

## Episode 4: “Art as Culture, Resistance, and Community”

Sikowis Nobiss

The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian:

Welcome to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa. Produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook and The EcoTheatre Lab. And welcome to today's conversation with Artist, Organizer, and Founder and Executive Director of Great Plains Action Society, Sikowis Nobiss.

Sikowis:

Great Plains Action Society's Theory of Change. Great Plains Action Society addresses the trauma Indigenous Peoples and our Earth have faced and works to prevent further colonial-capitalist violence through education, direct action, cultural revival, mutual aid, and political change. We believe that Indigenous ideologies and practices are the antithesis of colonial capitalism, and we deploy these tools to fight and build on our vision. Tools that are deeply embedded in a culture of resistance. Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and around the world have created a culture of resistance built on the front lines that is now a way of life. It can be found in our dancing, singing, clothing, art, and in our political motivations.

When we imagine a strong political infrastructure, society's built on compassion and a regenerative economy. We see a focus on relationships and community. Contrary to this country's notion of independent thought and action, we recognize the importance of relationships and community as the foundation for true democracy. Indigenous traditional societies and cultures are collectivist in nature, and we find this to be a critical way of being as we face down the climate emergency and increased societal polarization caused by the adversarial structures of our current governing systems. Radical individualism only benefits the wealthy.

Unfortunately, we have a long struggle ahead of us, but we are up for the challenge. We have no choice, and so we organize from the bottom up through grassroots and frontline efforts, and we are informed by the communities that we serve and are a part of. This work has made it very clear that mutually it is necessary for achieving our decolonized vision as a radical love helps heal and activate more folks on the ground to get culturally, civically, and politically engaged. By empowering BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, and Disabled folks to get involved in change making, we are building faith in disenfranchised communities that currently lack trust in governmental institutions. Only through mutual aid and community-based organizing will we be able to increase genuine interest in social and climate justice matters which affect everyday people. We also aim to get out the vote and increase political engagement as most of the big change we seek always comes down to legislation, even at the front lines.

Vivian:

Addressing climate change is urgent, but in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community engaged researchers, and community organizers and activists, who have all used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities. I'm Vivian and I invite you to explore The Art of Climate Dialogue with me.

As we enter into these conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture, and community engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries and continue to be today. Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication. Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the loway, Meskwaki and Sauk, Otoe, Omaha,

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Ihanktonwan, and Santee. And because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous peoples here.

The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their homelands was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. And as a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices contributing to the ongoing climate crisis. Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities. My thanks to podcast interviewees Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki Tribe; Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska; and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

Sikowis Nobiss is Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation in Saskatchewan, Canada, and grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. At 19, she began her life's work of uplifting Indigenous voices when she got her first job at the New Brunswick Aboriginal People's Council in Fredericton, Canada. In 2015, she founded Great Plains Action Society as a way to increase Indigenous solidarity in Iowa City. It turned into a full-fledged organization during the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline, which led her to start Little Creek Camp in February 2017. From August 2017 to September 2020, she worked for Seeding Sovereignty where she organized at a national level. As her heart is with her people and the Prairies, Sikowis returned to Great Plains Action Society where she can work at a grassroots level and a fully Indigenous led organization.

Sikowis is also a speaker, writer, and artist. She believes that environmental and social justice work are inextricably linked, and change will only happen when we dismantle corrupt colonial capitalist systems and rebuild them with a decolonized worldview. She graduated from the University of Iowa in 2008 with a Master's degree in Religious Studies with a focus on Native American Religion and Culture, and a Graduate Minor in American Indian Native Studies. She fights for a better future for her two young children.

Welcome Sikowis. Thank you so much for joining the podcast series and for sharing your work with us today.

Sikowis:

Thank you for having me.

Vivian:

So you just read an excerpt from Great Plains Action Society's Theory of Change. Can you tell us more about Great Plains Action Society, how it got started and what your role is in the organization?

Sikowis:

Yeah, well, I'll start by introducing myself. My name is Sikowis Nobiss, and I'm Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation. I grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, not too far from there. I call it the rezist city in Canada. We have a super high concentration of Natives living there. That's all in Canada. And I've been living in Iowa City for 17 years. I came here to get my PhD in Religious Studies and it turns out there wasn't quite as many resources here as I needed to do what I wanted. So I ended up doing my Master's Degree in Religious Studies with a focus of Native American religion and culture and getting a Graduate Minor in Native American Studies as well.

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And throughout this process, I had sort of started building a life here with my ex-husband and had children. And he had a job he really liked, so we ended up staying, and I realized how lonely I was. There's not a large concentration of Natives in Iowa City, though there is the Native American Student Association. At the time, it was exceedingly small, five or six people maybe. And also they were students, so I was older and graduated at that point and just feeling kind of isolated because I grew up with so many Natives around me, Native family. I just felt like there needed to be more.

Over the years, I attempted to get folks together in Iowa City to start something, some kind of community organization or just something to have us be involved beyond the university. Because honestly, being within the confines of university systems was somewhat suffocating. You can't do a lot or say a lot. And so yeah, I attempted to have these gatherings. I did a few times have Natives come to my house and talk about doing something, but it was hard because it's a very transient place, so people were always coming and going. So I was having a hard time with that.

But come 2016 when Standing Rock happened, all of a sudden when I was going there to help out, people just wanted to start doing stuff with me. And that was really the beginning of when I finally was able to break through, if you will, to get people's attention, to get more Natives to want to do some stuff, and that's how Great Plains Action Society was formed. It was formed out of the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline in Iowa and at Standing Rock. And so, I don't know if any of your listeners would know this, but I think it's a good point to make that 30% of that pipeline goes through Iowa. And the fight against the pipeline started actually in Iowa in 2014.

