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BEING IN PHOTOGRAPHY: AN INTERVIEW WITH KELLY LYCAN
In recent years, horizontality has emerged as a key concept in the art field: it is how progressive circles of curating, art making, and criticism now conceptualize critique. Horizontality is a cipher for a range of critical tactics, politically engaged practices, extra-curricular work outside the white cube, work inside institutions, work against the autonomous object, work that involves the problem of user-ship, collaboration, duration, identity, and all manner of unpacking the vertical strata that divide and organize the Neo-Liberal world order. But horizontality has also been a central trope in twentieth century art, leaving its trace across a range of practices that would include the work of Jackson Pollock, Carl Andre, Alan Sekula, Annette Messager, Doris Salcedo, Janet Cardiff, Susan Lacy, Pierre Huyge and many others. Finally, it has left its mark within phenomenology, has proven to be one of the central axiological problems of deconstructive criticism, and has a very real purchase on the crucial problems of process philosophy. In this issue of Scan by CoLab, we have tried to capture some of the intricacies of this history, and we have tried to pragmatically reach out to other people in the field who are working in ways that horizontally extend the way in which we understand, value, and engage with contemporary art.

Shep Steiner, David Foster, April 2016.

Erin Manning is University Research Chair in Relational Art and Philosophy in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal. She is the founder of SenseLab, the author of Always More Than One: Individualisation’s Dance (Duke, 2013) and Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty (Minnesota, 2008). More recently with Brian Massumi, she co-authored Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience (Minnesota, 2014), which provides the focus of the following conversation. The Minor Gesture (Duke 2016), Manning’s latest book will be released this year. Given her achievements and Massumi’s prodigious publishing record from 2014-15 alone—What Animals Teach Us about Politics (Duke 2014), The Power at the End of the Economy (Duke 2015), Politics of Affect (Duke 2015) and Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception (Duke, 2015) there should be little doubt that Thought in the Act is a major contribution to thinking the borders of art, philosophy and politics today. Indeed, Manning and Massumi are undoubtedly the two most important public intellectuals working in Canada at the present moment. A group of graduate students talked with Erin Manning by phone on October 21, 2015, a few days after the Canadian Elections.

ON ECOLOGIES OF THINKING AND ECOLOGIES OF PRACTICE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIN MANNING.

Kelley Morrell: In your book Thought in the Act one sentence in particular struck me and I quote: “The middle is not the average but an excess, and it is through the middle that things grow.” This is raised in the context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of disjunctive synthesis. I wonder if you could speak to this quotation especially with regard to the site you have created called SenseLab.

Erin Manning: Yes. For my way of thinking—and this is more Whitestream than Deleusian, although I don’t really make a difference between the two, because I think Deleuze was very influenced by Alfred North Whitehead—a philosophy of process is by its very nature a philosophy of the act. As a consequence it never can incorporate everything that it produces, so there is always an excess, and what is produced is always produced by the middle. And what I mean by that is what we come to know as the identities of what are produced—the people, the object, etc.—are ways that the ecology identifies itself as such. So in a context of working between art and philosophy and activism you really run up against this tension between identifying something as the form of what is—for example, it could be a belief in the need for a general politics, for a general philosophy of the form of what it is—for example, it could be a belief in the need for a general philosophy of life, for a general politics. It is as though to give you a very contemporary example, we met this morning—precisely, to give you a very contemporary example, we met this morning to look at what the conditions are for the setting into place of those kinds of as general concepts. It is not as though they can stand in for all the other forms of political representation, speaking of the 2015 Canadian election—and kinds of limits that structure a whole set of identities around them, as ways of being or ways of acting. The work that we do is a bit suspicious of the way that those identities come to be thought of as general concepts. It is not as though they can stand in for all the thinking and all the acting that was happening. So what we try to do is look at what the conditions are for the setting into place of those kinds of general concepts and then attempt to create within those conditions the opportunities for a certain kind of modality of attention that would be capable of attuning to the more-than in those initial conditions. This is what we mean when we ask how the middle produces an excess. More precisely, to give you a very contemporary example, we met this morning to think about the way that the election organized or potentially organized a certain amount of political lethargy. Because it reorients the work of many people on the left to a government that speaks from the centre, many people of the left who would have preferred to vote Green or NDP, ended up voting for the Liberals in order to get Harper out. How do you find the energy of that kind of momentum in a moment where there are no voices to speak directly to it? What are the techniques that you can invent that would activate or create an attenuation around those kinds of excesses?

KM: Could you ground this in your activities in SenseLab?

EM: SenseLab is really a constant experimental process. We do not have membership and we do not have an itinerary. We function around the momentum of what feels urgent at a given interstice and this momentum can be foregrounded by anybody. Somebody could arrive for the first time and make a proposal or we might move upon an idea put forth by somebody who has been there for the last ten years - we don’t orient according to pre established goals. There are a lot of pretty spectacular failures as you can imagine. We come together around many habits, including, for example, the habits of consensus seeking; or the habits of reifying certain forms of process or certain forms of action, so I would say that the work that happens around the SenseLab is never comfortable or very rarely comfortable. It is really deterritorializing: it uproots us, I think, but what we try to do is to keep creating an environment where that disorientation can be as productive as possible. Definitely today, in the context of the imminent election and local forms of activism around electoral politics, it did feel like we needed a gathering to think through how to reconnect from the limitations of electoral politics toward the exploration of the micropolitical gestures that seep through and potentially reweave macropolitics. Taking place right now in Montreal as we speak—it is the reason I am not at home—is an amazing event that is called ‘The Day Without Culture (Journée sans culture),’ where artists and thinkers and activists have come together to think about how else we might make our practices operative.

Mallory Donen: You mentioned the idea of discomfort as part of the processes and projects at SenseLab. I think a lot of times we artists find getting a balance between making things which are comfortable and important to us and things which are really uncomfortable. Where do you find that balance in your own artistic process?

EM: Well, if I were to put my cards on the table I would have to say that I have never found any particular balance. I am always running after that particular concept. But I have to say that one of the reasons there is this organized day here in Montreal (Journée sans culture) is because artists are extremely tired. I think there is the sense of a great urgency in not knowing how to be in all modes and all places at once—how to make our work work without placing it in the register of the neoliberal definitions of work and creativity? I think many artists know that the worst kind of work we can do is didactic work—work that places our concerns at the forefront in an explicatory way. That is not interesting. We don’t need to prove things with our art. A question that has come up often on this day “without culture is, ‘how is it possible for art to open up an interstice in thought, or action?’ How to energize the processional middling that activates practice and make it operative under other conditions? I think this is a kind of a hit and miss question, but that is what art does: it creates the opportunities for hitting and missing.

With particular reference to SenseLab, it has always seemed important to me to distinguish the difference between the collective work that we do and our individual work. And the reason I say that is because they are different temperaments between the artwork we do and sign as our own, and the collective practice of pushing the limits of what a universal practice at the interstices of art, philosophy and activism can do. And so we try to create a balance between the gestures that are honed in a more solitary practice and the sharing of techniques at the level of the collective. Over time, I have come to believe that the solitary is also collective, but at a different scale. Doing work alone in the studio or at the...
In my hunch was that I could maybe give people an opportunity to see that eight years. I had a sense that there was something to be explored here the practice of what I called ‘relational movement’ for about seven or own practice as a dancer into the environmental, even how to think it. EM: the movement of dance and getting people to do non-scripted dances. Can in the second half of the book you discuss the first event at SenseLab, a performance called Dancing the Virtual from 2005 where you talk about in the ‘ebb and flow’ of pedestrians ‘on a crowded rush hour sidewalk.’

Bonnie Marin: In the first chapter of Thought in the Act you speak about the ‘ebbs and flows of pedestrians’ on ‘a crowded rush hour sidewalk.’ You conjure up people coming from the subway and going to their office, manoeuvring themselves between other pedestrians on the street. You here see to bint at a sort of motion that is always passing. Later in the second half of the book you discuss the first event at SenseLab, a performance called Dancing the Virtual. Can you talk about the movement of dance and getting people to do non-scripted dances. Can you relate these two moments you highlight are just two sides of the same coin, but the relational movement is happening all the time—on the sidewalk, in the thought in the act.

Shawn de Roux: Erin I was interested primarily in the sections in which you discuss autism. I do have a sibling who has autism so I think that is why it was examined as much as it did. I found much of your description quite beautiful and so pinpoint, but I could not help feel that because autism is such a spectrum it is difficult to pinpoint certain experiences and attributes while doing justice to the lived experiences. Right on the spectrum I was curious how you approached this and how you feel artists should approach taking on topics such as this without limiting them to one perspective.

