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Navigating the Curator-as-Artist Divide

Good afternoon. Having been invited to present for this context—Clive [Robertson] mentioned this—I started looking around at different things that I was aware of, including the publication out of Banff in 1996, *Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future*. I started to question this, I suppose, closer to home in terms of my own practice, coming into artist-run culture as the administrator, then director, of Hamilton Artists Inc. in Hamilton, Ontario from 1994 to 2002. Beginning as an artist/administrator and eventually becoming the administrative director and a de facto artist/curator and, through a series of projects, a curator slash artist, the notion of a fluid sensibility develops. In fact, what struck me in this regard was—again as Clive mentioned—Jens Hoffmann’s project *The Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist*, which you can find online but is also a printed publication.

This struck me as not so much a provocative question but as an interesting starting point for my own thoughts as to where I began as an artist with a talent for organizing exhibitions and writing on behalf of other artists, to developing a certain administrative skill set over the years that increasingly and in spite of (or despite) the fact that I went back and did my MFA degree a few years ago at the University of Buffalo in studio-based practice that I’ve in fact converted to being a curator at a regional public art gallery—Cambridge Galleries, both the Queen’s Square and Preston spaces.

So I guess by asking the question about this whole notion of replacing curating, the kind of dialogues that were proposed in Jens Hoffmann’s project, a lot of that discussion... most of it was entirely anecdotal, because so few of us had actually seen *Documenta* while we were in school at the time, so the critique that the project was overly didactic, too journalistic, that there were six hundred hours of video, that it was impenetrable, etc.... what struck me more than anything on some level was that there was very little actual discussion of what the artworks themselves were

like, let alone the kind of theory or ideas that were being put forward as part of—literally—five different platforms. And so it made me think of the notion of taking things back in terms of my own practice.

I approach this job—and it is a job—as an artist and as someone who believes that they have something to say in terms of working as both an artist and a curator. I find myself over a ten-year arc from 1994 to now, in the position of being, in name and in title, an institutional curator at a public gallery, which is... interesting. It's an interesting kind of arc, having maintained a regular and ongoing exhibition history of my own during this same period of time. So I thought about some of the problems that I've run into and experienced. Initially I've written more of an overview—which is something Clive [Robertson] has been able to do far better than I—so it's probably just better if I speak about my own experiences in regards to the *Recycle Project*, which was a collaboration between Hamilton Artists Inc., the Art Gallery of Hamilton, and McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, Ontario, in 2003, while I was still a graduate student in Buffalo.

I wanted to present this as a case study of sorts, of a transition from what starts as an artist-run, artist-determined or artist-curated project, and inevitably morphs into something else. And the problematics that evolve around this in regards to the idea of a local or a community-based art practice, which I think is particularly pertinent when one is operating on the regional fringe of the Greater Toronto Area. If you're operating in Hamilton, in Guelph, in London or Windsor, you constantly and inevitably have a dialogue with Toronto, and with what's happening in New York or Paris or internationally on some level, but there is also this tension between maintaining a sort of loyalty to a localized art practice, and how that kind of frisson occurs... the kinds of problematics that simply occur when one steps outside of the prescribed boundary of a local art practice and actually starts working on things on a more critical or theoretical level. This is an observation based on my own experience, working at a—for lack of a better term—"regional" artist-run centre, which is regional only in the sense that it's not in Toronto, or it's not in Vancouver, or it's not in Montreal, for instance. I don't know if the term "regional" at this point has a specific meaning in terms of operating in southern or southwestern or central

Ontario, aside from the fact that it's not Toronto, so there's automatically this kind of opposition that's set up, that on one hand I understand but on the other hand I find is generally not very helpful. Something that I think can be discussed as a kind of rear-guardism, where many of the gains and the notions of artistic self-determination that come out of the '70s, through the artist-run network, through *Parallelogram* and ANNPAC, have over time become entrenched in a community like Hamilton, where there's the sense that nothing else can happen aside from it being a localized or purely regional type of project. There's a kind of... a lack of permission to work with Toronto or to work with Montreal or to work internationally. So as the Canadian art scene as a whole over the last ten to fifteen years in particular takes on a larger internationalist, even global, role—and is certainly being recognized as such—at the same time, some of the have-not communities—Hamilton's a good example—are put in a position where basically there is this fight to determine what the level of engagement with contemporary art should be within the community.

This is also tied to the Art Gallery of Hamilton. For instance, they've recently been doing a large renovation and how that will or will not affect the local arts community or the local arts economy is in question. Hamilton's in a unique position because you're connected to Toronto by a forty-five minute GO service, you're connected by highways—driving in is not a problem in any way, shape, or form—but there's still very much this very typical us-versus-them sort of rivalry, which no one in Toronto gives a crap about, really, to be honest, but it nonetheless exists. And as much as, on one hand... as someone who considers himself an artist and a curator based in Hamilton (even though I work at Cambridge Galleries and I have other interests and other contacts and connections), I consider myself someone based in that community and what I do has a basis in that community. At the same time, I'm troubled by the sometimes real, often arbitrary grandstanding that takes place, and it's often this notion of the curator—the curator as kind of gatekeeper... and the allowable level of authorship a curator can take in terms of putting a project together, selecting artists, and taking a narrative lead on a project—that this conflict stems from.