And so, it was just a time and place where people wanted to hear what indigenous people have to say, which, as you know, has been hard for us as we face high rates of erasure, tokenization, and stereotyping. This was a time where people really wanted to hear from us and in a real way. And so, that opportunity was a fantastic one for us, for myself to build the organization. And now here we are, six years later, and we have three full-time staff and two part-time staff and three youth organizers, so I'd say that we're doing well.

Vivian:

Yeah. Wow. I would say so as well. That's a lot in six years. And I know you've been doing incredible work within Great Plains Action Society itself, but then also all of this coalition building that you're doing too, bringing a lot of other organizations together and coalescing around these really big challenges that we're facing in Iowa, but making sure that we're building community power to address those. So thank you for all of the work that you've done.

Sikowis:

You're welcome, and thank you for supporting the work.

Vivian:

Yes. So you've also discussed how Great Plains Action Society integrates art into everything you all do, and art is even mentioned in your Theory of Change. Can you tell us more about the role that art plays in your organizing efforts?

Sikowis:

Yeah, I'm happy to do that. In fact, I gave a presentation on that just a couple of days ago. I'm not even sure how to pronounce this and I know I'm going to get it wrong, but it's called a PechaKucha. It's a

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Japanese presentation style, and you're supposed to show 20 slides and then you get 20 seconds per slide. It was for this national convening, discussing CO2 pipelines, the new greenwashing tactic that has been uplifted by the Fossil Fuel and the Big Ag industry. And so when asked to do this presentation, I thought, wow, that's going to be hard. So my mind right away went to all the art that we've done, and it is so much. It was hard to just keep it down to 20 slides. And honestly, I had 21 because I realized that would be a great way to talk about what we have been doing to fight the CO2 pipelines, because of course, a picture is worth a thousand words. And there you go, that is why we do so much art.

Art really does attract attention, and it really displays a message in ways that speaking can't always do. You can't always grab attention on an overpass or the side of a highway or on a roadway, trying to get people as they drive by, by talking, right?

Vivian:

Right.

Sikowis:

You can't always catch attention on social media with words, right? I mean, we know this, the world has changed drastically from reading to, now, visual communications. So communicating our message visually is just like we can't do without it. It's absolutely necessary for the work we do.

So, in this presentation, I basically found all the pieces of art that we've been working with in the past year and a half as we fight these CO2 pipelines plus other pieces of art from past campaigns and projects and events that also speak to this current fight and put it all together. And it did tell a really fantastic story of what we do.

After the presentation was over, I received so many messages from people just saying, "Wow, how do we do this in Louisiana?" Or, "That was the best presentation of the day," "That was the most uplifting presentation of the day," "That was very visually satisfying. I feel good, looking at that."

Also, because I could just talk about the piece very briefly because the piece itself told the story, I could get a lot of information out, because I had both the art and my words combined. So just talking about doing this presentation really does, I hope, describe to you why we put so much effort into art.

Vivian:

Definitely.

Sikowis:

The other reason we do put a lot of effort into art. I think it's a culturally based initiative for us because when you look at the history of Indigenous resistance back to the Red Power movement, for instance. But even before that, if you want to look at the Ghost Dance or just us dressing in our regalia and carrying out our religious practices and whatever, I mean, it's very visual. It's very much based upon our cultural beliefs and traditions. They're not hidden. You can't hide what we're doing with how we're going to be dressed if we're going to do it traditionally, right?

Vivian:

Right.

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Sikowis:

So there's always been this resistance through culture, which can also fall into the realm of what you would consider art, but not necessarily art in the way that you might imagine it. But it's art and craft as well. And so since the Red Power Movement in particular, though, of visual art, drawn art. That sort of art has become really integral to our resistance. Also, there's the Art of Music, which I talked about briefly in our Theory of Change. Even those songs, those war songs, if you will, in a way, or songs of resistance, have become a part of what we do and how we do things.

But I just feel like living and working within an Indigenous space is you always see this art. And I honestly believe that Indigenous peoples are just so good at it. We have such amazing artists, visual artists, crafters, singers, drummers. It's just inherent to us and our culture.

Vivian:

Thank you so much for sharing about the presentation that you gave and all of the different ways that you all are integrating art, not only into your organizing efforts, but it also sounds like into the community building efforts and in how to make sure people are finding space to come together, which you talked about at the beginning as part of the impetus for even creating Great Plains Action Society in the first place.

Can you tell us a little bit more about the different kinds of artwork that you've used? So I know you've mentioned to me Art Builds as a way to create community as you're preparing for organizing efforts that you've used it in social media campaigns and protests. You've done installation artwork, kind of massive pieces on wagons and murals and things like that. Could you just give us a sense of the variety of different kinds of art that you all use?

Sikowis:

Yeah. Well, so first of all, I would like to say that Great Plains Action Society, we are, I would call us, the brokers. I don't know if that's the correct term, but the brokers of the art. We're creating bases and opportunities for the art to come alive. We make a lot of our art, but also we put opportunities together so other folks can contribute to the art. So I guess you could call us a middle person.

Vivian:

Yeah.

Sikowis:

Okay. The different types of art we do. There's our digital art, which is our graphics to advertise a current campaign initiative, event, whatever we're doing. And then there's graphics to relate to different issues. And I do most of those for the organization, Trish also does quite a few, and then I've been teaching our youth over the years to do them as well, which has really been great because I love the learning curve. I love to see them start from a certain place and get somewhere else. It is an art to make graphics, to advertise different things that you're trying to get across to uplift different issues and such, because there's a big difference between something like, I don't know, how things used to be done back in the day with, what was it called? It was in Word.

