IMPOSTERING: Complicating Power in Social Practice

Danica Evering

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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By: Danica Evering

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ABSTRACT

IMPOSTERING: Complicating Power in Social Practice
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How can we complicate the dynamics between insider and outsider in socially engaged art? Through ficto-criticism, this thesis explores the intricacy of power and position and place and practice in crossing boundaries. Socially engaged art is by nature an imposter practice, reaching out into communities, institutions, and other disciplines. This act is not currently always done intentionally in a way that fully owns up to power (particularly funding), identity, and context. As a result, we as social practice artists and arts organizations often sometimes do work we are inexperienced to handle, labour for projects misaligns with available resources, thinking can be co-opted by boosterist social innovation frameworks, and other problematic engagements. Social practice writing is currently divided between those who dismiss it as anti-aesthetic and overly utopian and those who are uncritically hopeful about its liberatory potential. With this work I instead seek a self-reflexive operator working intentionally within shifting hierarchies and contexts to pursue complexity. I use ficto-critical writing as a methodology for implicating myself in the work and gaining a nuanced perspective—both critical and generous—after four years of work in the field. I weave in three coherent conversations with artists—Cristóbal Martinez, Orev Katz, and cheyanne turions—as a way of articulating difficulties and possibilities. I conclude by determining that making boundaries and crossing them are parallel impulses each with a multitude of motives, and propose a process of owning up both inwardly in relation to subject position and externally in relation to context as a way of acting with intention. I articulate this as *impostering,* an intentional crossing of boundaries, leveraging or ceding power from within, or interfering in relation to difficulty and complexity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was mostly written in Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal and in Cobourg on the shore of Lake Ontario close to Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg territory. I am thankful to the waters of the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario for keeping me alive. Activist Tings Chak acknowledges territory as a reminder of whose resistance we live in the footsteps.[I] As a settler person on the sailboat side of the Two Row Wampum—the first agreement between Europeans and Haudenosaunee, the sailboat and the canoe—I think about the hundreds of years of Indigenous resistance in relation to the hundreds of years of underhanded European occupation. As such I am committed to supporting Indigenous resurgence efforts by fostering more reflexive, relationship-based, and reciprocal practices in other sailboat people and organizations.

I would like to deeply thank Orev Katz, Cristóbal Martinez, and cheyanne turions for your careful insights in processing the stickiness, opportunity, and complexity of art in relation to change and power and people. I am so very grateful for the time and generosity of meeting with me to sort some of this through, and for our ongoing conversations in person and over the airwaves.

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[I] Tings Chak, "Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention," Presentation, *Creative Time Summit: Of Homelands and Revolution*, Toronto, September 19, 2017.

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Unfortunately, as you probably already know, people
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ON EFFICACY

A caveat, of sorts. I don't know if art can change the world. I'm not even sure we can agree on what changing the world means. Each of us probably in some way changes the world with our acts and decisions. It's hard to know if this registers at a larger level. It might be deviant to begin a text by talking about what it will not do. Yet it seems pertinent to begin by saying that this work will not address the oft-asked question of how or why art is or is not effective in bringing about social change. This question seems in many ways unresolvable—something to consider that can't be answered. Critically probing the ways change takes place through our actions is an important consideration for developmental evaluation processes and iterative personal and institutional learning. Still: it has proven tricky to make a fully convincing objective or subjective argument pro or con. The answer lies instead somewhere complicated and in-between. It *should* be complicated and in-between.

It makes sense to begin by talking about if or how art might change the world because the idea that socially engaged art contributes to social change is such a prevalent motivation for its artists, funders, and organizations. Artist Jules Rochielle's answer in *The Questions We Ask Together* to what Post-Social Practice might be registers the distancing shared by many of us in the field (and I use the word 'us' here because these are sentiments I have at one point shared). Instead of being wrapped up in what we see as the ivory tower of discipline, academy, and gallery, socially engaged art has, in her words, "always been more interested in using [its] creativity to create social change or impact."[2] We can read the hope that things might get better through our work in the frequency this phrase, "art and social change," arises in social practice discourse. Socially engaged art funders A Blade of Grass are up front about it in their mission: "We provide resources to artists who demonstrate artistic excellence and serve as innovative conduits for social change."[3] The phrase has almost become a shorthand for social practice-type projects. There is an International Centre of Art and Social Change, founded by artist and dancer Judith Marcuse.

