On September 3, 2014, in the lead-up to the People’s Climate March of September 21, the Concordia University Student Union, the Students’ Society of McGill University, Divest Concordia, and Divest McGill hosted the People’s Climate Tour in Montreal, which was organized by 350.org and featured a lecture by Bill McKibben, author and co-founder of the international environmental organization, as well as by Ellen Gabriel, a human rights activist from Kanehsatà:kę. Also present on the tour was Robert van Waarden, a young Montreal-based photographer, whose recent project, *Along the Pipeline* (2014), documents the stories of people who live along the 4,600 km path of the proposed Energy East pipeline, which, if realized, would transport more than one million barrels of diluted bitumen from Alberta’s tar sands to Saint John, New Brunswick, where it would be refined and exported. Van Waarden is a professional photographer whose work focuses on climate change as well as the social movements involved in climate change projects. He has photographed four United Nations summits on climate change, wind energy across the globe, coal plants in Tennessee, villages in the Arctic, and protests in Southeast Asia. For *Along the Pipeline*, he photographed and interviewed more than eighty individuals whose lives could be directly impacted by this pipeline project. With funding assistance from an Indiegogo initiative as well as Greenpeace, the Council of Canadians, and Environmental Defence, he interviewed city mayors, native elders and chiefs, fishermen, ranchers, and people from various walks of life.
life to uncover the ways that people are making sense of yet another environmentally damaging proposal. I interviewed van Waarden at his home in Montreal on September 8, 2014, to discuss this project and the growing climate change movement.

MARC JAMES LÉGER: Tell me about your new project, Along the Pipeline.
ROBERT VAN WAARDEN: The proposals for the Energy East pipeline hit the airwaves sometime around April of 2013. I found out about it while I was living in Europe—yet another pipeline. When I came back, I realized that this was something I could work on from a photographic and journalistic perspective. I knew some people who were interested in working on the pipeline issue already, so I approached them first. A few of those organizations put in some funding for the project. I then got a 4 x 5” film camera—a camera made in the 1970s for black-and-white film, with bellows. The travel time was about two months on the road. I started in New Brunswick, since I was already in eastern Canada. I spent ten days in New Brunswick and then came back to Montreal for a few weeks to figure things out. I then drove all the way to Alberta and worked my way back along the line. We put about seventeen thousand kilometers on the car, so there was a lot of driving. We interviewed about eighty people—mostly individuals—but there was one group, in Quebec. The idea was to find people from different walks of life to get a better idea of what’s going on, whether that meant politicians, farmers, ranchers, fishermen, First Nations groups, or activists and supporters.

MJL: Do you think that all of these stories put together create a coherent picture? Do you think that collectively we have a solution to the tar sands aspect of the crisis of global warming? How do you see individual will connecting with scientific knowledge and with political will?
RVW: My decision to photograph individuals comes from my previous work as a photographer and understanding how imagery is often used in the environmental or climate-related context. What you often see is landscape imagery or natural world imagery with polar bears or tigers. These are emblems that are used to raise awareness. What’s often missing, at least from a communication perspective, is the fact that people relate to other people and their stories. In that sense, I thought that a focus on the stories of people along the pipeline would help the audience pay closer attention. It would also allow people to see themselves. You could see “Henry the fisherman” and hear his opinion and think “maybe I should have an opinion on this issue as well.” So instead of “let’s save the whales”—because they, too, are going to be endangered by TransCanada drilling—you want to avoid the disconnect where people don’t know what to do in order to act.

Whether or not that forms a cohesive story is maybe not so important. It’s one story, and it’s what I have come up with in my travels. I think that, together, these individual parts are very strong. The images are created the same way, and through the interviews I try to get a similar kind of “picture” from someone. When the project is looked at from afar it results in a full body of work. As for what it amounts to, I think that what Bill McKibben said during the People’s Climate Tour is that science can’t do the work by itself, and so it comes down to movement. Do we collectively have a solution to global warming? Yes. Not only that, but we have to have one. We don’t have a choice. We will adapt, we will survive as the planet changes—that is, if we want to continue to have a life as we know it and to improve society in all corners of the globe. Science has been key to informing us about what’s going on, but it can’t create movement by itself.