Vivian:

Oh, yeah, just creating graphics in Word.

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Sikowis:

What was it called? It was a program.

Vivian:

Oh, I have no idea.

Sikowis:

Very, very, very, yeah, just not good, right?

Vivian:

Yeah.

Sikowis:

Compared to what we can do now with amazing platforms like Photoshop and Canva. I love Canva for that reason. It makes it so accessible. Anybody can be a graphic designer with Canva, and I really love that. There's that aspect of our work, and then there's also the digital aspect of our work that we print. So we're kind of famous for our posters, I guess, if you will.

Vivian:

Yes.

Sikowis:

Yeah. We make a lot of 11 by 17 posters that we print out that we just give out for free. We know we never charge for them. And I mean, we've probably given out a couple thousand at this point. Very different pieces. Pieces that talk about land back and land sovereignty, pieces for our missing and murdered Indigenous relatives, crisis pieces that depict the CO2 pipelines fight, saying no to CO2 pipelines. And then just, I would call these pieces more like protest pieces, so we'll just make basic posters that have a message on them, like "Defend land and body sovereignty," which we came out with during the reproductive liberation crisis that we're facing, or pieces that say, "Kim Reynolds, work for the people and end the fascism." So you can bring that to a CO2 pipeline protest. Or, "Bruce Rastetter bankrolls climate disaster."

So there's basic pieces as well, and we'll just hand those out. And those are just meant to be used in the moment. A lot of the time they get kind of crumpled up, but they're really great for those reasons. Sometimes we staple them onto small sticks so people can hold them up high. And then the other posters are meant for people to take home. They're beautiful pieces that we've put a lot of time and effort into that we've either commissioned an artist to make like Moselle Singh or SunRose IronShell, or that I've made for whatever it is that we're working on.

Vivian:

So that sounds like you're not only creating spaces for additional artists to come join you and develop pieces, but then you're sharing those pieces with people who aren't creating the artwork, but then can take it and either use it in protests or take it with them to share with other people, and then it kind of has these ripple effects. That's really wonderful.

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Sikowis:

Yeah. Yeah, so it's really funny because I'll be on Zoom sometimes and I just see the posters up on people's walls, and I love it. So there's that aspect of the work. And then you mentioned Art Builds. Yes. We've helped organize quite a few of those over the years. We usually have those organized before we have a protest or some kind of action, and then people can come out and make all sorts of stuff. Whatever it is they want to make, we help facilitate that.

But then often as well, we also have a... I guess you could say a central part of it as well. Back in November, we were protesting the CCS Conference where CO2 Pipeline folks had come together for an annual event. And I worked with Moselle Singh to take one of her pieces that she had made as a poster to translate it into something that could be screen printed, so more simple, less detail, which then I brought to David Solnit, a really famous movement artist in the country, and then connected these two together so they could make sure that it was how he would want it in order to screenprint it. And then he took two of her pieces, he screenprinted them, and he made about 50 of each, and also made a patch as well out of one of them, so that some people could pin them on their backs. That's often what they do, or on their bags or wherever.

And then I happened to be in Oakland at the time for a conference, and he asked me to come and speak, which I did. And then at that time, they presented us with all these beautiful pieces of art that they had created on fabric, which then I brought back to Iowa City and then Mahmud Fitol, our Land Defense Director, and I spent quite a while putting the larger banners or signs. I think they're about three feet by two feet wide onto wood frames with eight foot poles, so that people can carry them. And there's a picture I sent you of that. And so people could carry those around. They're very effective, they're very beautiful, they're eye catching. And so we have a lot of those now. And then we have all these patches, hundreds of these patches that we give out to folks, and then they can color them as well.

Vivian:

Oh, cool.

Sikowis:

So that's an art build that was part of the Art Build for this event.

Vivian:

And it was bridging California all the way to Iowa.

Sikowis:

It was, yeah. And it's really good because California plays a huge role in the CO2 pipeline fight because their state is so pro CO2 mitigation as they call it, or CCS, because it then satisfies the requirements of their gas standards. But they don't seem to care that Iowa and these other states are going to be sacrifice zones for that. So yeah, it was good to have that happen. Now, we have all this art here and we deploy it when we need to.

And another aspect of the work is banner art. So banners are really important when you carry them at the front of a march or to hang them places, just to have them out, even inside events, just so you can get good photo opportunities so that you can get a message across.

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Not everything needs media attention. A lot of our mutual aid efforts, we don't really need media attention for that. We're not interested in that. But when it comes to issues like this where we're really trying to get the nation to change its mind on something so egregious, you do want that attention. The whole point is to try and get media to get the information out there to the people, and these banners really help. So we have a lot of beautiful banners.

We do have "No CO2" banners that one of them was made by David Solnit as well. It's a beautiful green and yellow one. We have one that was made by Molly Free, who's a local artist in Des Moines. We have one made by Remy Fredenberg, an Indigenous artist. I mean, actually, we made it together, him and I. It says, "Colonial capitalism equals seventh generation genocide." And we have a beautiful one that I designed with Cree motifs on the bottom of it that says, "Decolonize farming. No GMOs, no CAFOs, and no Big Ag." I made that with the help of James Hale, who's a Potawatomi water protector that's living up at the Land 3 area right now.