EM: Yeah I think that’s a really important question. You might not know it was the case of thinking in movement, thinking in texture – these are not generally what is the way the world choreographs movement - movement that does not belong to an individual but can be moved by individuals, as opposed to individuals. The individuals keep doing these practices. I think of myself as a used car philosophy salesman! I work with artists, I work to deadline and do my best to be patient with processes that I find that if you do that it does not feel like an ideological issues as you them?

Pancho Puelles: I am concerned about the amount of capital being injected into the arts in Canada and Europe, especially with regard to technologies. We negotiate the outcomes on the level of individual artists and institutions are all going to be different, but what are the larger ideological issues as you them?

EM: I definitely think that we want to recognize the ways in which the art world is changing. I think the internet is really into several disciplines in this case. I find it to be a definition is making and create new ideas. This goes right to the heart of some of the roots of activism and the question of how new ideas have to be very careful about what kind of claims are made in our name, which is not to say that I do not think every artist should be paid for their work. Obviously I think that is the first step to taking approach this is by encouraging transversal operations that include art but are not limited to typical modes of expression. This means: let’s continue to make work, create objects, and in doing so, let’s continue to trouble institutions, to rethink beauty, to reorient how content and expression do their intermingled work. But let’s also do the work of the intersection itself, asking what else crudeness can be when it is not aligning to the “newest” let’s assist one another and the ecologies of our making create the rhythms of when we are moving toward modes of thought that are on the edge of thinkability. Let’s not be shy to experiment even if those experiment yield forms not yet elegant enough for foreground as artistic works. And let’s become sensitive to what I think of as the artful – those modes of expression that are something that I've written two other books around autism, so that work comes out of that work. What is produced at SenseLab are techniques for emergent collectivity, leads us toward better ways of approaching the questions that frame our practices and share those techniques in ways that make itself felt without holding itself to a form. So that’s the urgency that I think of as a responsibility to our students who are working toward research-creation PhDs. My feeling is that you actually need exist as much time. There is no such thing. Being a great philosopher doesn't make you a good artist. On the other hand, I can't imagine creating anything differently. Despite the challenge, you’ve been quite courageous in taking on topics such as this without limiting them to one perspective. No matter how uncomfortable! What do you do for people who may be afraid of
de Roux: In Thought in the Act there is a really strong desire to be in conversation, to participate in a conversation very much already underway in autistic circles. – The Kawasakis I’ve been in conversation with have a particular characteristic – they don’t speak with their voices. And because they don’t speak (many of them use forms of facilitated communication), they have been kind of ‘low function’ or ‘autistic’ people I’ve focused on troubleshooting the question of what function can mean under the circumstances, and particularly the question of how knowledge is conveyed. I'm my own thinking this has been less about speaking to the autistic community—although of course I feel very indebted to them and I have learned an enormous amount there but I have to understand that there is a lot of hard at the interface of the linguistic, there tends to be an assumption that it is not at work. This is a thing that I think I've learned to do in my own work, so I would say the two moments you highlight are just two sides of the same coin, but the latter is more sophisticated. It is what I call ‘choral thinking.’ This is the way the world choreographs movement - movement that does not belong to an individual but can be moved by individuals, as opposed to individuals. The individuals keep doing these practices. My feeling is that you actually need exist as much time. There is no such thing. Being a great philosopher doesn't make you a good artist. On the other hand, I can't imagine creating anything differently. Despite the challenge, you’ve been quite courageous in taking on topics such as this without limiting them to one perspective. No matter how uncomfortable! What do you do for people who may be afraid of

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is not a re-enactment of the past, but an invention in the present. That is from Christianity. And most of them cannot remember it and they begin is told. For instance, there is no consensus within the community about is felt in the uneasiness the community feels in relation to how the past But the camera doesn’t work simply to represent. It also unmoors. This in this case, the presence of the camera moves the community to re-enact way Perrault uses the camera in terms of the intercessor, orienting but the film that ensued, an island in northern Quebec called L’Isle-aux-Coudres. In his discussion of are comfortable thinking in some ways. I think Bracha would say that our being there definitely affected the work, yes these are her words from many conversations while we were there, but they are also our words, feeding through our participation in their process. The hard thing with Bracha was that she has a vocabulary of spirituality that was quite foreign to us, but fascinated because we sensed she wasn’t using the word in the usual way. In the specific way of the past we had been given ourselves was to take the artists at their word, we had tocontent not only with her concepts but engage with them in the terms of our shared encounter. So the work or the thinking is truly a collaboration. The chapter is on thinking with Bracha, pushing her concepts to the limit, but also pushing our concepts against her concepts to see what can happen in that interface. I think Bracha would say that our being there definitely affected the work, because how could it? We were all engaged in the process. Our hope was to make that process of thinking and artmaking felt, to undermine the notion that it might be possible for an encounter with art to be in any way neutral. So yes, we were interested in how Bracha’s work could be that you could feel it. But also she was an intercessor in our thinking, so it was working both ways. She was pushing us to think beyond where we were comfortable thinking. Phoenix Thomas: Did the notion of the intercessor come from Bracha Ettinger or yourself? EM: From us, if you go online and look for ‘Deleuze’ and ‘mediator,’ you will find a short three-paragraph article that explains the concept of the intercessor. The problem is that intercessor has been translated as ‘mediator’ so anglepoises tend not to recognize the concept. The intercessor is a concept that has influenced me to no end. The concept actually comes from a Québec filmmaker by the name of Pierre Perrault who would enter into small communities and bring the practice of documentary film to them. In one instance Pierre Perrault went to an island in northern Quebec called Île-Àux-Cousins in his discussion of the film. Perrault is interested in the idea of wanting to make the world just as it is beautiful, but I think it’s a really important question that we all need to constantly be thinking about. The whole of my next book is about that. What kinds of minor gestures do they work in the world? To what degree can they be acted out in a way that gets out of these kind of concept-object or conceptual dichotomies?

Grace Han: It seems to me that having concepts is important in contemporary art field these days. What is your opinion of art objects that are technically perfect, or so beautiful to look at that you would like to own them but do not pose any questions? EM: That is a question for a full-term class I really love beauty. I have had a lot of years to think about how works because one of the role beauty played in a work that took up about a decade of my life that I showed at the 2012 Sydney Biennale called Stitching Time. This is a physical All art is two thousand pieces of fabric, all of which are beautiful textiles—different kinds of silks and linens and cottons, all colorful and materially enticing. The late 1990s and early 2000s was not a time when you were really supposed to do things that had this kind of allure. They were considered apolitical. But I kept thinking that the world is constructed around and has constructed itself around many kinds of allure. Some of these models of allure are incredibly moving for their aesthetic value. I mean it’s austere and awe and who could ever speak of the turning of the leaves on the trees as not alluring? Right? So my interest is to not oppose or create a dichotomy between concept and beauty. What I would say is what is our work has to be able to do its work. So the kind of work that frustrates me is the kind where either all of the work is happening in the world, or where the object is so self-consuming that it cannot activate any excess. I don’t need a smart artist statement and I don’t need a work that simply reproduces its own image. The question I always have is how is the work doing its work? Are there conditions there for it to be able to do its work? And this is a question I would ask to the work each time anew. Then there’s the problem of context—how conditions are created for the work’s working. In my forthcoming book, The Minor Gesture, I talk about one of my works that I think really didn’t work. I think it worked in another context, I do not think that all work always does its work the same way under all circumstances. This has led me to put a lot of emphasis on the conditions that enable a work to do its work in an ecology of practices. So I ask how materially, aesthetically, conceptually etc., is the work doing its work, here, now? Are there better conditions under which it could do work better? And these will include material conditions, environmental conditions, ecological conditions, etc. I am sorry it is a bit vague, but I think it’s a really important question that all we need to constantly be thinking about. And the trouble of my next book is about that. What kinds of minor gestures do their work in the world or is there a way they can be acted out in a way that gets out of these kind of concept-object or conceptual dichotomies? PEACE IS STILL FRAGILE: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER FRANZ

Peter Frantz

Peter Frantz was an artist, an entrepreneur, an advocate and a teacher. As the co-founder and CEO of Fragile Peace, Peter has drawn on more than 12 years of experience in tech and private industry, developing an ability to bring together advocacy, entrepreneurship, and economic development in vulnerable populations. Peter holds an MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and has been a professional artist for over 35 years. He has exhibited nationally and internationally and is the primary artist and curator for a continuing series of exhibitions titled Peace Should Not Be This Fragile: A Portrait of Peace. He is the co-founder of Panzi Foundation USA (panzifoundation.org) and served as the Executive Director from its initiation in 2010 until 2016, and remains on the Board of Directors.

