The Art of Resistance

The life's work of Susan Simensky Bietila

Tom Schulte

2026

a review of

Front Lines: A Lifetime of Drawing Resistance by Susan Simensky Bietila. PM Press, 2026

In *Front Lines*, Susan Simensky Bietila documents a lifelong relationship with anarchism defined by praxis over theory. Her journey began with the 1967 Provo anarchist youth movement in Amsterdam, where she was exposed to "temporary autonomous zones," creative squatting, and street demonstrations.

This anti-authoritarian model shaped her understanding of art as a catalyst for change, leading her to embrace consensus-based collectivism and direct action within feminist, anti-war and New Left struggles.

Bietila's work is not merely decorative; she gifts us, in the words of Cris Siqueira of Lions Tooth Bookstore in Milwaukee, a "handy manual" for aligning artistic practice with political ideals. Susan provides practical guidance on everything from mud stencils to "art builds" involving giant puppets and cardboard sturgeons.

This collaborative ethic extended to her own family when she joined her son at an international anarchist gathering. "In 1996, my sixteen-year-old younger son, Smitty, told me that he was going to Active Resistance (AR), an international anarchist gathering being held in Chicago that he had read about in the Fifth Estate... [see "Anarchy in Chicago: Active Resistance at the Democratic Convention: Planting seeds for an anarchist movement," FE #348, Fall, 1996] Smitty wanted to help make giant puppets with David Solnit, a California activist who was leading what is now called an art build...It was a week-long event with workshops and strategizing sessions, delicious vegan meals... My son was right. It was wonderful."

The memoir's closing chapters focus on recent grassroots organizing in Wisconsin, specifically regarding water protection and Indigenous sovereignty. Bietila highlights the "Love Water, Not Oil" protests against the Enbridge Line 5 pipeline stretching across Michigan to Ontario, where activists partnered with Anishinaabe water protectors.

These recent actions emphasize treaty rights and nonviolent civil resistance, connecting local struggles to movements like the 2016 Standing Rock occupation. Bietila donated art, organized artists, and addressed medic needs arising from the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Bietila portrays a continuum of resistance where art and solidarity serve as essential tools against extractive projects like the Back Forty Mine, a proposed open-pit metallic sulfide mine in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, while fostering long-term community power to catalyze change.

Her art activism favors direct action and creative disruption, reflecting core anarchist practices as she moved fluidly among New Left, feminist, antiwar, and community struggles in a lived ethic that is anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, collaborative, and rooted in direct action.

Tom Schulte lives, bicycles, and reads in an unincorporated area of St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana.

fifth estate

Tom Schulte
The Art of Resistance
The life's work of Susan Simensky Bietila
2026

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/418-summer-2026/the-art-of-resistance
Fifth Estate #418, Summer 2026

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net