Also, there's the huge mural that we made. That's more of an installation piece, which we made during the First Nation Farmer Climate March. And that was made with about 10 of us Natives over the period of eight days. I designed the piece and then we all colored it in over that period of time, and it's large. Geez, it must be 12 plus 8 feet or 6 feet. Must be about must about 18 feet wide by 12 feet high. Yeah. And so that we hung up on the side of a semi-trailer at the very end of our march, and then had our big event there with that as the backdrop. And we still have that piece, and we still use it. We take it out and use it every once in a while. But the pictures of it have been used a lot on social media as well.

And we have done art installations. We've helped that artist I mentioned earlier who helped me make that banner, Remy Fredenberg. I helped him make a large wagon that says colonialism on it. And it has all these arrows of decolonization that are piercing it with different sayings on them. They're large 10 foot, 6 by 6 inch PVC pipes painted black with feathers on the ends of them, and they say, "Language, culture, the matriarchy, land back." All these things they say on the feathers. And then that the wagon is 12 feet long. I mean, it's large. It's like a life-size colonial wagon and has real wheels on it. And it's pulled usually, because we've done this installation three times.

Vivian:

That's incredible.

Sikowis:

The last time when we made it in Iowa, it was pulled by the four horsemen of the apocalypse dressed in various outfits like war. So we had somebody dressed up in a military outfit, and we had somebody dressed as the Pope. I can't remember the other two honestly right now. I think there was a pilgrim. Yeah, I think there was a pilgrim. And so, oh, then a business person. So they pulled that wagon and then after it was done, we took it to another action to demand abolishing monuments to white supremacy in Iowa. And then when it was done there, we took it to a friend's private field on his land and we burned it.

Vivian:

Wow.



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Sikowis:

So yeah, we actually, we just set it on fire and filmed it and burned it to the ground. And it was a really great bonfire.

Vivian:

I would imagine.

Sikowis:

It really epitomized the term wagon burner, which is what we wanted.

Vivian:

And that in and of itself, creating that piece, probably getting a lot of attention from it because it sounds like with all the pieces you all have created. There's these very clear messages like keywords, key phrases that you want people to remember and walk away with. And then this artwork that's either gorgeous, like you were talking about with the cree motifs and everything, or just incredibly striking. If you have these four horsemen of the apocalypse that people see it. They're going to walk away with something regardless. And then even burning it at the end is kind of this act of...

Sikowis:

It's art.

Vivian:

...community building and coming together, right? Yes, it's art.

Sikowis:

Absolutely. There's also wearable art. So we make a lot of shirts. We have a shirt right now that's really popular that is using the same words as that poster I was talking about. Defend lot land and body sovereignty. People really like that t-shirt. I mean, I'm sure I'm missing stuff. Like I said, there's also, we bring a lot of people into sing and drum for various events and to dance. We had a mini powwow, for instance, on the lawn of the Capitol a couple years ago in 2020. So there's always some kind of art as part of what we do.

And I feel like in terms of the organizations in Iowa, I feel like we truly are up there in terms of who's making art and using art to get a message across. We're definitely one of the organizations that is really using that as a tool.

Vivian:

Absolutely. And like you said, I mean, I've seen plenty of articles that come out about Great Plains Action Society's work, and it is, it's those banners that are on the front page of those articles and it draws you to it, and it helps communicate a message very effectively, I think in that it's succinct, but also you can't kind of get it out of your head. And I know we saw each other at the Practical Farmers of Iowa Conference a couple of weeks ago, and everyone was coming by your table because you had all of this. You had artwork, you had all these posters that you were handing out and people could take with them and think about what was on them and share them and hang them up behind their Zoom meetings or whatever it might be.

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Sikowis:

Oh yeah, absolutely. We had a piece on there by Moselle Singh that says, "End ethanol." Ethanol is bleeding Iowa dry. It's a really, really poignant piece. And I was kind of excited to have that one up because art also creates controversy too, and so I can't help that there's a part of me that wants that to happen because I'm trying to get people's attention so that they can think about their choices. And ethanol, it's so ingrained in the Iowa economy and culture, to talk against it is very faux pas in a way in a lot of circles. So even at that particular conference, which is more liberal, I was just really happy to have that there.

And it was such a talking piece, I couldn't believe it. So many people came by and were like, I'm so glad to see this, I'm so glad. Because they don't see that, you don't see that anywhere because people are too scared to say it. And that's probably because they are white and they are part of those circles, their family, their friends, their communities. And if you say that, then you're a bad person. You're against farmers, you're against the economy, you're against good old farm family farms. But we can say that because we're Indigenous and we don't have a stake in that game, I guess you could say, right? We care about the land, we care about sacred sites, we care about land back, we care about the future of our world and the climate crisis. I mean, that's what we care about. We're not scared to say what we think is an issue.

So, that piece, like I said, brought some really great comments and also some bad looks, but it is what it is. And I'm glad we had it there.

Vivian:

And like you said, maybe art can create controversy because it can be very direct in a very obvious way about what are these key messages and takeaways. But that controversy does maybe open the door for conversation if you're going to...

Sikowis:

Yeah.

Vivian:

We have to figure out a way to talk about controversial at times.

Sikowis:

Unfortunately, it can be divisive too. Because for instance, when we were putting on that event on November 9th, we had made these really nice posters from Moselle Singh's pieces again, like the ones that I was talking about earlier, and somebody within the community that we don't know who, they really were, I guess, inspired by it. And so they went and pasted a bunch of these posters all over Des Moines. Not all over, but I think it was the East Village. And wheat pasting is something that can come off really easy with some warm water. But I guess, I don't know what her position is in the Sierra Club, but one of the higher up in the Sierra Club, Iowa chapter, got word that I guess a couple of business owners were upset because they were scared that... they were saying it was industrial adhesive that had been used. And so basically she was very upset with us. But we can't help that somebody went and used that in that way.