What impelled you to get involved with this project in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Peter Frantz: In the summer of 2009, Dr. Lee Ann De Reus traveled to Panzi Hospital to conduct a research project on the stigma associated with rape and sexual violence among students completing their residencies. When De Reus returned to the US and gave countless talks on what she learned, audiences were visibly moved by the powerful stories she shared. People wanted to donate but there was no way to donate to the Panzi hospital. Dr. De Reus approached myself and Dr. Mukwege, head of the research team, and by 2009 a Panzi Hospital in the USA was formed. Myself and Dr. De Reus brought on board two veterans of non-profit ventures: Mickey Porty, social justice advocate and skilled fund raiser; and Tera Herman, vice president of a leading manufacturing company and project development mastermind.

By February of 2010 a website was inaugurated and in May of that year, a major fundraiser and art exhibit were launched in Holyfield, Pennsylvania. Measuring Dr Mukwege in New York, and hearing first hand the stories of these absolutely courageous women and understanding what this man had taken on as his life’s work changed my perspective. “The violence is disturbing and often seems endless, but the ongoing narrative of these women’s lives is their resolute strength, given all hope.” As the crisis in Congo and Dr. Mukwege’s heroic work gained global attention from the media, so did the visibility of Panzi Foundation USA. The momentum created by this combination of hard work, exposure and passion to address the tremendous need in the DR Congo culminated in a foundation dedicated to the mission and vision of Dr. Denis Mukwege and the people served by Panzi Hospital.

After Lee Ann asked me to be involved I created a small exhibit for her (mondy portraits) to use as a fundraiser. In 2008 I went to Marseille on an artist’s residency and she continued to send me information and I continued to be interested in the project. In 2009 I travelled to Barcelona for a residency at Can Serrat just outside the city. Like all good artists, Lee Ann was essentially relentless about getting me to be a part of this. I created the portraits while in Barcelona that now make up part of the Panzi Exhibit. Peace Should Not Be This Fragile: A Portrait of Peace. In the Graffiti Gallery in Winnipeg and the Winnipeg School Division #1 students were a part of.

Later that year we met with Dr. Mukwege and I agreed to help found the non-profit.
P: How effective is using art as a vehicle to propagate and create awareness for a cause which is so distant to the west? P: Extremely effective. Art exposes and helps resolve issues of social justice. As a cultural tool, art helps humanize and actualize the emotions, grievances, and fears of those who may not have another place to voice concerns. As an illustrative and journalistic tool, art shocks and inspires us to action. What art depicts can elicit a visceral, almost cellular, reaction. Art as non-verbal communication evokes an emotional response as well as an intellectual one.

At a school level, this reaction becomes noticeable very early in the curriculum and as the student-artist critique their peers art. During these sessions they see direct examples of how people nonverbal means to express themselves, and begin to internalize how powerful these statements can be. The circular and positive effects of the critiques
and individual interface during art making is enlightening for the young adults we work with. Furthermore, as with the general population, but especially for those who have experienced abuse and violence, and that can lead to a feeling of powerlessness, particularly in young adults. Art and culture are fundamental elements of a society, the essential means by which people shape their identity, explain their experiences and imagine the future.

PP: How was your experience organizing and connecting with the art community in Canada during Peace Should Not Be That Fragile exhibit?

SD: I found the experience to be incredibly rewarding and meaningful. It was a great opportunity to connect with many different artists and organizations, and to help promote the important issues of peace and justice. We were able to create a platform for young artists to showcase their work and to share their stories with others.

PP: What are your plans for 2016-2017 with the foundation?

SD: I am still a part of Panz, on the Board of Directors, and am going back to DRC the fall of 2016 to continue working with this organization. I will continue my work in Canada with Peace Should Not Be That Fragile which is in the process of curating an exhibit in Montreal in the area of the cultural exchange with and for vulnerable populations in order to promote healing, cultural expression, social development, awareness and understanding. Please visit our web site www.fragilepeace.org and see what we are doing. I must say, the site has been very well designed plus we have a collection images of all the works of art done by students and professional artists.

PP: Thank you very much Peter for this opportunity. It was a real pleasure to talk with you.

PP: The pleasure was mine.

http://www.panzi.org
http://www.fragilepeace.org

PP: Could you tell me how MAWA’s changed or expanded over the past years?

BM: Yes, MAWA was formed in 1984 out of a Plug-In committee. People who were involved in Plug-In realized that there was a need for a mentorship program. So the foundation mentorship program was started at MAWA, and that was the beginning of MAWA. We have had to date, the participation was heartfelt and dedicated, and the organizers clearly rallied around the themes of the event and were encouraged from the community to do so. It was by far the most successful community event we have had to date.

PP: What is MAWA’s mission?

BM: MAWA’s mission is to provide a forum for the exploration and development of art in Canada, particularly the artists that live in rural and remote areas. MAWA is a not-for-profit organization that promotes and supports the arts in Canada.

PP: How many members do you have?

BM: We get around two or three applicants a year, not that many.

PP: Can you tell me how MAWA’s mentorship program started?

BM: MAWA, but I think especially for rural people to come right to the centre of Canada.

BM: You’re doing a little about the mini-mentorship program, right?

BM: sd: It actually depends on our budget. Sometimes we have four mentors, and some years we have five mentors. And each mentor two mentees, so eight to ten.

BM: And do you get a lot of people applying? I know one the year I was a mentor there were a lot of people who applied.

BM: Yeah. It’s usually between twenty and thirty apply.

BM: So how many mentors do you take a year? It probably differs by how many apply.

BM: It’s such a great service that MAWA provides.

BM: Yes.

BM: And on top of the mentorship… I should say something that’s happened recently is the number of groups that meet at MAWA. We now have a rural-urban artist retreat for rurally-located artists in Saskatchewan, and MAWA tries to provide it, and that is what has changed over the years.

BM: By Bonnie Marin

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BM: Bonnie Marin: Can you tell me about the origins of MAWA? (Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art) MAWA was formed in 1984 out of a Plug-In committee. People who were involved in Plug-In realized that there was a need for a mentorship program. So the foundation mentorship program was started at MAWA, and that was the beginning of MAWA. We have had to date, the participation was heartfelt and dedicated, and the organizers clearly rallied around the themes of the event and were encouraged from the community to do so. It was by far the most successful community event we have had to date.

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BM: By Bonnie Marin

BM: Bonnie Marin: Can you tell me about the origins of MAWA? (Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art) MAWA was formed in 1984 out of a Plug-In committee. People who were involved in Plug-In realized that there was a need for a mentorship program. So the foundation mentorship program was started at MAWA, and that was the beginning of MAWA. We have had to date, the participation was heartfelt and dedicated, and the organizers clearly rallied around the themes of the event and were encouraged from the community to do so. It was by far the most successful community event we have had to date.

BM: What is MAWA’s mission?

BM: MAWA’s mission is to provide a forum for the exploration and development of art in Canada, particularly the artists that live in rural and remote areas. MAWA is a not-for-profit organization that promotes and supports the arts in Canada.

BM: How many members do you have?

BM: We get around two or three applicants a year, not that many.

BM: Can you tell me how MAWA’s mentorship program started?

BM: MAWA, but I think especially for rural people to come right to the centre of Canada.

BM: You’re doing a little about the mini-mentorship program, right?

BM: sd: It actually depends on our budget. Sometimes we have four mentors, and some years we have five mentors. And each mentor two mentees, so eight to ten.

BM: And do you get a lot of people applying? I know one the year I was a mentor there were a lot of people who applied.

BM: Yeah. It’s usually between twenty and thirty apply.

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RHIZOMES AND MONUMENTAL STRUCTURE: CHRIS BOOTH IN CONVERSATION

By Kelley Morrell

Chris Booth is an environmentally conscious sculptor from New Zealand who designs and creates mostly monumental landscape artworks internationally. His work—incorporating rocks, wood and steel—recognizes the fragility of nature, the importance of culture, and brings awareness to the responsibility of humankind and our role as stewards of the planet. In this interview, Chris discusses his thoughts about the role and responsibility of being an artist and the legacy of his natural materials. Chris is often associated with the actuality, and the growth of natural plant life and the idea, promoting a deeper respect and awareness of the natural world. It should be explained why the term “rhizome” is used to introduce the work of Chris Booth. In the botanical sense of the word, Chris is concerned with plant, fungus, root and rhizome activity as the living aspects of his sculptures. In the philosophical sense, like proposed by modern French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in their “Capitalism and Schizophrenia” (1972–1980) theorize, a system of information and understanding that spreads, not like a tree through its branches or as the roots supporting one plant in a linear fashion like the study of history, but in a manner that is horizontal in fashion and affects or informs through access, in a biological or geological method, like a rhizomatic root system supports a network of plants. His sculptures have popped up around the globe, sharing Chris’s visions and his concerns to those who have encountered them. As well, the term rhizome has become a defining term used in many artistic, educational and cultural operations and organizations, to indicate the nature that participants and coordinators envision how their facilitation of activities is embodied. Booth’s work has a similar method and relation to all these applications of the term rhizome. He is concerned with the existence of root systems and other botanical aspects of his sculptures; he promotes the sharing of individual relationships to nature, and considers his relationship to the land and the environment as a form of spirituality.