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[2] Jules Rochielle, "What is Post Social Practice?" in *Questions We Ask Together*, ed. Gemma-Rose Turnbull (Pittsburgh: Open Engagement in Print, 2015), 123.

[3] A Blade of Grass funds critical work in Brooklyn and unlike many institutions and funders is at least publicly self-aware and asking questions about the implication of and complication of their work. A Blade of Grass, "Our Mission," *A Blade of Grass Nurtures Socially Engaged Art*, accessed March 7, 2017, http://www.abladeofgrass.org/get-to-know-us/.

Americans for the Arts has a Social Change program. Montreal-based J.W. McConnell Family Foundation's Arts and Social Inclusion fund aims to support "arts' role in catalyzing social change."[4] There is a prestigious art award given by New York Social Practice fixture Creative Time, "The Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change." The connection between art and social change for these projects and people and funders suggests their belief that things might be different through art's efforts. To this end, as socially committed practitioners, we might feel as though we are superior to those artists and organizations who choose to work in traditional economies, institutions, and contexts. Unlike them, *we* are working in the "real world," putting our creativity to good use by, as Rochielle summarizes "creating social change or impact." This is of course very much up for debate. Socially engaged artist Darren O'Donnell declares unflinchingly: "Efforts to address world inequities through art, while well-intentioned, are devastatingly naïve. Art has lost this round. Decisively."[5] Artist and writer Hannah Black, whose work engages identity and politics speaks alongside this: "I suspect that effective radical struggles have to be far more antagonistic and communal than is possible within the realm of contemporary art."[6] Art frequently looks in the mirror and asks itself what it is doing with its life.

I share with art critic Jennifer Doyle an awareness that art's conflict with itself is "the desire that it have the value of a science—that its impact on the world be something we can measure and demonstrate—and the desire that art make us all feel better (about ourselves and the world) by actually redressing social inequity (but not really)."[7] I simultaneously hold in the same hand her somewhat-contradictory (but not really) position that there is a danger of responding to controversy around queer, feminist, antiracist, migrant performance art with the proposal that it is only art, that it has no real-world impact. "I can think of no more effective argument for privatizing the arts," she says, "than the assertion that an artist never meant to make a difference."[8]

I have long been wary of feeling like I have something to contribute. At the beginning of this study, in my research journal, I wrote a line: *What good is a poet at the end of the world?*

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[4] The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, "Arts and Social Inclusion," accessed March 7, 2017, http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/en/programs/arts-and-social-inclusion.
[5] Darren O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2006), 27.
[6] Hannah Black, "The Identity Artist and the Identity Critic," *ARTFORUM* 54.10 (Summer 2016) 338–339.
[7] Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 11.
[8] Ibid., xvi.

Art is and has historically been an elite institution. The fact that we think we're exceptional, that we're onto something, feels embarrassingly hopeful. What art offers—ambiguity and complication—seems an inappropriate response in the face of war and systemic injustice and political struggle. This complexity still feels resonant, particularly in those difficult practices Doyle articulates. Whatever else, many of us do mean to make a difference. What we do has value. Curator and writer cheyanne turions reminds me of artist David Garneau's idea that the arts have an extra-rational potential as a refuge to imagine strange things.[9] Artist and scholar Cristóbal Martinez tells me this is how he sees it also: art is irrational and engages the imagination, which is what makes it powerful. That an aesthetic is what a person or group believes to be good, beautiful, and true. He refers in this thinking to Indigenous education scholar Bryan Brayboy, whose exhaustive corpus engages education, citizenship, science literacy, culture, place, ethnocomputing and electronic textiles, maker culture, gender, and more. Artist and priestess Orev Katz shares that they see it as offering a place for representation, for witnessing yourself in public, and for not being presented with the truth, for cross-referencing mindfully. I take to heart artist and educator Pablo Helguera's affirmation that socially engaged art "depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social interaction" instead of existing in the realm of the symbolic, as traditional gallery practices often do.[10] It is doing *something,* though that something is perhaps not always what we imagine it to be or hope for.