But also, it goes to show you how some organizations stand and where their loyalties actually lie. They're more loyal to the status quo, to the middle ground, to placating folks than they are to their

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actual mission, which is supposed to be the climate and the environment, which is the Sierra Club's supposed mission. But it was easily mitigated, I guess. Somebody went and showed them you can take this off very easy. But I guess that controversy can also cause division. It can also bring people together. So other folks banded together over this small issue, and so it's interesting.

Vivian:

That is a very interesting example of that. Finding that balance and being okay with knowing that there's going to have to be some hard conversations because we're going to put these conversations out into public, whether that's on the side of a building or elsewhere.

Sikowis:

The people that did this, I don't know who they are, but they did it in a really gentrified area. And so maybe they were trying to get a message across.

Vivian:

Right. Right. Right.

Sikowis:

Like you took away a lot from people, and so here we are just putting this little thing up just as a reminder that you are still prone to living in a world where other people exist. And gentrification almost seems like it becomes almost like a gated community. It's just a place where it just feels like unattainable because you can't afford things there, so you don't go there. So maybe that's what they were trying to get across as well. Yeah, I mean, that's what I would think.

Vivian:

Yeah, definitely. I actually want to talk more about this. You've mentioned a couple of ideas about how it's hard to talk about topics like ethanol and other agricultural challenges that we're facing in Iowa. So in your experience, what are some barriers to talking specifically about climate change and justice in Iowa that is such an agricultural heavy state?

Sikowis:

Absolutely. I mean, look at the state we're living in. Look at the government that we have. I mean, that's a huge barrier because you can't talk about it at a legislative level, bypassing bills, or even having conversations in the Senate or House or whatever, just because there's no interest there. So right off the bat, there's that predicament.

There's the issue of this state being filled with conservatives. Some of them white supremacists, some of them Trump people, and some of them even QAnon people. So for instance, these landowners that the Sierra Club has been organizing to resist this eminent domain issue with the pipeline going through their lands or the pipelines, excuse me. I think there's about 1,200 of them. We've been told by the Sierra Club that we can't talk about climate to these people. We can't talk about ethanol. Ethanol is off limits. And of course, Indigenous issues like land back and sacred sites are not of any interest. And we've basically been told in not so many words, you're going to scare them off. So that's definitely a barrier.

But also not a barrier because it's really hard for us to work with these kinds of folks with these mentalities anyway, because honestly, when I think about it, why are we helping them protect their land

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from eminent domain abuse? It's stolen anyway. And that's the conversation that I would like to have more often. But unfortunately, when we do or when I do, because I'm the one that seems to push the envelope most in our organization, which makes sense as I'm the executive director, right? I find that I get told that I'm being too divisive, that I'm trying to build bridges, not burn them. But I'm not trying to burn any bridges at all. I'm trying to finally allow for honest conversation that does not include whitewashing. And somebody has to take that first step. And it might turn off some people initially, but maybe it will activate some folks to be more interested. Maybe some folks will take notice and want to look further into this or just have a conversation about it. And it could just even change their mind, just the slightest. And I think that's pretty cool.

So we have though still focused the majority of our efforts in this fight on environmental justice aspects of this. So the missing and murdered Indigenous relatives crisis, because these pipelines will bring man camps in brown and black communities who aren't being communicated with by the Sierra Club because they're working on the landowners who are 99.5% white, because 98% of agricultural land is owned by white folks in this country. And most land anyway is owned by white folks, right? And we're in Iowa, so that means that it's mostly white folks that are dealing with this eminent domain issue.

And so we've been focusing on people that don't own land, black and brown folks who are in communities where these pipelines are going through or by, and trying to get their attention on this and trying to communicate this information to them. In fact, we were just at the Sisseton Wahpeton reservation for a spiritual law meeting, and we discussed to a bunch of Dakota and Lakota tribes... We discussed with them these pipelines and how it's going to be coming through their lands. And so we're very happy to get that information out to them. After that, we're fine. All we want to do is get the information to them and then they can decide what to do. And then we just spoke to the Omaha nation as well about that. And we've been speaking to the Winnebago Nation as well, who has asked for an environmental impact study from the IUB, but then was denied. But still that helps.

And so yeah, that's what we've been doing. Essentially, just doing our best to communicate this information with brown and black folks, making sure that just because you don't own land, doesn't mean you don't get a voice. Making sure that that is our motto and getting the message across in that way because the issue of eminent domain and these pipelines affects every single person in the state. It doesn't just affect the people who have the land that it's going through. And when you think about it, some of these landowners might own a hundred acres or more, and they might live on the complete opposite end of their land where this pipeline is going. But right beside that pipeline might be a housing division or might be a school or a community where people who don't own land are situated.

So the landowner, in the end, sure, they might be mad because they're NIMBY folks, like "not in my backyard" folks. They might be like, okay, well, I don't want this pipeline going through my land just because it's my land, right? Because the idea of sharing in this colonial capitalist society is beyond their understanding. Don't tread on me mentality is very prevalent. I would say, not just in these conservative communities, but even in these liberal communities, I feel like they don't say don't tread on me, but I feel like they believe it.

Vivian:

Right. Right.

Sikowis:

Right? And so it might not affect them at all, it might just be that the pipeline's going through a piece of their land. Maybe it'll decrease some harvest productivity. But yeah, like I said, it's these communities

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that also need to be informed where we do know that these pipelines are actually going by some schools.

Vivian:

Definitely. So you're focused on informing members of our community about what's happening with the pipelines, making sure people know how it's affecting them. That it's not just affecting landowners, that it's affecting most everyone in Iowa. And you're talking about these barriers to discussing climate change and justice and how that's affected the pipelines and everything. So, how do the artistic strategies that you all use help facilitate that dialogue about climate change and justice?