I was driven by my own conscience and also by my own, if you like, spiritual guidance as well.

Kelley Morrell: First of all I’d like to say that I’m very impressed with your work and that you’ve done work in Canada recently. “Earth, Reeds, Sticks, Five Fungi,” at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Ontario, and the living sculpture “Transformation Plant” in Vancouver.

Chris Booth: Thank you, I really enjoyed working in Canada. Earlier this year I went to the Great Bear Rainforest alongside La Gabrielle, an historic Hydro Electric Dam; there was an art and nature sculpture symposium, Cime et Racines; there was a very profound experience there. It was called the Rainbow Warrior Memorial, to honour the ship which was sunk offshore at March 1985. It was the first environmental political protest against nuclear power and atomic testing. It’s in concept? It’s in concept?

CB: It’s in concept?

KM: Yes, it’s in concept?

CB: Yes, it’s very much in concept, it’s been eight years now trying to realize it.

KM: When you contemplate and or create a piece [like the SLS], there are considerations that you must take in regarding the decaying effect or what the life of that work may be, not just from natural decay, acknowledging your understanding of the fungus and the way it works with your pieces, but unnatural influences on your work. What is important to you of how that piece, the Rainbow Warrior, would have moved on to something else or when you have worked through something?

CB: Every work I make continues to be very meaningful to me long after its creation: how nature takes it, changes them or shifts them. It’s important for me to try to revisit them over the years.

KM: With the Canadian west coast, the notion of the living sculpture, “Transformation Plant”?: it’s obviously going to sprout forth life, and as I was talking to you earlier, you had a piece there of grass and short grass prairie.

KM: I would like to understand your relationship with nature, and how you've come to have this innate ability to make very large sculpture, because you want to be big, but it’s nothing to do with that. It’s just in my blood. I happen to have this innate ability to make very large sculpture, travelling them as really straightforward challenging work that I fell into. But the good news is, from the photographs they sent me, the forest is being allowed to grow back and again that they want to rebuild the sculpture, which I’m really thrilled about.

KM: It’s sort of an allegory for exactly what you are creating. To take it to the next level of creating something that was really important for you, you’re sort of in between interfering and disturbing with the land and culture and even the history of a location. Assuming that this rationalization must be a part of your work, when you are undertaking (a project) or when you are incorporating the First People’s ideals and understanding, or regarding the land that you are working on, you’re distorting that place and you’re appropriating a part of culture. How do you feel do you rationalize that with yourself as an artist?

CB: That’s really a good question as well, well done. Creating such work is challenging in this area because the land is sacred and you must understand some reason or other have it in my blood that I’ve got to work large. I’m actually quite a small person and some people might say, “Aye, that’s just because you’re Scottish.” I can’t do that, it’s just in my blood and I happen to have this innate ability to make very large sculpture, travelling them as really straightforward challenging work that I fell into. But the good news is, from the photographs they sent me, the forest is being allowed to grow back and again that they want to rebuild the sculpture, which I’m really thrilled about.

KM: How can I build a sculpture in the Netherlands out of forty tons of rock, or I can’t build a sculpture in Holland, because the soil is more clay. So I’ve read some of your other works, and some of your other comments. You once wrote that there was an avalanche that travelled through your sculpture and transformed over the years into a living reef.

KM: I’m more and more deeply value how people react after all these years, and how they ask for active action by looking after the sculpture and the track, which are very steep. For a while in the past they never did that, but now it’s treasured.

A couple of years ago, the brand new ship, the Rainbow Warrior III, on her maiden voyage to NZ, anchored off to pay respects to the original Rainbow Warrior on the seabed nearby. Then everyone landed at the beach and climbed up to the Rainbow Warrior Memorial paying homage there as well. Respect is paid at the memorial on the anniversary of the sinking every year now. I’m so grateful that it’s worked out how I can do the work. My book ‘Woven Stone’ helps hugely too. I’ll always work for the whole project with an elder from that community in Ireland. In regards to appropriation, I’ve always felt that I’m just an animal that’s trying to pass on a property and a place in a way that is as new as possible when I’m working with different cultures in different lands. I am an animal that has been born and has somehow managed to have the skills of being able to work spiritually with a place in the sense that I feel the land is speaking to me, and I work as sensibly as possible with Mother Earth, first of all, and then with other animals and plants, what’s living on the planet, including humans. It’s the old story that music or this or that, it’s really come to mean as a result of this ability, and subsequently I believe that these ideals and ways that I’ve been through.

When I’m working with the Cadigal people in Sydney, my ideas for that particular piece, Wurrungwui, (by the way, I hope that you can view the film Wurrungwui on my website [http://www.chrisbooth.co.nz/view/ socklen6.html], I felt the whole relationship with the land is speaking to me, and it was in so many other projects I’ve done around the land. The land is speaking to me first and then it’s telling you about what it’s done, what it’s made, how it was formed - which I’m standing on - and then it starts to tell me, it initiates and contributes to the idea. The people of the place will initiate, contribute and guide me too. With Wurrungwui, the Cadigal...
elder. I was working with a protea, a colonisation pattern should pattern to incorporate into the sculpture, which was just such a privilege and honour.

KM: There are different concerns or concerns that are much more on the forefront of popular media with regards to global warming issues, with pollution, that are affecting work that you've been involved in. Do you consider that or reflect or conceptualise or make a statement towards some of those concerns or what you are creating?

CB: If your question is - 'Am I concerned about what footprint am I making when I am making my work?' - yes I am. I guess that it's something that we all, as global citizens, have to question. I don't, for instance, fly to get to these different places and when I'm there I'm trying to make a statement that is trying to make people more aware about our environment and to bring some people back to Mother Nature. I must admit one of my driving passions is to try to reach out to those that have gone too far into the electronic and money world - who seem to have departed from the environment and to bring some people back to Mother Nature. We've a little cottage that they stay where your lettuce comes from or even what a lettuce is.

So I can do that for some people then for me that's the best reward, but of course, at the same time I know that I'm using materials and tools, I'm using equipment and so on and so forth, but it always try to do myself. My team, and me we don't hire big contractors, unless we're obliged to, like on Wurrungai. Thankfully, they these contractors that got the job were just wonderful people who were thinking with their soul and spirit and working in sync with me. Wurrungai satisfied them so much that the point that the engineers, the stone cutting factory, the assembled, all pronounced that this was the most empowering work that they have ever done in their lives and the most happy project they've ever worked on as well.

There were Aboriginal people coming onto the site, there were all nationalities visiting constantly. The whole thing was about nature and respect - reflecting what was under our feet and around us and then making sure that they experienced the special ceremonies that occurred all through the project.

For instance, in the Netherlands, I made sure we had a visitors’ area, that visitors could come into this security area where they could overlook the work. We had an educator on our team who, whenever visitors came by, would give their time to people to tell them about the sculpture and what I was trying to say. We literally had thousands of people come by doing that, and they're holding those memories for the rest of their lives. I've had children to be experienced my work and I've had it full on when they were just kids, coming back to me as adults, talking how much.


KM: If your question is, 'Am I concerned about what footprint I am making when I make my work?' - yes I am. I guess that it's something that we all, as global citizens, have to question, I don't, for instance, fly to get to these different places and when I'm there I'm trying to make a statement that is trying to make people more aware about our environment and to bring some people back to Mother Nature. I must admit one of my driving passions is to try to reach out to those that have gone too far into the electronic and money world - who seem to have departed from the environment and to bring some people back to Mother Nature. We've a little cottage that they stay where your lettuce comes from or even what a lettuce is.

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Chris Booth, Wurrungai, 2009. Garnet Hill, New York State. "Hey, look what's here!" But do you ever take the time to make pieces that wouldn't take notice. I see that image and see you respond in such a profound way to the idea. I think it's something that you've done, Chris, is to be a proud human being. It is terrific, as I've got older in my life knowing that what I've done is helping people and helping the planet even though I know I'm damaging the planet to a certain degree as we all do when we get into any machine and drive somewhere or try somewhere or pick up a tool and start drilling or whatever.

KM: Do you consider that or reflect or conceptualize or make a statement towards some of those concerns when you are creating?