The counterposition seems to be a kind of labour-based sense of entitlement, a sense that what should be done is that shows should be put together based on quotas and entitlements on some level. That, basically, this person is an artist who's been doing art for this long in the community and therefore they deserve to be in that show. I'm basically of the general opinion, that no, I disagree with that position. I think it should be based on context and whether it's appropriate for that person to be in that show or not.

Anyways, I've kind of run on way too long just to talk about this one project: *The Recycle Project*. This started out as part of a series of off-site outdoor projects that I helped to initiate in the Hamilton area, in partnership with Shirley Madill at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, and with the McMaster Museum of Art, using Hamilton Artists Inc. as an office and as a funding front. We started putting together these large collaborative outdoor projects and applying for funding, from the Canada Council Millennial Arts Fund or the Ontario Trillium Foundation or OAC Special Projects, to do off-site projects that were based on notions of artist intervention or site responsiveness.

The Recycle Project initially set out to be a project that would coincide with the World Cycling Championship, which Hamilton was hosting in 2003. We set out to take advantage of potential funding available through that, but because of mediating circumstances happening with that event and the fact that the city was trying to put on its best face, etc., we got sidetracked. Some of the problems that occurred go right back to that first initial decision to pursue this... when a large international event comes to a city that size, you are basically relegated very quickly to the sidelines. What was initially discussed and talked about as a project that would be very urban and would actually take place in the downtown core... partway through the process of coordinating this, we found ourselves without a site because the city had taken back every available piece of land, including the Art Gallery of Hamilton's Sculpture Court, for things like stands and the media, and for dressing rooms, etc. In some ways, we took on this impossible initiative... it was one of the first projects that I had done where the possibility of funding came before the actual idea, and I'm positing that that's probably a bad thing in the long run and that we paid the

price for that from the outset, because we didn't have things planned out as well as we should have, and it led to a cascade of negative effects down the road. So I'm going to just go through the slideshow and talk about the project and some of the problems we ran into.

One of the first problems that we ran into right off the bat was this notion of inviting outsiders in, that this wasn't just a show that was advertised locally and that the call for submissions was not limited to "local" artists... that we were inviting artists from across Ontario, particularly Toronto, to apply. The fact that the first three artists selected included Germaine Koh, followed by others, ended up becoming a huge issue in the community. In a sense we were being called out for ignoring the local community, even though the fact was that the project was always going to involve area artists, it's just that the definition of what constitutes an area artist came into question.

There is this sense that this project ended up being a kind of switching point for me, where I almost... I cease to be perceived as the artist and become the curator on some level, and all of a sudden I'm playing on the other team. Right? I'm working with the institutions. Danger, right?

I'll just foreword this by saying that—I'm going off topic from my abstract but I think it's useful because I think a lot of people are addressing some of the same issues—that this is actually a project that I'm very proud of but it was an awful experience at the time for different reasons. So personally, when I came to this panel, I started thinking of presenting this as a sort of case study, an example of what goes wrong (or right) in these sorts of projects when curating outside of gallery spaces, which are protected environments. What happens?

Germaine Koh did one of the projects. She reappropriated a project where she was placing her journal listings in the classified ads section of *The Globe and Mail*, and basically did a macroscopic version of it, where every night her journal postings were sent to an area artist and colleague of mine, Simon Frank. In the evenings, he would change the text on a standard mobile sign, which was set up very specifically in front of the McMaster Museum of Art, strategically, right beside the

GO bus stop. At about 3:30 or 4:00 every day, when classes let out, you'd have this clustering of thirty, forty, fifty people around the piece at all times. And fifty feet away from it was an actual university sign—advertising tickets for the Sloan concert or whatever—so there was this nice confusion between the function of the signs, where one was a real sign and the other one was also a sign, but was it art or was it a sign? Particularly for the people taking the GO bus, over a period of time they'd have a relationship to that text, because it was changing on a daily basis.

One problem we did have is it seemed that no matter how much text we received from the mobile sign company we were always missing letters. So you see there's an O missing here, there's a T missing there. We never seemed to have enough letters.