Sikowis:

Well, again, it goes back to catching people's attention. So we get a lot of news coverage so more people can learn. And that's number one, I think. And then number two is it's inviting. I feel like art can be very inviting and it can really also affect people emotionally. So there's that as well. And yeah, I think that's what it does.

Vivian:

That's great. And you also mentioned this a little bit earlier, but you are also an artist yourself, a writer, a visual artist, and then you've talked about how you're an arts event organizer and kind of a catalyst. So as a visual artist, you've created your own digital and non-digital works that are often influenced, like you talked about earlier, by traditional Cree and Ojibwe artistic styles. Can you tell us a little bit more about your own practice as a visual artist and how this practice connects to your climate activism?

Sikowis:

Yeah, I mean, I think it has provided somewhat of a brand for us. I don't know if that's a good term for a nonprofit, but just something, I guess, consistency. Consistency, because I make so many of our graphics. You can kind of see a consistency to who we are. If you go on our Instagram page for instance, you can tell that maybe it's the same artist making a lot of stuff.

Yeah, and then in terms of my visual, well, it's all visual. My drawn art, what do you call it? Drawn art. Painted art. I've used some pieces of that I've made in the past to help with what we do. So that big, huge mural I was talking about earlier, I used a crane that I had drawn in the past to make that piece. I don't know.

And then of course, it's not just me, it's all these other artists. Trisha makes graphics as well, and some of her art... just some of her graphics are just so beautiful. And you can see how she has grown over time as well in learning how to do this work, because it's all grassroots, but it's all from an Indigenous perspective, and I think that's important. It's all Indigenous made.

In terms of Indigenous artists creating art to depict what was and what should be, I think I would be remiss if I didn't mention Lance Foster, the tribal historian of the Ioway of Kansas and Nebraska and the original inhabitants of so much of Iowa, which the state is named after. And he has written books on Iowa history from an Indigenous perspective, and been a huge mentor to many of us younger Indigenous folks that are working to keep Iowa's land safe and the people safe.

And there's this one piece that he's done, I just call it Corn Woman. It's a corn maiden, I guess, if you will, working the ground with a skirt made of corn. And it's really amazing to me. I love to use that piece because he's given me permission to use it in different contexts to uplift not only his work, but also the

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ideology behind it, like what it depicts. We've actually talked a lot about getting that particular piece made into a statue and put on the Iowa capital complex grounds in place of other racist and white supremacist statues that are there. So I would absolutely love to see that happen one day, and I'm going to continue to work on that.

Vivian:

I've talked about this with some other interviewees as well. This idea of changing the agricultural climate, economic social narratives that we are amplifying, and that art is a way to share and amplify different narratives that we need to be telling. So you're talking about making sure that your stories are being told through this consistent platform, whether that's social media or whether that's all of these protests, and then that gets into media and then other people see it, and they're taking posters. And yeah, that there are these ripple effects, it sounds like, from the work that you're doing.

Sikowis:

Yeah, I guess that goes without saying. Just thank you for... I mean, it's just so integral to what I'm doing. You're right, it helps provide the alternative message that we're trying to get across. I guess there's the art of writing as well, which I haven't even talked about. We do so much writing. There's the zine that's really popular that I wrote a few years ago, our perspective on Big Ag in Iowa, and then the beautiful art that Moselle made for the cover. The writing that Jessica Engelking does for our letter writing campaign. Trish as well. The youth interns. Ronnie has done some beautiful writing for our Truthsgiving website, our Truthsgiving zine. Then we have guest writers as well on our blog. So writing as well is a art form, and that has also been exceedingly integral. Exceedingly integral into what we do.

Vivian:

And it sounds like figuring out who in your community wants to tell their stories in different ways, whether that's visual artwork or whether that's writing through a zine or writing for a social media or writing articles or whatever that might be, and figuring out ways how to provide platforms to make that happen, and to let people share that story in the way that they know how to tell stories, because everybody does have a way that they communicate. You've talked about your artistic practice as healing as well, and a way to connect you with your ancestors and history. Can you talk a little bit more about this?

Sikowis:

Yeah. I started to do Cree-, Ojibwe-style art when I was just 12 years old. I believe I was introduced to it by a teacher at school when we were on a canoe trip, actually. And one of the pieces that I made actually won an award from the Governor General of Canada and was put into this book. And so it was kind of a big deal.

Vivian:

That's wonderful.

Sikowis:

I just kept drawing in that way and learning of that way by reading about it and looking at other artists from the past, like Norval Morrisseau who was an inspiration to me, and that's my style of art. And it

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really does speak to me and speak through me. My ancestors, I feel always speak through me with all that we do at Great Plains Action Society.

I don't really consider this a job. I consider it like a passion. It's my life's motivation. It's my goal to just try to get Indigenous perspectives out there and make some change to this colonial capitalist society, so that we can do better and live better lives. The lives that we're living, there's not a lot of compassion in this society that we live in, and I really want that to change. I want us to have an economy built on compassion, like a regenerative economy that relies on traditional ecological knowledge to make decisions rather than this idea that you can just keep taking whatever you want. So my art does definitely reflect that passion and desire and what I feel like my ancestors have told me to do.

Vivian:

That's really beautiful to think about. And also that you talked about starting this kind of artwork really young. And then earlier you mentioned that you love sharing these artistic practices with the young people in your organization and your community too, and inviting them into this process that it is kind of cyclical, that you felt like it was an integral part of your growing up, and now you're helping pass that on to other young people who are joining your efforts now.