In terms of the Energy East pipeline specifically, and for the people I met on this project, science doesn’t play a big role, but the idea of climate change does. Many people I met are concerned about the effects of tar sands development on climate change, especially if it is developed in the way that industry and the federal government would like. That is a reality, but outside of that, science doesn’t play such a big role. People are more concerned with the impact on water, on land, on jobs and the economy, on what it could mean for First Nations people, for instance, or what will happen if there is a spill somewhere. These are local and regional issues that are all related, and they are more tangible in some ways than what science is telling us. So the science is there to support these concerns, but for the people along the line it’s about real, tangible things that they can feel in their daily lives. For many people it’s not a question of how many parts per million are in the atmosphere, so there’s a big disconnect and that comes back to why I decided to focus on individual stories.

MJL: What are some of your inspirations for the aesthetic aspects of this project? If someone asked me to describe Along the Pipeline, I would have to say that it’s a cross between Richard Avedon’s In the American West (1979–84), with its large-format portraits, and Allan Sekula’s Sketch for a Geography Lesson (1983) or Fish Story (1989–95), which is about global oceanic commerce and containerization. Unlike Avedon, Sekula was concerned with photography as a social practice, especially since in the 1980s it was considered important to move the discourse of photography away from formalist aesthetics. Today, this seems less of a concern, in comparison with the need to move photography away from postmodern irony and cynical simulation games, and to produce images that matter to society more universally, or in a more generic sense, to use philosopher Alain Badiou’s terminology.

RVW: There’s no question that Avedon’s In the American West was an influence. I always appreciated his work from a purely aesthetic point of view. But you’re on the right track with Sekula, since Avedon’s portraits don’t tell us the stories of his subjects. For him, it was more a matter of showing a person who works here or there, or the vagrant on the side of the road.

MJL: Avedon photographed people somewhat like August Sander did, as social types.
RVW: Yes, they’re characters, but he didn’t go into what the image means or what their story is. But his aesthetic worked for me and I thought that instead of photographing people in front of their homes, or at work, I would make a conscious effort to bring stories into that type of still portraiture.

From what I see in photographic trends, whether it’s Instagram or what have you, the number of images that are being shared today and where photography is going make it difficult for me to connect aesthetics and politics in a narrow way. The decision to shoot in
black and white is a deliberate effort to slow down the process and to become very conscious about one or two things in the image that is being created. This is an effort to get away from the huge amount of digital information that we’re being hit with every day and instead to find a way to care about the project and the people involved. Does that link directly to politics? I don’t know for sure, but I wanted to slow things down. I now have an archive of one hundred twenty-five thousand images, and I can’t do anything valuable with all of this material, so I have to ask myself how I can think about it, and do something that matters.

MJL: How do class issues play into your work, if at all? The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu famously characterized photography as a "middle-brow" or "petty-bourgeois" art form, focused primarily on documenting family relations. Today, such "guilt relations" like family structure get reprogrammed as biopolitics—as surveillance, measurement, calculation, statistics, policing, security, governance, and as second-order cybernetics, with its constant feedback mechanisms. Image production becomes coextensive with technocratic management and the control of populations. If this shift is accurate, then it’s imaginable that some of the work that you’re producing could be used by governments or by oil corporations, just as much as it could be used by First Nations and environmental activists. I wonder, then, if some of Bourdieu’s ideas on what he called “the choice of the necessary” might not also say something important about how the depiction of collective concerns might generate defenses against market capitalism and biopolitical control.

RVW: I do recognize that my images could be used by all sorts of people for their own purposes. That’s simply the nature of imagery.

MJL: Is there a possibility of a resistant image that wouldn’t be easily misused?

RVW: The thing about portraiture is that it’s a sort of blank slate, really, and without the text, we don’t get the story. If you incorporate the text, you can’t so easily poach that image for your own use, but you could change the text and use it as propaganda for whatever you want. With regard to class and politics, one of the reasons I wanted to do this project was to provide another perspective through which to look at the Energy East proposal—one that was not the same as the media or the government line. We often hear that it’s about jobs and energy security, and that everyone supports it, even though you don’t look very far, and so my hope was that this project would give us another avenue to consider this proposal. That’s where the politics and class issues come in. I definitely made an effort to photograph the people you don’t otherwise hear from, the everyday people from all sides of the political spectrum.