CB: It is a monument; it is a place of ceremony, of gathering and community. It was more of the metaphor when you explain the blade of grass being the environment and the people working, and how it has etched into the sand or the ground around it through the making of it, he opened it up, he blessed it with karakia and sprinkled earth. It was the point that the engineers, the stone cutting factory, the assembled, all pronounced that this was the most empowering work that they have ever done in their lives and the most happy project they've ever worked on as well.

I actually work a lot with young people from all over the world. Where I live here, we've got a small organic farm, my family's land, going back from the 1930's, my me and my three brothers, we run it all, very close to Mother Nature. We've got our home gardens and orchards and we have what we call 'wwoofers', which are young people from all over the world that work on organic farms. We've a little cottage that they stay where your lettuce comes from or even what a lettuce is.

So part of the reason for making these sculptures is, one, bridge building, such as trying to bridge between a First Nation culture and the colonising culture and two, bridge build between human beings back to Mother Nature again, and wonderfully, the biggest rewards I get are responses from people just along those lines where when they experience my work, some of them bother to write to me and say how this has led them back to thinking about nature and providing a huge amount of peace and harmony in their minds, leading them back to being closer to Mother Earth.

So I can do that for some people then for me that's the best reward, but of course, at the same time I know that I'm using materials and tools, I'm using equipment and so on and so forth, but it always try to do myself. My team, and me we don't hire big contractors, unless we're obliged to, like on Wurrungai. Thankfully, they these contractors that got the job were just wonderful people who were thinking with their soul and spirit and working in sync with me. Wurrungai satisfied them so much that the point that the engineers, the stone cutting factory, the assembled, all pronounced that this was the most empowering work that they have ever done in their lives and the most happy project they've ever worked on as well.

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Chris Booth, South承接 Transformation Plant, 2012, VanDusen Gardens, Vancouver, Canada. Created in consultation with elders and key members of the Musqueam Indian Band.
Laurel Johannesson is an artist based out of Calgary, Alberta. She has a background in Drawing, Painting, Video, Printmaking and Digital Media. Her current work is an extensive series of underwater photographs with an intense focus on the body, time and space. Laurel was invited as an artist in residence in Greece, Italy and Greece. Laurel is an Associate Professor at the Alberta College of Art + Design. Laurel was my Drawing Instructor at Red Deer College in Red Deer, Alberta. She had, and continues to have a profound influence on my art practice.

Laurel Johannesson:

How do you feel that your art practice has changed/developed over time? How did your art practice transform during your residency in Greece?

LL: I have, for as long as I can remember, used myself in a lot of my work. However, the Metamorphosis series was the first instance I remember of using myself because my presence was simply integral to the concept. I've always been interested in how philosophies of time can be present in a still image, and that feeling is reflected in the work that started in Greece in 2005. The first residency that I did in Greece was a pivotal moment for me in so many ways. The idea for my work on the Metamorphosis project had been in the works for quite some time...but all the stars aligned in Greece to make that happen. Residents provide the time and space to work through the technical and conceptual aspects in tandem. I had an idea of how things might look before I arrived, but it wasn't until the first photo shoot I knew I wanted it. I can still remember returning to the studio with my first images, uploading them from the camera, and having the feeling that the image that just turned some kind of corner in my work. Greece is a very sensual place...the sounds, the colours, the clarity of light...everything is heightened. I think this also allowed me to be in my own skin...and that feeling is reflected in the images.

LL: How did you come to utilize yourself as a subject within much of your work?

LJ: I have always been comfortable using my own body as a subject...perhaps a result of many years of dance training and swimming. I was around, I was available, a willing participant, and knew what the "photographer" wanted. But with series like Metamorphosis, Thirst, and Respiro, it was absolutely necessary for it to be my experience of that underwater space.

LL: I admit I am somewhat afraid of water but somehow it works. What challenges have arose from working with such an unpredictable element like water?

LJ: The challenges have been great! For the first two underwater series, I worked completely alone. I would rig up systems so that I was able to be both artist and the subject at the same time, and I was accompanied by a lot of booms. For Respiro and Acqua Vellutata Sospeso, I had an assistant, mainly due to the depths and remote locations that I was shooting in. Respiro, in particular, involved shooting in locations all around Greece and Italy. It was never easy. The water was always cold. Sometimes it was too rough. I’ve repelled into a grotto. I tore my meniscus two years ago. I also have an irrational fear of sharks...

LL: I always see such a fascinating amalgamation between clarity and distortions within your work. It is as though water is suspended. Does the philosophy of time enter your work at any point in your artistic process?

LJ: Time and temporality is an ongoing fascination for me. When temporality started to play a part in my work, I decided to delve deeper into philosophy and contemporary practices of those philosophies. I looked at philosophers such as Bergson, Derrida, and Series and the more recent writings of Timothy Barber and Christine Ross. I did this as a way to understand how my work was already operating in a temporal manner and also to learn how I might explore the temporality in a more deliberate way. I'm currently working on writing a book chapter about temporality and art and technology, for an upcoming publication.

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LL: When will your next artistic adventure be? Where do you feel your art practice is headed?

LJ: I’ll be off to Greece for three months for a few different projects...an exhibition and lecture at the Ictus Center in Kefalonia, and I’ll also work on developing some new techniques while in residence there. Then I’ll travel to Paros and Naxos to collect images, video, and sound for the Waters of Lethe project. It will be many months before I complete work on the coding and technical aspects but these images will, in the exhibition space, transform over time and in response to human presence. Responding to proximity, the number of visitors in the space, speed of movement and so on, the still images will come to life on the video panels with small movements, changes in light mimicking daylight and moonlight, new bird activity, the flight directions of the birds, the attention of the subjects gaze, and so on. I’ve also been reading about some episodes of collective dreaming that have occurred on the island of Naxos over the past 200 years. It’s a fascinating tale of temporality. All dreams are curious specimens of temporality and I’m sure these island dreamers will play a part in some future work. Notions of oblivion, forgetting, dreaming and remembering are very evocative concepts for me and I’ll continue to explore these ideas through the intersection of art and technology.
Grace Han, Oneness as individualism, 2015. Porcelain.

Phoenix Thomas, "As long as the sun shines, grass grows and rivers flow", 2016.

Gwendolyn Freeman, "Untitled", 2016.

Jeanne Randolph:

Yes, very conscious. In a way, it does disengage people, in a sense they don’t have to worry that they have to bring to a conversation. It’s about putting people in that world of the writer, in a sense you could say, forewarn people not to worry they have to bring those preconceptions to what I’m writing.

SdR: Right. I find that you really struck a similar nerve when we were corresponding back and forth to arrange this meeting. You said you would be interested in having a “conversation masquerading as an interview” – something I found similar to your approach to your writing. The statement made this meeting feel as though we weren’t limbo to engage in a conversation based on our preconceptions of what it should or shouldn’t be. I find that sentiment of both of your texts I’ve been reading and I think it was a quite liberating and approachable.

You touch upon a lot of different areas. You’re interested in philosophy, sociology and culture at large, as well as psychology/psychiatry and these are quite extensive bodies of knowledge and practices. In order to encapsulate all that at once and convey those ideas to the reader, I imagine you must need to be more open and inclusive. That’s really important I think.

SdR: Right. It’s interesting because a lot of philosophical writing, and especially art criticism, is much different than yours, even if they are discussing play as well, they do it very seriously and rigid. And I didn’t find that in your work, not to say that it hasn’t backed with something serious, but your approach becomes a lot easier for the reader to breach the threshold of your ideas. I feel less lectured at and more involved in the process of learning.

Jeanne Randolph: Originally the writing had more challenges than the performance because I’m a big talker. Performance is mostly talking with some body language. I’m comfortable talking. But writing is, I would almost say, not natural. If you look at the history of writing it’s sort of... like way, way back, what do we find all crunched up on tablets? We find lists of property that the King owned (laughs)... You know, if that’s the origin of writing. It’s not that I’m against technology. It’s only when they get to the point where they’re trying to record hymns to the gods, or epiphanies, or something like that, that writing approaches something literary. So in that sense, I saw literary writing as a latecomer and rightfully so, because it’s hard. It’s really hard.

SdR: I imagine that the way in which you’re writing would almost be even harder. I mean you’re really interested in the relationship with the audience, but your audience isn’t (there in front of you). JR: And there’s no grid. There, no, well, you said, its map-less, there’s no format. That doesn’t mean however, that it’s not backed by theory. It doesn’t mean that it’s wildly rilly or random, or meant to say something about language - like James Joyce, Ulysses... that era. The peak of modernist thought was to just make the language itself prominent and digging for the meaning was almost a folly of the readers. Even Derrida doesn’t do that, he plays with language, which means something entirely different. It’s not objective to him. It’s more of what Wittgenstein would call a transitional object, something you can transform and show to people and mess with and see what meaning comes out of it.