The second artist was James Carl. We resited a piece that was originally installed at the Blackwood Gallery, outdoors on the U of T Mississauga campus. The piece is called *Proposed Monument for a Clover Leaf*, and the intention was to have the piece off on the side of a highway, but instead we found this great little hill in the midst of the great utopian *Space 1999* architecture of the McMaster Hospital, and it functioned as this great odd thing—this seven-foot-high beach ball. It's shiny, and it's absolutely approachable. It looks like it's about to roll down the hill. Because of the black stripe—the colours coordinate in a Mondrian colour scheme—there's this slightly sinister edge to it as well. Here's a good shot of it within the utopian architecture.

So we were really trying to play off this notion, for lack of a better word, of the everyday, of how we can reascribe the real. So the mobile sign is a very common thing that's been appropriated with the addition of Germaine's text intervention. James's was the closest thing to a traditional public sculpture, but its form denied itself constantly, and it was a cheeky comment on marketing and commercialism.

We also invited Adrian Blackwell to create an inflatable structure which he ended up nicknaming "The Monster". We set it up in the arts quad, which is between the Fine Arts building and the food court and administration centre. This posed its own set of problems, because, initially, we weren't aware of the fact that Adrian

wanted it to be completely mobile. It was not going to be tied down in any way, which obviously could cause problems on campus.

During the night of the opening—here’s a great heroic picture of Adrian—during the first night, after a number of us had gone home at 10:00 or 11:00 that night, Adrian and Kika Thorne stayed behind to take some footage. What we didn’t count on was that, essentially, there’s a pub directly beneath the piece. And so, at 1:00 in the morning, Adrian and Kika are still there, and they’ve got their video camera, and all these, like, footbally guys are coming out... and Adrian really wants people to use the piece. So they’re climbing all over it and they’re rolling it around the quad, which is the intended function, but then they’re trying to roll it over this barrier, onto the patio of the pub, and then the bouncers got involved. So what ended up happening was, we had to set it up as a temporary installation that was only on display at preset times. Literally, you’d have to deflate the whole thing, and store it, and then reinflate it. We set up a schedule between Adrian’s and my own availability and some students we had helping us out, and basically it was on display Wednesdays from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM and Sundays from 11:00 AM to 5:00 PM. We actually had to post a schedule. In fact, there wasn’t anyone really guarding the piece but we couldn’t just leave it out on campus all the time. And dealing with the campus...

...one becomes aware of all the invisible administrative boundaries that one crosses. Bryce Kanbara, who’s a Hamilton-based artist, activist, and gallerist—he runs you me gallery and was the founder and the first administrator of Hamilton Artists Inc. back in the ’70s—his piece was a giant drywall installation that was going to be done on site. It was mammoth—I think it was like six or seven hundred sheets of drywall—it’s propping up this tree—and this caused difficulties right from the beginning.

First with the administration. Even though we told them we were doing a piece using hundreds of sheets of drywall, and diagrams were submitted, they didn’t really understand it until eight hundred sheets of drywall showed up on site. Then there was a complaint from a gentleman who lived across the street who found it offensive, so we got into a protracted battle over that. This is actually Bryce’s

second choice of site and it's right beside the nuclear reactor at the university. We had to move it from one site or another, so this basically turned into a labour negotiation at this point, because I had to find funds to pay Bryce to essentially take down his piece and reinstall it after already having installed three hundred sheets of sheetrock. This made the local press, and it turned into a big thing... and then, of course, the piece was vandalized. We knew that this was going to happen—the Tim Horton's mug there is just great, a very Hamilton sort of thing.

As things deteriorated, I'm dealing with phone calls in Buffalo on a daily basis. The university administration unilaterally decided that they were going to fence the piece off, because they claimed it was a public hazard at this point. So this is the sign someone put up: "Please do not climb on the sculpture", because they were worried about liability. So this is essentially [laughing] how the piece ends up.

[audience laughter]

That should give you a sense of the scale and again, the tree was used because it was actually marked for destruction. The tree was being removed, so the piece was called *Life Support*. It was referencing the painting *The Wreck of Hope* (Caspar David Friedrich) but also Melville's white whale. Bryce actually does a lot of smaller drywall sculptures, like studies or sketches, so this is like a giant sketch.

We also had an interactive piece by the PED Collective based in Buffalo. It included a small fleet of bicycles that had audio elements that were pedal-activated. You'd have to sign out a bike, you'd get a helmet and the T-shirt, and you'd drive the bike around this fictional path around the campus. The audio was made up of different histories about the campus, about the city—some fictional, some true—woven into a narrative. So it was like a pedal-operated Janet Cardiff.

We also did a number of responsive performances. We contacted the McMaster Dancers and the Hamilton Dance Company, and had the students actually respond to the pieces. So this was the Hamilton Dancers. They did a really nice performance using Adrian's piece. They used giant rubber bands, as kind of... a signifier, I guess.

And the final gesture was by Simon Frank, who dug a hole. He spent an afternoon digging a hole in front of McMaster Museum of Art—in the rain, I might add. He looks so happy digging a hole. Then we buried this rootlike heart object that he had cast in bronze as a gesture of renewal and hope. So we ended the project with this gesture of hope or eulogy. Everyone took a turn burying it, and it's still there, there's a sign marking it. You can just see Germaine's piece in the background.