While this is not a consideration of how art is going to change the world *(Katz exclaims: "What a lot of pressure to try and change the world!"),* the belief that it might is one of many reasons socially engaged art reaches out beyond itself. The idea that we could tangibly use our creativity to bring about social change or impact leads socially engaged artists and organizations to cross over the boundaries of other disciplines, sites, and communities. Yet this hope often leads us to be very unintentional about how we cross that line. The idea of social change, though a primary focus for organizations, writers, and artists alike, is also only one of many reasons one might choose to move outwards instead of staying nestled comfortably within a community or discipline. It can also be a quest for relevance, a distancing from your own power, a search for affinity, to take resources. Rather than looking idealistically at how art might or might not change the world, or make the case for

[9] cheyanne turions, "Decolonization, Reconciliation, and the Extra-Rational Potential of the Arts," *ArtsEverywhere,* March 23, 2016, accessed September 4, 2017, http://artseverywhere.ca/2016/03/23/1218/.
[10] Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 8.

how or why not socially engaged art is a valid art form as other authors have, this work instead probes the sticky implications of reaching out. Acknowledging that artists and organizations are indeed working in this way, it considers what we're committing to when we commit to crossing boundaries. How can we trouble the dynamics between insider and outsider in social practice? How do we address the complexity of power and position and place and practice of trying to make a difference by not staying where you're put?

FRAMEWORK FOR **READING**

> "In short, motivation is the thing we have all felt in our gut that something isn't right. Intention becomes the framework for the set of actions that we attempt to realize in order to address those hegemonic realities, and simultaneously provides a cover that is more legible, coherent, and instructive for our motivation, which is messy, unresolved, and perhaps misguided (though deeply urgent)."[11]
> – *Justin Langlois*

IMPOSTERING is a work of ficto-criticism in four parts that asks: *How can we complicate the dynamic between insider and outsider in socially engaged art?* Like many of us in social practice, I came from a more traditional art background via an undergrad degree in studio art. Although I gravitated towards the conceptual—the belief that good art was a complicated, poetic, intricate idea in a form responding to that idea—the degree emphasized aesthetics, and the academic context and white cube of the galleries we most often made work for felt insular and elitist and apolitical. I grew up in a small town in Southern Ontario and although I yearned for art's weirdness as an antidote, I was also hyper-aware of being exclusive, having been excluded within that conservative, Christian context as a half-homeschooled kid from a leftist pagan family. Yearning for contemporary art that was more grounded and had relevance outside art circles, I got a job at Musagetes, an arts organization based in Guelph which produces socially engaged art projects. During my nearly 4 years there, Musagetes was working in mid-sized cities in Canada and Europe across a variety of media: a play, a freeschool university, a site-specific video installation, a poetic music tour, a youth council, an experimental film, a lecture series, an alternative publisher, and others. Through this work I collaborated with some careful, thoughtful artists and arts workers to produce politically and socially intricate work. I also had moments of frustration with some of the power dynamics complicit in the work we were doing as an all-white Canadian charitable foundation engaging in communities on the periphery, putting parameters around the work of Indigenous artists, operating overseas in contexts we understood only partially, building alliances with organizations outside of the arts. Although this situation is specific to the foundation and the cities we worked in, if we look outward more broadly to the field of social practice, these experiences are far from anomalies. In attending socially engaged conferences, reading texts, and speaking to practitioners, there are similarly difficult and hopeful patterns of intrusion in the work of other socially engaged artists and arts organizations. Crossing boundaries—disciplinary,

[11] Justin Langlois, "What motivates us? Are we asking questions about our intentions?" in *The Questions We Ask Together: Open Engagement in Print 001*, ed. Gemma-Rose Turnbull (Minneapolis: Bookmobile, 2015), 300–303.