Sikowis:

Yeah, I hope so. I hope so. I see it happening. I hope it keeps happening.

Vivian:

And earlier you talked about Great Plains Action Society, and you as a middle person, I think you said.

Sikowis:

Yeah.

Vivian:

You're creating opportunities for people. And in prior conversations that we've had, you've also talked about it as that you're a facilitator and a catalyst for artistic opportunities and organizing that you bring other artists into this work, you fundraise in order to pay them, you bridge the art with political action and community building. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the Climate Justice Summit you organized with the Buffalo Rebellion last year, and what your role was as this catalyst in bringing that event together.

Sikowis:

Well, none of the folks that I was working with had ever done something like this, so I think I was the only one that ever had organized something this big. And so I was mentoring a lot of folks, so they would also learn how to do it, which was really great. And those folks are younger folks, and also black folks and migrant and Latino folks, so it was really great to be able to do this with them. And one of the things right away, of course, that always comes to my mind is we have to have some art for this event. And so right away I contacted SunRose IronShell and asked if she could create a piece for us. And we talked about it. We brainstormed for a while and came up with this idea of a buffalo stomping on a tractor. I asked her to use the word ReMatriate, and she went to work on that.

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And she created this beautiful piece that is just really stunning and that became sort of our Buffalo Rebellion piece, I guess, if you will. Not just for the summit, but just to show in general what we're doing, because Iowa is the most biologically colonized state in the country, and it's because of farming, because of colonial capital's farming practices. And that's not just Big Ag, right? That's not just these big industries, it's also small farms that carry out these practices. So that was created for that conference, or maybe even beforehand, I can't remember.

And then I contact with Moselle Singh to see if she could create us a poster. And then from that poster, I realized, hey, maybe we can have some t-shirts. So I asked the group if we had money for t-shirts, and luckily we did. So then, we got about a hundred t-shirts printed. I think 120 actually. So that we could give them to every attendee that showed up, and then all of the members of the Buffalo Rebellion Group. So now we see these t-shirts all over the place. They're just so beautiful and people love them, so they have just the most beautiful art on them. Moselle Singh really does create stunning pieces, and I really do hope to see her flourish more as a movement artist. Also, SunRose. Both of them. I hope to see them both flourish more as movement artists.

Vivian:

And for our listeners, Moselle is also one of the interviewees on this podcast series, so you'll have to check out her episode as well. She'll talk about some of the artwork that she's created with Great Plains Action Society and Buffalo Rebellion. Thank you for sharing about that event and how you pulled arts and storytelling strategies into building the event and bringing people together. And it sounds like it goes back to that idea you talked about earlier, where you said there's this consistency in the messaging of Great Plains Action Society because you use this artwork, because you're using artwork from yourself and a variety of artists. That you continue to create artwork, so we see this thread that pulls everything together.

And it sounds like you all have done that with Buffalo Rebellion too. That it's a coalition of a bunch of different organizations. But that as a catalyst, kind of bringing those organizations together, you seem to have emphasized the importance of figuring out what is the image and what are the words that are going to pull all of these organizations together into our organizing efforts. So if that's Rematriate, that's kind of these big words and this idea of bringing buffalo back and land back and how that's connected to farming now. That's so powerful.

Sikowis:

Yeah. And I believe on the t-shirt it says, "Diversity, not uniformity." So that's really cool too.

Vivian:

Yeah.

Sikowis:

Yeah.

Vivian:

Yeah, I think maybe Moselle and I talked a little bit about that and how that idea refers to a lot of different things in Iowa that we're talking about land and people and ideas and how do we, like you said



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earlier, create space to be honest and have honest conversations about what's happening so that we can move forward.

Sikowis:

Yeah.

Vivian:

Much of the artwork of Great Plains Action Society is what you've referred to as resistance art, which is integrated into your political advocacy work, as we've heard. In your Theory of Change, you say most of the big change we seek always comes down to legislation. What role do you think arts and storytelling has played in your own work pushing for climate policy in particular?

Sikowis:

We just show up at the Capitol with it.

Vivian:

And trend on the news, I guess, right?

Sikowis:

Yeah.

Vivian:

Yeah. Yeah.

Sikowis:

We often show up at the Capitol with a lot of art. All that art I was talking about earlier has all ended up at the Capitol at some point. So, I guess you could call that lobbying. Just we get the attention of legislators as they're in session, coming out of session, and we often see them poking their head over the railings and watching us at our events there and us speaking, and then they see the art, and hopefully that affects them.

Vivian:

That it draws attention to what you're doing. It does tell a story. And it sounds like too. You have all of these different screen prints that then you can create multiples of and hand out to people so that everyone who shows up at the Capitol also can be holding a piece of art.

Sikowis:

Yeah.

Vivian:

It unifies.

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Sikowis:

Yes. Yeah. And I'm just thinking of Jeff Taylor, who last year, wrote legislation to close loopholes in eminent domain who's a Republican, but who I think does not like Kim Reynolds. And how both times that we've been there with art, he's come and taken every one of our signs.

Vivian:

Oh my gosh.

Sikowis:

So, he definitely agrees.

Vivian:

Well, yeah, I mean, the big question that we're trying to explore in this podcast series is how does and can art be used to start conversations? And maybe it's just as simple as you have this beautiful artwork out, and then someone you don't expect goes, wow, those couple of words and phrases I agree with, and that art is beautiful, so I'm going to take it and think on that more. That's big.