So I learned the hard way a lot about the pitfalls and pratfalls of this kind of curatorial project. It wasn't the first off-site public project I'd done but it was certainly the first that ended up on the front page of the local paper as a debacle. I had... literally, there were email death threats being sent, which seems ludicrous! It seems absolutely ludicrous, and the only thing that saved it for me at the time was that I would run into students in the arts programme who knew nothing about the infighting and backbiting that was going on and were actually very engaged having all this stuff happening on campus, because they really hadn't seen a lot of outdoor art, aside from some very traditional work, on campus.

What happened is that this really fed into my own practice, the way that I approach my own work more and more, now that I am a—quote/unquote—“curator”, when I work in sited spaces. For instance, here's a long line of text appropriated from the essay “Ecstasy and Inertia” by Jean Baudrillard. I carved this into a forty-five-foot-foot long wall behind a glass façade for the *Future Cities* project, which served as the Art Gallery of Hamilton's off-site space while they were undergoing renovation. This piece, *Passage*, was visible twenty-four hours a day from the plaza level of Jackson Square. If you walked up to the gallery site from the plaza level it was at relative eye level but inside the gallery it was just above my head height. So you're looking up at this text that was carved directly into the wall.

Similarly, a group of us were invited to do a project at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery—*Forewords*. I had this magnetic text made. It was installed on a girder, and loosely and poetically suggests the notion of walking in galleries, looking at things, going into libraries... how one can drift through these spaces and find things, and the fact that it's only when you're not really looking for things that you often find them. So it's a poetic riff on that idea. The letters are still there. We're leaving them

up for another winter. They're quite pleased with it, so that's kind of nice.

Here's a recent piece I've done at the Royal Botanical Art Gardens this past summer. It was sited there, riffing on the nineteenth-century notion of the botanical garden—there's also a cemetery across the street, a rather large cemetery—being a place of contemplation, a site of leisurely activity that one would go to on weekends. You might go to admire art in the Royal Botanical Gardens or the cemetery. It's also a wordplay. The piece is called *Double Word Score*, playing off the notion of the iris, the flower, but also the iris or eye of the camera—people take pictures here all the time. The word “rise” suggests heliotropism or resurrection, which is something that happens in gardens all the time. The placement between the benches and the trees was very important, the idea being that two old men could sit there and play this intellectual game.

The thing I'll end with is a vinyl text intervention, *Passages*, that I did for this year's CAFKA project (Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener and Area). The theme was “X Industria”, and they situate artist projects in the Kitchener downtown city hall for ten days. What I proposed was a reworking of the proto-Situationist text—in French, *ne travaille jamais*—“never work”—as a form of giving up, appropriating the text on one hand but also giving up authorship. I approached more than two dozen colleagues, artists, collaborators, and asked them to rewrite the text in their native languages, which usually weren't their first languages, but their parents' languages, as would be my own case with Croatian. So here was Millie Chen's text in Chinese, and Japanese by Bryce Kanbara. There's Dutch by Diane Bos. That on the right is my mom's translation of the text in Croatian. Basically, I affixed this text over the second-floor windows of Kitchener city hall, because the theme of the project was “X Industria”—it was all about this notion of labour. Kitchener, like Hamilton, is a blue-collar town that really doesn't have a blue-collar industry any more but has ceded to something else. In fact, in Hamilton, which is ostensibly a steel town, health sciences has been the biggest employer for the last ten years, so “steel town” is a bit of a misnomer, but that's what you see from the highway.

So for me, the interesting notion was I ended up being the curator or art director on my own project. I had different artists sending me their handwritten texts and I

ended up with eighteen different languages, including Farsi and Finnish and Korean, for instance. So my job was to do all the digital production necessary to get the vinyl produced, and it led to these two windows on the second floor of the city hall with the French translation—*ne travaille jamais*—and the German translation—*arbeitet nie*—side-by-side—Kitchener being originally called Berlin. Even the theoretical posturing of the original text comes out of German and French philosophy and theory. These were cleverly placed, because I knew that this was where city hall workers came to read and have cigarettes during their lunch hour, so I was happy to have city employees sitting underneath this text that said “never work”. It was actually quite nice.

So that’s it. I’ll wrap it up. I’d like to end with this notion that I wrote down—somewhere here, with everything else I forgot to read.

So despite, or in spite of, or to spite everything that’s happened through this project and process, I see that I don’t wear two hats. I’ve just got one very big hat that allows me to do all of these different things. Essentially, whether I’m curating or whether I’m making artwork, I consider my practice to be generative. Whether as an artist or as a curator, I consider myself a problem-solver. For me, one activity always informs the other.

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