community, organizational, contextual—is inherent to the practice. Socially engaged art grows out of a desire to reach out. Yet this act is done for a variety of reasons with varying degrees of self-reflexivity, complexity, and awareness of power. The motivation—as Langlois writes, the feeling in our gut that something isn't right—for this project is a feeling that something is not quite right with how we currently frame social practice. Why do we try to draw attention away from hierarchies and our own social, cultural, and economic resources? For those of us intervening from a position of power, how much of this is guilt alleviation in response to our own privilege? Are we doing damage by our lack of preparation? Are we positioning art that engages with people as a medium as inherently hopeful instead of looking at the discomfort and difficult feelings our acts produce? This thesis project is an attempt to reckon with the messiness of this motivation. It is my hope that it proposes, as Langlois writes, an intention, a "framework for the set of actions that we attempt to realize in order to address those hegemonic realities, [that] simultaneously provides a cover that is more legible, coherent, and instructive for our motivation."[12] It is a way of sorting through and making legible the power and complexity of social practice's boundary crossing, a process of turning a lot of messy gut feelings into an instructive intention for myself and for other artists and arts workers.

CHAPTER ITINERARY

After outlining the field in Terms and History as a means of introducing social practice as a discipline for those readers unfamiliar with its criteria, I begin this work by discussing the development of its current discursive framework in Canon. I move on to lay out my criteria for evaluating the agreement or fit of my ideas in Resonance. In Focus, I lay out the scope of this research as centring on socially engaged art practitioners instead of larger institutional structures. In **Method**, I explain the choice of Ficto-Criticism and Conversations as research methodologies and introduce the practitioners I speak with in this research: artist/priestess Orev Katz, artist/scholar Cristóbal Martinez, and writer/curator cheyanne turions. After **Method**, the ficto-critical section of the text begins, indicated by a grey page background and two columns. At this point, the writing style will shift to a more poetic and experimental voice in order to speak alongside some of the power dynamics in socially engaged art practice. In particular, the first three sections—**The Superb Fairy-Wren**, **The Executive Director**, and **The Coordinator**—are written on a spectrum of semi-fictional voices. **The Superb Fairy-Wren** and **The Executive Director**

[12] Ibid., 303.

are more toward the fictional, and **The Coordinator** is closer to the factual, informed by my experiences as a Program Coordinator and in relation to some of the projects I worked on. **The Artist, The Curator, The Priestess** is still lyrically written, but as it draws from notes from my conversations with Katz, Martinez, and turions it is more representational and less fictional, finding conceptual connections between these three interactions. I conclude by returning to an academic voice with an analysis section, **The Imposter**. This conclusion proposes processes for approaching social practice work by finding through-lines in the theory addressed in **Canon**, the ficto-critical writing sections, and the conversations. In this section, I include relevant ficto-critical text in italics in order to make apparent the connection between the experimental writing of the thesis and its analysis in relation to the current discourse.

TERMS AND **HISTORY**

Socially engaged art is by nature an imposter discipline: a collection of art practices that borrows from and engages outside itself—pedagogy, theatre, publicness, site-specificity, activism, and communication—in a bid to break away from self-reference and medium-specificity. In her exhaustive history of social practice *Artificial Hells*, art critic Claire Bishop traces its roots back to its two most generally acknowledged avant-garde predecessors: Dada, the early 20th-century avant-garde anti-capitalist offensive irrational collage/sound poetry/cut-up writing/sculptural art movement based in Zürich, and Situationist International, a widely acknowledged precursor as a result of its focus on confronting spectacularized society with new ways of thinking about interactions between people, media, and places, which we witness in member Guy Debord's proclamatory and influential text *Society of the Spectacle*.[13] These roots she attributes to periods of political upheaval which incite "a utopian rethinking of art's relationship to the social and of its political potential," and also to aesthetic refusal.[14] Bishop also identifies precursors in Italian Futurism, Group Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) in France, Happenings in the US, social art under socialism in the former Soviet Union, Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia (Group of Avant-Garde Artists) in Argentina, and the community arts movement in the United Kingdom.[15] Though socially engaged artist Pablo Helguera's history is briefer, he focuses his scope to America and traces its history to the late 1960s, with Allan Kaprow's Happenings (semi-scripted art situations enacted with audiences) and the activism of

[13] Published in French in 1967 (Paris: Buchet-Chastel) and English in 1970 (Kalamazoo: Black & Red).
[14] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), 3.
[15] Ibid.

feminist art education, such as the work that came out of artist Judy Chicago's alternative education experiment the Feminist Art Program in the early 70s.

