have infiltrated the camp—surveillance tactics used not only at Standing Rock but also historically against Indigenous political organizations since the resistance movements of the 1960s.

From its opening shot of Keahna on a laptop display to the final shot in a studio where we see the film itself projected on a screen, *Dislocation Blues* reveals its own dislocation. In concert with the footage shot over three weeklong periods, Hopinka’s film bears witness to the individual emotional histories of this momentous historical event. This is a necessary endeavor, as Keahna says in the film: “No one person is the authority. It’s a story that must be told by everyone, by multiple people.”

—Robert R. Shane, Associate Curator

Endnotes

1. The Standing Rock site, near Cannon Ball, North Dakota, is on land that was guaranteed to the Očeti Šakowin (also known as the Sioux) in the establishment of the Great Sioux Reservation under the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868. But the U.S. Government has repeatedly violated those treaties, shrinking the Reservation's territory, most egregiously in the 1950s and 1960s, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built five dams along the Missouri River, flooding 200,000 acres and forcing Native villages to relocate.

The Dakota Access Pipeline was originally slated to be built near Bismarck, but officials worried an oil spill would pollute the state capital's drinking water, so the site was moved to within half a mile of the Standing Rock Reservation.

The courts sided with the government and against the Water Protectors, and Dakota Access, LLC eventually built the 1,72-mile pipeline, transporting half a million barrels of oil a day through North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois and beneath the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers.

2. During the course of the protests, North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrymple invoked the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a federal program that allowed him to enlist seventy-five law enforcement agencies across the country, the state's National Guard, Border Patrol, and Homeland Security. Additionally, a private security firm, TigerSwan, provided intelligence to the Morton County Sheriff's Department.

The militarized law enforcement response was criticized by the American Civil Liberties Union, human rights groups, and the National Lawyers Guild, who in November 2016 filed a lawsuit for excessive force against peaceful protestors.

About the artist

Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, b. 1984 Ferndale, Washington)

Hopinka's video, photo, and text work centers around personal positions of Indigenous homeland and landscape, designs of language as containers of culture expressed through personal, documentary, and nonfiction forms of media.

Selected solo exhibitions and installations of Hopinka's work have been held at LUMA, Arles, France (2022); the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2021); the Block Museum of Art, Chicago, IL (2021); and the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2020). His work has been shown in notable group exhibitions, including Prospect.5, New Orleans, LA (2021); Cosmopolis #2, the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2019); the FRONT Triennial, Cleveland, OH (2018); and the Whitney Biennial, New York, NY (2017).

Hopinka's films have been shown at various festivals, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, the Courtisane Festival, the Punto de Vista International Documentary Film Festival, and the New York Film Festival.

Hopinka's awards and fellowships include: Infinity Award in Art from the International Center of Photography (2022), MacArthur Fellowship (2022), Forge Project Fellowship (2021), Guggenheim Fellowship (2020), Alpert Award in the Arts (2020), Art Matters Artist Fellowship (2019), Sundance Art of Nonfiction Fellow (2019), and a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University (2018-19).

Hopinka received an MFA in Film, Video, Animation and New Genres from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, WI (2016), a BA in Liberal Arts from University of Portland, OR (2012), and an Associate Degree from Riverside City College, CA (2006).



UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY | STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Sky Hopinka: Dislocation Blues

August 12 - December 9, 2024

Nancy Hyatt Liddle Gallery

*Supported by the Office of the President, Office of the Provost, and
The University at Albany Foundation.*

*Additional support for exhibitions and programs provided by the
University Auxiliary Services at Albany, the Ann C. Mataraso Fund,
and the Jack and Gertrude Horan Memorial Fund for Student
Outreach.*