Sikowis:

It was interesting. Yeah, we actually were having a conversation with him, a private, the group of us with him, that we're putting this... Well, we weren't working on the legislation specifically, but we were helping with the event to get the word out, Food & Water Watch put that legislation together. But we did have that one poster there, which is very bright. It's like a peacock. It's bright blue, and it says Kim Reynolds in bright pink, and it says, "Stop with the fascism and work for the people" in bright yellow. And then it says, "No CO2 pipelines" in bright green. So it's just super bright. And he took all the posters, except for that one. He's like, yeah, I don't know if I can take that one, but I can just see the smile on his face.

But yeah, so we even have a picture of him holding one of the posters. So it's really cool. I mean, it shows you that maybe we can have these conversations that we can work across the table, even though it feels so impossible in Iowa. Sometimes this gives you a tiny bit of hope.

However, it is a really special situation where there are those of us that want to stop the pipeline simply because it's a bad idea for the climate and for the land and for the people, the health and safety of the people, and that they're those that just want to stop it because they don't believe in the abuse of eminent domain. So it sort of feels uplifting at times to think that we can all work together. But we do know that in the end, people are coming to address this issue basically because of very different reasonings, right?

Vivian:

Right.

Sikowis:

Yeah. But through that, we hope that we can create some good relationships that maybe in the future could be useful.

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Vivian:

Absolutely. And like you said, yeah, figuring out ways to invite a conversation, even if we're not all on the same page about what exactly it is that we value. Hopefully starting to make pathways where we can talk about what we value.

Sikowis:

Absolutely.

Vivian:

Which seems very hard to do as well.

Sikowis:

Yes, it is.

Vivian:

That we can't seem to get to that point to talk about what it is we value and how that might align in more ways than we think.

Sikowis:

Don't get me twisted. I know that there's not a lot of hope in Iowa to get the things done that we want to get done, but if we didn't have a voice at all, that would be worse. So we work basically just so that people can see and hear the alternative.

Vivian:

Right. And so that other people who maybe don't feel like they have a voice... you talked about this in the Theory of Change too. If you see people doing this work and showing up and amplifying these narratives, then there's a lot of power in realizing you're not alone. If that work is being amplified, if those stories are being amplified, and then you say, "Oh, maybe I can at least get connected or build relationships or be a part of this movement in some way."

Thank you so much for sharing that and for sharing so much about the wonderful work you do. I know we could probably talk for a very long time about all of the different projects you all have done, so I hope listeners check out Great Plains Action Society's website. There's lots of information just on the web, like we talked about earlier with lots of articles and social media and everything about the protests you all have done, the organizing that you've initiated, how you've been catalysts in the state, and also throughout the Midwest and all the way across the California as we heard. So you're doing really amazing work, and thanks for sharing that.

As we wrap up, I want to ask you, what are the three key ideas that you want listeners to understand about your work at the intersection of arts and climate dialogue?

Sikowis:

Art is really important for messaging when you're trying to make change, because it can tell a story with one quick glimpse, and this time that we live in now, that's very important, especially because social

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media has become the way we get messaging across a lot of the time. So it has to be visual in order to catch people's attention and then to hopefully read more about it.

The second thing would be that art is cultural. There's a cultural context to it for us as Indigenous peoples, and that we use it to uplift our culture and empower ourselves to revive our culture.

I guess the third thing would be that it creates community. It involves so many different people to create the art. I'd like to use the example of a piece that Christi Belcourt made, who's an Anishinaabe artist. She made a buffalo a while back, just a very simple outline of a buffalo with a heart in it, and she said, "Anybody can use this piece. You don't have to use my permission. You don't have to use my name. Just use it." So it's out there for the world, and it was made during the Standing Rock movement.

And when we were putting together our CO2 pipeline images that David Solnit was going to print for us, he took that buffalo and put it on a little graphic that said, "No CO2 pipelines." And I was like, "That's great. I love it. But we're trying to do something with Iowa artists." So I asked Moselle then to do something with buffalo. So then she created a piece with buffaloes. But because I had that piece made and shown it to the Buffalo Rebellion Group. One of the Buffalo Rebellion members, they decided to take that buffalo and make big white cutouts of it, like cardboard cutouts and put it on sticks, and then they took that piece to the event. And then Marie Krebs, one of our Apache volunteers that works with Great Plains, carried it in the event. And then the picture of her carrying it was taken by Karla Conrad. And that all happened because myself and Mahmud were connecting people and making things happen, right?

Vivian:

Right. Right.

Sikowis:

I mean, just think about all the people that are involved. And then don't forget the event itself was organized by a ton of us, the whole Buffalo Rebellion crew. And then don't forget about the hundred or so people that showed up to the event to make it an actual success. And the media. It's just there's so much that goes into this. That's why I say art brings community together, so I think that's a great example.

Vivian:

Thank you. Yeah, thank you so much for sharing those. I'm definitely going to walk away with those ideas. And my last question is, what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who might want to use artistic strategies to talk about climate change in agricultural communities?

Sikowis:

It doesn't have to be perfect and working on it in community is a great way to increase visibility of it.

Vivian:

Wonderful. And finally, before we leave, can you let listeners know how they can connect with you and your work?

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Sikowis:

Yeah, they can go to [greatplainsaction.org](http://greatplainsaction.org) and they can connect to all of our social media accounts from there. If you scroll to the bottom of the website, you can sign on to our email list. If you click on our About section, there's all of our emails there to contact us.

Vivian:

Thank you so much for talking with me today, Sikowis. It was really wonderful.

Sikowis:

You're welcome. Ay Hai Kitatamihin.

Vivian:

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue, and we hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at [ecotheatrelab.com](http://ecotheatrelab.com). We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback form in our show notes, and checking out The EcoTheatre Lab's website.

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