In defining a terminology for this kind of work, it has variably been called relational aesthetics, community, collaborative, participatory, dialogic, or public art.[16] Bishop defines it as an art form "in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material."[17] As such, she opts for the term 'participatory art.' Helguera notes that the term 'social practice' has "emerged most prominently in recent publications, symposia, and exhibitions and is the most generally favoured term for socially engaged art."[18] He sees it as a practice based on engaging society, but because it brings subjects into the realm of art-making in order to bring insight to a social issue, he prefers "socially engaged art."[19] The emphasis of its roots in art practice is acknowledged and retained. Both this social action component and the connection to art fit with the artists and ideas and projects I will be discussing, so I will use 'socially engaged art' or 'social practice' as interchangeable terms to mean this: art that engages society and depends on social action.

[16] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 3
[17] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.
[18] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 3.
[19] Ibid., 5.

CANON

> "The benefit in these articulations is that we end up with a series of anchor points around which to orient. The danger is a congealing of the term [social practice], a fixing of meaning, and a narrowness of perspective. Worst of all, an assumption that we're all on the same page."[20]
> – *Helen Reed*

Because it reaches outside of its origins within art, drawing on and visible to many other disciplines, aiming to engage with a miscellany of sectors, social practice has many strange bedfellows. Accordingly, there is a good deal of dispute about approaches and best practices within the field, and even further out into the other fields socially engaged art touches. As practitioners and academics, we find each other instrumentalizing, honest, hierarchical, strong, sentimental, careful, ambiguous, inspiring, ineffective, earnest, steely, shallow, or loud. Similarly, the discourse relays social practice's interdisciplinary impulses by investigating the cross-sections of education, politics, space, publicness, activism, conversation, ethics, performance, antagonism, feminism, urban planning, and art. As such, despite artist Helen Reed's welcome caution on this matter, it is safe enough to assume that we are very rarely on the same page (sometimes even with ourselves). One needs a page, though, for the purposes of a text. Here: let me smooth the paper over the table to lay out the series of anchor points around which this one will be oriented. Beginning with a description of the two current stances of social practice discourse, I will articulate a place for this research within the complicated and critical works of other practitioners. I will situate the groups I am interested in engaging and determine the relevance of investigating complexity, power dynamics, and insider/outsider relationships to others in the field. Finally, I will determine the works that respond to these thematics within the discourse.

Something akin to socially engaged art has been framed varyingly over the last fifty years: from Guy Debord's writing on situationism to Suzanne Lacy's new genre public art to

[20] Helen Reed, "Is there a social practice canon?" in *The Questions We Ask Together,* 73. Helen Reed often makes work with Hannah Jickling and has made collaborative projects with *Twin Peaks* fans, lesbian separatists, high school art teacher candidates, and a teen wolf pack, among others (http://www.reheardregalement.com).

Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics.[21] However, the two prevailing positions within the current discourse crystallized in a dispute on the pages of *Artforum* between art historian Grant Kester and critic Claire Bishop in 2006 (a fight arguably taken outside into both author's subsequent books).[22] This clash had likely been rumbling since Bishop's article two years prior in *OCTOBER* disputing Bourriaud's claim that relational art should be judged not only aesthetically but also ethically: by the relations and dialogues that it produces.[23] Bishop instead argues (drawing on Rosalyn Deutsche's reading of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) that if we are going to judge art by the relations it produces, those relations need to be more antagonistic and acknowledge the limitations of art as inherently artificial in order to be truly political, an impossibility in the amorphously cozy utopian conversational works Bourriaud champions.[24] Bishop's later text in *Artforum* expands this analysis to include the newly minted socially engaged art (and its many near-synonyms) and characterizes many of these works (naming Kester's 2004 text *Conversation Pieces* specifically) as being hand-wringingly mired in anti-authorial collaborative ethics at the expense of the aesthetic, the interventionist, and the difficult.[25] Kester's somewhat-injured response three months later counters that 'mainstream' art critics like Bishop are just uncomfortable with the aesthetic boundary transgressions of politically engaged art, reading in her critical stance a somewhat askew interpretation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's articulation of paranoid exposure (juxtaposed against reparative amelioration) and a 'cliché' ad hominem dismissal of activism.[26] Bishop fires back, calling Kester's aversion to disruption 'righteous' and reasserting that without it, art is innocuous and fills the void of deficient governmental service policies.[27] Put plainly, Kester reduces Bishop to a cold and elitist critic, and Bishop skewers Kester as a preachy politically correct do-gooder.