MJL: Some people think that technology is going to save the day. I absolutely disagree with this kind of futurism. You can’t conflate matters of ideology and means of production. Other people, however, like Naomi Klein, think that only socialism or communism can save us from global warming and looming environmental catastrophes. The reason for this is that the free-market fundamentalism that neoliberal governments everywhere claim to endorse is primarily oriented toward profit and the interests of big capital, investors, and shareholders, and avoids any notion of the social good and social responsibility if it stands in the way of those interests.
Did you encounter this idea in any of your interviews or at any of the climate change conferences that you attended? I noticed that no one at the 350.org rally in Montreal mentioned socialist politics.

RVW: No one used the word “socialism” in particular, but many people were talking about the need to get back to the land—especially the First Nations activists I talked to. I don’t think any of them were advocating that we reject modern life, but there is the recognition that we need to get away from the growth and profit model, with everything being consumption oriented. Some people are thinking in bigger terms, in that sense, and the different political models that we need to consider. This I did encounter more often than the idea that we need to continue growing. Many people are thinking about returning to community and local solutions and living more closely within our means. I heard this all around, for example from the rancher in Saskatchewan, who has nothing against the pipeline, but who believes that as a society we need to live with what we have.

MJL: There’s an interesting book by Greg Sharzer called No Local: Why Small-Scale Alternatives Won’t Change the World (2012). He looks at how big solutions are sometimes actually more environmentally effective than local solutions, and so the communitarian rhetoric is sometimes blind to the need for serious state intervention and international cooperation on a mass scale.

RVW: Well, we need both. I think you need local community-oriented solutions in order to be able to support and propel that mass-scale solution. If you just drop a mass solution on people, you’re going to have trouble finding support at the base. So people need to recognize why the local matters. However, we won’t find the solutions quickly enough by asking people to look to their local communities, so I agree we need to have the bigger picture. Along the path of the proposed pipeline, we asked everybody: “Where do you think we should be going and what do you see as a solution? Is what we’re doing now the solution or do we need to be doing something else?” I was interested in finding out what Canadians and First Nations people think about this proposal and the direction in which Canada is heading. Even people who support the pipeline are saying that we need to develop wind energy and solar energy. So it’s complicated.

MJL: I noticed that some of the material that discusses the Energy East pipeline talks as though it’s a done deal, as though this question is closed and there is no need for an environmental impact study. This is clearly political pretense and posturing on the part of elites. If it weren’t posturing, they wouldn’t be lobbying municipalities and decision makers. How would you see your work functioning in this context? Do you think that aesthetics is capable of opening up the issue, whereas it’s otherwise perceived to be predetermined?

RVW: I certainly hope so. I started the project, in fact, because we’ve been told that this is an already accepted deal and that everyone supports it. In reality—no, everyone does not support it.

MJL: The opposite would be more true.

RVW: The opposite would be more true, at least in my experience. I do believe that there is a vital role that art and photography play in allowing people to look in greater depth, and I hope that the aesthetics of the portraits will encourage people to find out more and to realize that this isn’t a done deal, that there are people and
places that are saying no, but also that many are saying yes—so it's not an open-and-shut case, as it's being portrayed in the media or by politicians. We still have two years before final decisions are made and a great deal can happen in that period of time. So it's my hope that the quality of the imagery will attract people to learn more about this project and understand that it's not a closed case.

**MJL:** I would like to get your feedback on a few photographs of yours. I don't know the stories that go with them, but I do find them particularly compelling.

**RVW:** *Art Build at Power Shift* (2013) is an image from the October 2013 Power Shift event in Pittsburgh, which is a huge gathering of people, mostly youth, around climate issues. There are educational conferences and events that last for about three days where you can learn about climate justice, or mountaintop removal, or coal mining, or tar sands. And there's a big action that happens on the Monday. This is in Pittsburgh, which is a big coal-mining town, and this image shows someone who is creating one of the placards that will go into that demonstration. It's important for me to show the process of how anyone can get involved, how you can be a part of it, and also to show the amount of energy and thought that goes into creating a “photographic moment” the next day. Here you see how art plays a role in protest and social change. That's something that I think we need: the recognition that art and aesthetics can change opinion and attract people to issues. That's certainly one of the reasons I'm doing *Along the Pipeline*.