SdR: And maybe that’s what allows you to move between poetry and prose. To move, like you said, from the mountain of seriousness to the valley of silliness and to also really have exploration of all of what I’m in between. That’s really important I think.

JR: I hope you do think that’s important? The idea of binary system puts a fence between this and that, and when in reality it’s really a zone, it’s a whole huge territory. When I think of Wittgenstein saying, “to move down from the mountain of seriousness to the valley of silliness”, actually he didn’t say that as an epigram or advice, you’re supposed to listen to every word. And the word “move” implies a displacement. I think that not what he used a landscape metaphor is materialized, it wasn’t abstract. There’s space between point A and point B.

JR: Exactly. I spoke a lot in my later work about the zone between polarities, the spectrum along which a binary reader, which is easy enough to see and say.

SdR: Well for some people.

JR: (laughs) Yes, for some people.

SdR: For some people it’s all very black and white isn’t it? JR: Yes, very categorical.

SdR: You know, it’s quite that you brought up silliness. In Shopping Cart Pantheon, there is a silliness that’s predominant. In Ethics of Luxury you touch upon it when you discussed the idea of play and you’re a bit more forward and serious. While in Shopping Cart Pantheon it’s a bit more... Jeanne: It’s just... the whole thing is ridiculous! (laughs)

SdR: Yes it is! But is it important to the idea of play?

JR: Play? I’ve made it central, always central, and I think a lot of thinkers... Wittgenstein said game, which in our era... it has too many rules really. I’d say Art theorist or Cultural theorist. But for most people within the arts, there’s a concern with the word criticism, because the word criticism doesn’t quite mean what it used to mean. It used to mean analysis.

SdR: I feel like the word criticism used to mean it was going to be something constructive, but it doesn’t always feel that way anymore.

JR: Right, I mean even if the approach to the work isn’t negative, it’s still a lot like dissertation, or an autopsy or something. I think that an artist could find that enlightening or helpful, but there are plenty of people that want to do that, I don’t think it opens the field of art writing to the cultural issues of the day.

SdR: Which are?

JR: Which are, which are ethics, technology, mass media, and advertising. I mean look, aren’t those not the most important issues of the day? I mean maybe besides the planet going down the drain (laughs). So if you can open art writing and art to those bigger issues or content... what are we doing?

SdR: You do tackle these things in Shopping Cart Pantheon, in fact you do so by placing yourself, or your character, in Las Vegas, a place that’s arguably thriving by using these current issues of the day to its advantage.

SdR: I love Las Vegas. I love it because it’sphony. I mean all around us we perceive some kinds of phoniness right. But we’re still in touch with so many tangible things, with their effects to grapple with. But to be in a city where everything is a representation is almost like a mirror the way the human mind is. Schopenhauer realized we are representation systems. We’re not seeing things, or feeling things as they are, we are a system for correlating information. So Las Vegas is a relief because it’s just a representation, so there’s hardly any comparing between real andphony in Las Vegas - it’s all phony and... I indulge that (laughs).

SdR: It’s a break, like a vacaction from a world saturated with media, advertising and information. That world seems to leave us clambering to figure out what’s real or not.

JR: Right, like Wittgenstein said that in all of life we can never free ourselves from the struggle of reconciling outer reality with inner reality. Well, there...
A CONVERSATION WITH KARA UZELMAN

By Michelle Bigold

Artist Kara Uzelman has made a career of breathing new life into found and forgotten objects. Often taking shape in site-specific installations and sculpture, her collections of objects that are typically framed by the conventions of museological display produce a range of historical, factual and pseudo-factual narratives. Having recently relocated her artistic practice to Nokomis, Saskatchewan, she speaks about her nomadic life and how this has informed the development of her work such as The Covariant Project (2009) inspired by H.G. Wells’ novel The First Men in the Moon.

MB: How important is truth to your narratives? Your scientific style of presentation could conceivably convince an uninformed viewer that, say, Covariate was indeed excavated in Dawson City. Are you questioning the legitimacy of scientific inquiry in these instances, or is the element of believability crucial for some other function?

KU: Through working with found objects I’ve been interested in the reincarnation of objects, how an object can be continually re-born through endless re-contextualization or re-imaging. In works such as The Covariant Projects, I was interested in thinking about truth, fiction and narrative as objects that can also be collaged and assembled the way you would collage or assemble other objects. And similar to the way I would work with or treat a found object equally to a fabricated object, I treat truth and fiction as equals. The narrative is used as a provisional framework or armature; it’s the glue that precariously holds these assemblages together. The elements of truth provide an anchor that is crucial to creating some sense of believability. It doesn’t bother me if the viewer is confused about what is real. It’s like a trampoline, and ultimately I find that state of confusion interests me quite a bit. Our perception of reality is constantly being changed and shifted. I’m not critiquing the legitimacy of scientific inquiry, but a lot of my work is informed by an interest in activities of inquiry that take place on the periphery of the sciences. Whether these activities are considered to be valuable within the sciences, I believe they are legitimate forms of inquiry and their merit may be in forming new images, to expand what we believe to be possible. My work has always been an arena where I think that it is always regarded as an artwork. I would say there is an aspect of institutional critique within this thread of work that has to do with how history is represented, and how certain objects are presented within institutions such as museums.

MB: It’s fascinating how much importance we give to everyday or found objects. And yet we are often just as quick to abandon them. What is your process like when choosing objects to include in your pieces?

KU: Over the years I’ve adopted different processes for collecting. Initially I was an ardent student and for some of my earlier works, I would make up more of a conceptual framework or process for collecting. For example I did a number of works in which I would buy a garage sale in its entirety and use these collections to make different works. In Backyard Dig, I used the process of excavation as a way of collecting objects to work with. Later I started developing a narrative structure first and then collecting and fabricating things to become artifacts for a speculative narrative. Since moving to rural Saskatchewan, my process has shifted to mining objects from abandoned houses and farmyards. I like that these objects speak to a very local situation – the abandonment of this region primarily due to industrial farming and a harsh climate. When we first moved here I spent a lot of time at the dump, which is only a short walk from our house, and at the time it was unmanned, and open 24/7. But now it’s monitored with very limited hours, so I don’t get much there anymore. Because of the sparse lifestyle here I limited access to things like libraries, museums, art shows, shopping, etc. I also spend a lot more time mining the internet for research and inspiration. The information gleaned from these searches and the observation of online subcultures also get collaged into the work.

MB: Will your online research translate into a new visual language for you? Beyond being a useful informational tool, the visuals associated with online technology seem to lack contrast to some of your previous works.

KU: My work has always taken a makeshift approach responding to readily available materials and limited resources, making work without a studio, without many tools and in the spirit of stretching limited resources as far as possible. I’ve never been particularly inspired by digital technology or contemporary communications systems such as social media, but I am interested in working with what I have on-hand and figuring out how to produce work within these constraints. When something seems mundane, it can take a long time to really see it and to figure out how you are going to aestheticize or transform it. I am attracted to some of the DIY, how-to and self-published content that proliferates online, and sifting through this kind of content has certainly informed the construction techniques and the content of my work. But up to this point I’ve maintained the physical aspect to my work, which contradicts a very practical movement toward working in virtual space.

MB: Many commentators have pointed out that your work carries a heavy narrative of utopian pursuit. Indeed, we all search for elusive meanings in the objects that you have quite literally dug up from obscurity. But you also use sensory processes, most notably sound, that seem to chart impossible territorial beyond our comprehension. Can you expand on this common observation?

KU: Yes, there is a utopian underpinning to my work that in part comes from the objects themselves. The abandoned objects reflect the dissolution of a home, a community or a capitalistic promise and prompt us to think about this failure or destruction while simultaneously offering potential for renewal and utopian pursuits. On another level I think there is a utopian underpinning to the work. It is a utopian underpinning to the development of the technologies and the information society. The medium is the message and the end result is utopian. On another level, I think these interests come out of a general disaffection with the status quo. I started working with radio and electromagnetic frequencies as an extension of working with magnetic fields and gravity (The Covariant Project, 2009-ongoing). If YOU RECEIVE THIS YOU WILL KNOW MY BASK IN GLORY (2010-2012), a sound installation composed of a series of cabled together electronics, amplifiers, speakers, crystals, and homemade batteries, to receive and broadcast atmospheric electromagnetic frequencies was inspired by a series of provisional semaphore towers used to communicate across long distances during the French revolution. These sound emitting sculptures were accompanied by a series of wall carvings depicting Chappe semaphore texts, electronic schematics and the legible structure of a satellite dish made from a high-tension pylons. Re: Spiritual Experience (2015) is a more recent work in which I created a living sculpture inspired by the origins of Cyberpunk and Posthumanism: a central supercomputer was connected to hundreds of field recordings, images and objects were used as additional tools to aid in taking participants through a transcendent process. The content and title of this work relates to the collected correspondence between Duncan Blissett (Department of Psychology, University of Regina) and Wilif Harris.
Fred Moten, the writer, theorist and recipient of the 2015 National Book Award for poetry, is reading at Or, a small gallery squashed next to a sloping pizza in Vancouver called Victory square. We’re rushing because we think they will run out of space, but didn’t need to because it is a poetry reading, after all. Taking our seats as the room fills, a gentleman sits next to my history in a five-pack and incongruous snacks drops out of a paper packet. “He walked by and asked me what was happening here tonight”, another friend tells me when she comes back from her cigarette. We shug, smiling.