**MJL:** She's a good drawer. It looks like one of those deep ocean fish with the glow-in-the-dark lantern.

**RVW:** We need more artists, especially in Canada. This other image [*Power Shift Rally* (2009)] is a Power Shift event from 2009. It was set up to be a good image. The organizers knew what might work as a photograph, with people wearing green hardhats in front of the Capitol building in Washington, DC, showing the oncoming tide of environmentalism. What they didn’t know is that we were going to get about ten inches of snow the day before. But it totally blanketed the place in white and worked visually, even if it didn’t work for anyone wearing shoes. It's one of my favorite images. After I spent about five or six years documenting the climate movement, this is one that encapsulated the feeling that there is a growing group of people who are ready and are pushing politicians. The movement is getting bigger and bigger, and it's not just going to be in Washington; it's going to be around the world. It's an image that tells the story without even having to say anything about it. With the signs and the green hardhats we know exactly what's going on. The image has been used by a few organizations. It's been censored also. The National Wildlife Federation did an exhibit of environment-related subjects in the Rotunda of the US Senate and they chose this image and printed it up, but the Senate censored it and so the NWF wasn’t allowed to use it. That was one of the first times I had ever been censored [laughs].

**MJL:** Good for you. What about this image, *Activists Organizing for Power Shift* (2009)?

**RVW:** This took place the night before the action in Washington happened. There was a march on Capitol Hill and there was a civil disobedience action that happened around a coal plant in Washington, DC, which the government promised would be converted to a natural gas plant. They marched on the coal plant and a bunch of people sat in, but no one was actually arrested because there were people like McKibben and Wendell Berry, and some of the other big names in the US environmental movement, who came out for it. They circled the coal plant and sat down on the sidewalk and the police didn’t arrest them. It was one of the first mass civil disobedience actions around climate in the US. Although there were no arrests, it set the stage for further escalations, like the protests we’ve seen around the proposed Keystone XL pipeline.

This was one of the first “behind-the-scenes” images that worked for me as a journalist photographer. The previous image is fabricated in a sense and a good deal of work goes into a photo op like that. Photographing behind the scenes is important but tends not to be as important or as visually interesting as the planned event, but this image really works for me. It really tells the story of people mobilizing. I think it’s also important from a historical perspective because it documents the time when we’re starting to see the climate change issue be about movement and getting people on the street. How do you read it?

**MJL:** There is definitely a kind of romanticism to this picture—revolutionary romanticism, as well as the post-industrial feeling of the space they’re in, which is in a state of decay. Activists organize and move in places that are closer to the grassroots, but they’re trying to take the message to places...
like summits of various sorts, which are spaces that are freshly and lavishly designed jet sets, created and quarantined for ministers from around the world. Obviously, it’s stagecraft that’s designed for the people who are meant to see politicians only from a distance, as revered figures nobly carrying out their mandates.

RVW: What comes to mind is the beauty that is not beautiful. A photographer like Edward Burtynsky does a good job of that. I think it’s important that we can show devastating scenes or industrial development as aesthetically compelling and as a way to draw people’s attention. That’s obviously something that we can use as a tool in photography. In terms of change and the way that photography creates snapshots in time, when I look back on what I’ve created and what other photographers have created, what I think about are those moments in time that we can look at and consider how things have changed. So for this photograph, I can ask myself whether this was the beginning of something or not. It’s a moment that we can pull out and look back on twenty years from now and say, yes, that was something that was interesting. Our history is full of images that changed the world. Why those images become iconic I don’t know, but I suppose what’s interesting for me, looking at my own images, is how they did in fact capture something of those moments. That’s the role that photographers have the luxury of being able to play. It allows, in this case, the movement to recognize itself and where it started. Without that visual history we lose some of that.

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