Moten begins his first appearance in Vancouver with poems described as ones not read, but listened to. “The line ‘everything I want to say studies me’ lands with soft, serious impact; later he breaks from his text to speak of his experience of being ‘killed’, like, ‘some kind of supernatural anecdote about his kids. Half of the poems he reads were composed during all-school critiques when he was a visiting artist at Bard College; a procedure he described as “watching someone get beaten.” He has written, with Stefano Harney, a book called The Undercommons: Feminine Planning and Black Study that examines possible interventions for the neoliberal configuration of today’s university. To me, what it really describes are the spaces where another kind of “study” happens: riding the bus to school, or having a cigarette with your teacher outside.

When the room is opened to questions the (white) man with the six pack says “Hey where you from? Compton!” and it’s possible every asshole in the room has a copy of the book in their hands. The quality of his response is not surprising, but the guy keeps rambling and a woman remarks she would like a better question to be asked, and the guy says fuck you bitch, and a kind of flurry erupts.

I relay this event to an acquaintance at Moten’s second event two days later, and she says “It’s kind of thrilling when something actually happens at a talk”. True, and let’s be real, the discomfort at Or is really only a catalyst above the visual impression I experience at any given artist talk. But the disruption casts a pall that unfortunately could not be remedied. The guy says fuck you bitch and the rest of the audience emitted loud sounds of disapproval, and he’s asked to leave but then apologized a lot and said he would be quiet, so it awkwardly continued. Moten attempts to answer someone else’s question about whether he has any bad writing habits but his response seamlessly turns his gaze to the guy and, with calm command, told him to leave because he fucked up the whole vibe. Another outburst, more verbal abuse. The guy is sort of escorted out and then stayed outside the gallery for a long time screaming “Wu-Tang Forever!” and “Fuck you nigger!” interchangeably.

At this point (gallery owners/collectives take note!) we needed a representative mediates so the questions continue deep inside a study group that is working towards having something to say about blackness, and black social life. Race matters have become professional matters; they are once again, and have always been, matters of finance. What is produced is an incredibly uninteresting and vacuous and always surreptitiously neoliberal discourse that tries to abolish and inoculate itself by its constant reference to the empirical facts or records of racial oppression. As black life, as if even the suffering that comprises that black life, could be captured by what Stuart Hall and his folk call “the empirical attitude”.

The state autopsies report about Michael Brown tells us nothing about either Michael Brown or the state. The reduction, or enlargement, depending on how you look at it, of Gone With The Wind to document, nothing. The alarming lack of thought that would allow presumably intelligent people to believe so, even for a minute, is staggering. And to my mind, not only calls all their work into question, but also and more importantly alerts us to a quite specific danger that occurs in the interplay between the art world, the poetry world and the academic world. And mongrel coalitions are left howling, because all they seem to want is entry into the very system of vulgar, violent recognition they claim to want to destroy.

“Occupy turned inward” is right. Because Occupy was always turned inward, or more precisely, turned towards the increasingly untenable
and Daniel Ross. The money. Reorienting myself, I looked to the North and traced a route I reconsidered and thought no: Documenta 14 will be about following a depressed South. To attain the “depressive position”, as I thought, will be about overturning the dialectic between North and South. Athens was chosen as a symbolic capital to anchor the event. Documenta 14, I was convinced, would be about overcoming the flow from the East to the West—what mattered is the curatorial project—its conceptual rigor, poetic logic, referees and commissioners . . . if their notice is aroused, will be as brutal as possible. And will insist, brutally and dishonestly, on a symmetry that does not exist.

Man, a lucky white guy perspective. Why would you take that up? You’re better than that. And it’s not your fate. Better to take no part at all. The punitive point of view is of necessity: mobile and obscure, susceptible to the real—which is to say the earthly—its not a point of view at all really, but a field of feel. That’s the problem right there: Place and Goldsmith and their insistence upon a point of view, which can never say anything about some climate since they are self-protective, collective anonymity is unsurely unsustainable in the face of either of region. So I bet you say to public them, although (laughter) I guess a lie now . . . there’s still I would never say publicly that I would say to their faces with a kind of fury. They’re not very good at the game they want to play, and the referees and commissioners . . . if their notice is aroused, will be as brutal as possible. And will insist, brutally and dishonestly, on a symmetry that does not exist.

As every new iteration of Documents appears around the corner, I begin to wonder what will be at stake. It is truly an exhibition without walls, much larger than its 100 days, and for some time now, it has had a reach that extends far beyond the rules of history. Documenta is now news. The art itself is clearly irrelevant at this stage of the game what matters is the curatorial project—its conceptual rigor, poetic logic, political reach. Historical grounding, ethical fidelities, and so on. Indeed the curatorial groundwork, preliminary moves and unfolding plans for the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documentas have played as big a part in pushing 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Documentas have played as big a part in pushing the last three or four Documenta
Maybe this is what Documenta 14 will be about. But if not, all of this, is beyond me. Please refer to the original texts and film.


Footnotes:

Kelly Lynn is an artist whose practice crosses the boundaries between photography, sculpture, painting and installation. For Lycan, technology is a major concern, the monochrome is a recurrent motif. literalizing the experience of photography is a constant source of interest. In the following interview she discusses her recent work that has hinged on a set of references to Alfred Steiglitz’ 291 Gallery.

Shep Steiner: Could you mention the scale or footprint of the space you created compared to the original room in the photograph?

MN: Everything was an approximation. The original gallery had two iterations. First it was on 5 Ave in New York City, but the building doesn’t exist anymore. The floor plan I referenced was drawn from memory by a woman who helped out at the gallery. 291 was started by Edward Steichen and Alfred Steiglitz. I always like to give Steichen credit, because he was a really big part of the space. Steichen suggested that they open up the gallery. It had been his portrait studio and he was moving out. In the set I created, the table with the skirt around it is based on the table in Steichen’s studio before it ended up in the gallery. This table with the foliage was a really signature thing for the gallery.

You are saying that you are in a black and white environment. Is that a weird bodily experience?

KL: Yes, I think a little bit, because we are not used to being in a black and white environment.

Gwen Freeman: What are the challenges you face with installation and when installing your work? Also, how do you resonate ideas on displaying your work?

KL: Challenges are about support and space. I know specifically was a huge piece to do. For example, I knew for a while that I was having a show, but I never had a final date—I really only found out less than two months before. So I had a short period of time to install. I had not worked out what photos I was using, nor was I using the technical parts. But I used to work in film and I know how to get things together. I work with models. I think models are a brilliant way to work, especially if you are working on installation. I do foam-core models that are one-inch scale, so it is easy for me to work with. I do small versions of what I am thinking about, because it is really about composing space. It’s not that different than if you are dealing with the surface of the canvas, except that you are composing in three-dimensional space.

For Underglow, it was really important that it was one exhibition staged in three rooms. I wanted the three rooms to have conversations with each other. Some were contemporary conversations, some were historical conversations, but they all melded together. Also color was very tricky. To achieve the full tonal range of grays I used the drapery as my starting point. There’s so much painting in this show. I spent a lot of time mixing colors. I matched the drapery color and added tint, which is adding white, and shade, which is adding dark. I moved from there to create my palette based on the installation photograph that Stieglitz took of 291. My work is about modes of display, and film sets are about a very temporal mode of display and also very disposable. I was interceding in revealing that mode of display as well.

MNF: Could you mention the scale or footprint of the space you created compared to the original room in the photograph?

KL: Everything was an approximation. The original gallery had two iterations. First it was on 5 Ave in New York City, but the building doesn’t exist anymore. The floor plan I referenced was drawn from memory by a woman who helped out at the gallery. 291 was started by Edward Steichen and Alfred Steiglitz. I always like to give Steichen credit, because he was a really big part of the space. Steichen suggested that they open up the gallery. It had been his portrait studio and he was moving out. In the set I created, the table with the skirt around it is based on the table in Steichen’s studio before it ended up in the gallery. This table with the foliage was a really signature thing for the gallery.

There are also vases that kept reappearing in the corner and they never get any credit. They are never listed. They were probably made by women. In my next exhibition that I’m about to do in Toronto, I use the images of those vases and some of the decor. I go into even more detail using the drapes, the vases, and the burlap wallpaper. I erase them all through screen-captured images from websites, videos, or books, and in this sense it’s really about perpetual reproduction. There’s a whole history of photography in this room. The next piece I’m doing is this sort of an atlas of photography.

Shep Steiner: Is there a relationship between your practice and that of Louise Lawler’s work?

**KL:** Yes, I appreciate her practice a lot. She’s referring to the museum, art galleries, and artifacts. I think she maybe dealt more with authorship, whereas I’m more about value and how value shifts depending on place of display, especially how objects cycle through, from your home to the thrift store, back into the gallery. Actually I had a very interesting experience with my own photograph. I took the picture for this story because it’s a very good example of what I am speaking about. Many years ago when I was at Ryerson, I did these photographs of flowers. They were kind of pretty images, some of the first images that I made. Somehow I gave it to my mom and she gave it to my sister. Then a little while ago I was in a thrift store and I saw my photo.

**BM:** Did you buy it?

**SS:** Below value?

**KL:** Totally. Then I marched over to my sister and niece, who I was with at the time. And my niece, who is interested in photography and who was kind of devastated that I gave it to her mother, ended up buying it and getting it in her home but that my other niece had slammed the door so hard that it knocked it off the wall and the glass shattered. That is interesting to me. I think so much of our lives are lived through photography. So it’s important for me that I talk about Stieglitz’s photograph as an installation photo that has different value than as an art photo. The whole Presentation House exhibition was trying to address images about images being present. That is why there is no art on the wall.

I went through the archives of Presentation House and recreated elements of the decor from the past. For instance, I changed the chair configuration every week and each configuration was based on past arrangements; they are the same chairs that they had for many years. For example, one arrangement is based off of a configuration from a particular exhibition in the 1980s, but because we understand what the configuration means, and that the configuration is about looking at images, there are images present without actually being there. Subsequently, I added mirrors that used to be in the gallery as well as lights from the 1980s. These lights were not on, but they were by the new lighting. Our experiences of the gallery and museum—the furnishings, the wall color, the lighting—it all affects our viewing experience. These things are meant to be invisible, but made it the subject of this work.

**Shaun de Roys:** I have been looking through your work and listening to you talk today and have been thinking: you are working with installation, photography, sculpture and the aesthetic qualities of the space, while also talking about value, the re-contextualization of space and the reappropriating of space. The list seems to go on. Do you ever feel like you lose yourself in all of this subject matter? Or do you always have a clear beginning upon which you establish the work and also feel comfortable failing back on if things begin to branch out chaotically?

**KL:** I multi-task and I usually have several projects going on at once, so you have to really been in on it research. And I am very research based. I encounter images that I find intriguing and then I think a lot about how to expand them. Or things will happen in the studio. For example, through the city of Vancouver I was awarded a three-year livework studio space, which allowed me to pursue really material explorations. Some of my recent preocupations grew out of having that studio space. In the studio I started looking for how we ways in which things can make themselves and when you’re working with a really monochromatic palate as I do, it narrows things down a lot. It’s far less confusing and overwhelming than it might appear. And then of course, documenting these encounters in my studio, the photographs become the documentation, but then it also becomes the artwork.

**SS:** Below value?

**BM:** Are these photographs individually titled?

**KL:** No, the body of work is called I Walked into a Moment. The title comes from the first line of a concrete poem written by a woman that was published by 291 Magazine. Did I do a six-month residency in New York City. During the time I was playing with the photographs of the room and going to libraries and trying to find more installation photos from 291 Gallery. I was also going into museums. Sometimes, because I was not allowed to photograph, I would photograph shadows, shadows of artworks, and corners. There were hundreds of these images and I had to narrow it down to six. That was hard because you are trying to create these optical experiences. The thing about the vinyl was that I could wrap it around the wall. I do not like the grid of photography. I am always trying to dismantle that grid. I really want to push that, so I keep the photo around the wall. There is one example when the photo goes right into the corner of the wall. By pushing the material in unexpected ways, peoples’ relationship to it changes, and that is fruitful. I call it fruitful confusion.

**SS:** Are these photographs individually titled?

**KL:** Below value? I wanted to make the color I used custom pigment and custom paint. I was literally there for a week mixing color.

**SS:** When you go into Photoshop and drop white into your image you realize that it’s actually from white. White is actually quite blinding.

**SS:** That is kind of what I was trying to do. I wanted to reposition that gift because it enhances the conversation. If it had been on the pedestal it would have been a more historical conversation, whereas if it is on the floor there is a contemporary and a historical conversation which expands the conversation.

**SS:** Speaking of that, Kelly, are the transitions from photo to wall as accessible as it appears to photography.

**KL:** Yes, I had to match the color. I used custom pigment and custom paint. I was literally there for a week mixing color.

**BM:** When you go into Photoshop and drop white into your image you realize that it’s actually from white. White is actually quite blinding.

**SS:** That is kind of what I was trying to do. I wanted to reposition that gift because it enhances the conversation. If it had been on the pedestal it would have been a more historical conversation, whereas if it is on the floor there is a contemporary and a historical conversation which expands the conversation. I call this minimal scatter art. Jason Rhodes, the now deceased, L.A. artist perfected scatter art in my opinion. Actually, I’ve been a called a maximalist, and I think it is largely due to the reduced palette I use.

**BM:** Did you find viewers reluctant to touch or pick up Bronze Torso Ball?

**KL:** Yes, some people didn’t want to.

**MD:** How did you facilitate this?

**SS:** Is that the first line of a concrete poem written by a woman that was published by 291 Magazine.
**KL:** I asked the gallery attendants to invite people to pick it up. But the way that you entered this show that was at the Dr. Gallery was through velvet curtains. I wanted to tap into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century moment when galleries started referencing domestic space. Galleries started putting draperies on doors in order to balance their typically grand European spaces. This was a way to make the galleries more domestic and hence more accessible. Plants, furniture, and velvet on the doorways were all part of this. There was no electricity, but there were often skylights and they would paint the walls in a way that would reflect this natural light.

Lori Leighton: Could you talk a little bit about the challenges you have faced working monochromatic?

**KL:** I don’t find it challenging, I am a little bit more peripheral now, but I am part of a collective called Instant Coffee, which uses fluorescent color. In fact, we use color like crazy, and so I do get to use color. I’m very interested in color. I like how color can be function supportive, so for instance, the color of a hospital room is really important. Color can over stimulate or under stimulate and affect you psychologically. I think color is really powerful, and so I do get to use it with Instant Coffee. However, the less I participate in the collective, the less I get to play with color. Color is important to my life. I used to be a set decorator, so I have a really good color sensibility, and I’m interested in it. Like I said the way it is named and the way that it is invisible, even if it is paradoxically visible.

MN: What do you think about the switch to fluorescent lighting in galleries around 2005/2006?

**KL:** Well, I had an exhibition at Simon Fraser University Gallery (SFU Gallery), called Autobiography for No One, and they had fluorescenters and track lights. Fluorescent is fantastic for me. When it’s incandescent light, I have to have a lot of it to get a flat light. When it’s fluorescent it’s great. The problem with fluorescents is that you can over stimulate to the point of going crazy. But sometimes artists need the drama. I couldn’t have achieved the effects I did in my fin foil piece without track lighting. The best is to be able to have both.

Pamela Puellas: Have you seen comments on the intense effects of the fluorescent lighting?

**KL:** Well in the SFU exhibition, it put drywall on the floor. The floor there is wooden, and the wood is basically orange, so it was not neutral enough for my purposes. As a result when you walk it, it’s like you are really walking into a monochrome that you know, so you have a very physical experience of the work. Actually, everybody now is starting to put in wood floors in galleries like the monochrome deep floors. Similarly the new Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) is going to have wood floors. I like cement myself so it is pretty weird.

BM: You said that you worked in the film industry as a set designer. Did this influence your decision of the technology in your work or were you doing installations first?

**KL:** Well I kind of happened at the same time. I started off as a photographer and then I started working for a commercial photographer. Then I started working as buyer for television commercials. I went to Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and I started doing installation art. After that I started figuring the installation came first. I think you do what you’re good at, and I am good at space, especially Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and I started doing installation art. After that I started figuring the installation came first. I think you do what you’re good at, and I am good at space, especially.