While still aiming not to oversimplify, Bishop and Kester's positions in many ways characterize the dominant narratives of social practice: those who see it as tepid and

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[21] Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was published in French in 1967 and English in 1970, Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, [1997] 2002).
[22] Kester's *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke, 2011) and Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012)—in both cases, though the books are intricate investigations of critical and practical perspective, the authors re-open their three-article *Artforum* exchange throughout in a five-year *esprit d'escalier*.
[23] Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *OCTOBER* 110 (Fall 2004): 64.
[24] Ibid., 79.
[25] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 178–183.
[26] Grant Kester, response to Claire Bishop, "Another turn," *Artforum International* 44, no. 9 (May 2006): 22–24.
[27] Claire Bishop, response to Grant Kester, "Claire Bishop Responds," *Artforum International* 44, no. 9 (May 2006): 22–24.

hopelessly moralizing pseudo-art trying to be something it's not and complicit in or at least ineffectively resisting structural inequity; and those who champion its community and dialogic components as both a political act per se and an extension of art's often-antidiscursive boundaries. Perhaps due to a defensiveness against the former's dismissal, those in the latter camp can be somewhat unselfconscious of the inner workings of social practice. Save for Kester's welcome early-career analysis of the collusion between socially engaged art and the paternalism and histories of social work, his later texts focus instead on a more affirmative articulation of a place for conversation practices within contemporary art discourse.[28] His endorsement of collaboration and conversation often has a positive tenor that minimizes the discord, struggle, and uncertainty that inevitably occur when working together.[29]

It is relevant to note that the social justice analysis of many of these most prominent voices in socially engaged and political art closely aligns with that of leftists whose answer to any problem is economics. This leads the struggle to be located in the spectre of a capitalist other—corporations, the 1%, the mass media spectacle, consumerism, the marketplace—instead of in oneself: in the ways we reproduce these and other oppressions (race, class, patriarchy) in our work. While corporate hegemony is certainly still resistance-worthy, this manner of analysis results in a Kesterian 'we're all in this together, let's talk' kind of thinking without troubling and situating very real power relations within. Creative Time's Artistic Director Nato Thompson shares Kester's enthusiasm, articulating social practice as a 'wondrous' tool for social change and situates his critique of power in Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony and "sticking it" to the corporations.[30] Scholar Diana Boros similarly glowingly offers it as a way to enact civic rejuvenation, model new ways of being in the world, and energize public life.[31] Although former Queens Museum Director Tom Finkelpearl provides a pertinent survey of social art practices in relation to American activist histories and offers a set of dialogues with socially engaged artists and writers (both Kester and Bishop appear), he still favours conversation and cooperation over difficulty.[32]

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[28] This appears in *Conversation Pieces* (Berkley: University of California, 2004) but this thinking developed in his early article "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage* 22, no. 6 (January 1995): 5–11. Despite this small nuance, Kester is widely cited in articles uncomplicatedly supporting the discipline in opposition to Bishop. Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.
[29] Grant Kester, *The One and the Many*.
[30] Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015); Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2012).
[31] Diana Boros, *Creative Rebellion for the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
[32] Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) 1–50.

Gregory Sholette is a bit of an outlier in this group as an artist involved in radical collectives instead of an organization director or academic. His articulation of 'dark matter,' the generative power of those of us between the art stars—we failed artists and magazine writers and Sunday painters and activists—who keep the art world afloat, has been useful to me in thinking about arts ecosystems.[33] Still, his focus on large systems instead of individual self-questioning leads me to foreground other theorists in this work. I will instead build on the comparatively self-reflexive approaches of artists Darren O'Donnell and Pablo Helguera in a desire to complicate the often unwary narratives of social practice asserted by Kester, Thompson, Boros, and Finkelpearl.[34] While I aim to add similar layers of nuance to Bishop's dismissive idea that social practice has to be aesthetic and antagonistic in order to function as both political action and art practice, I share with O'Donnell and Helguera in adopting her cautionary social and structural evaluation. A full elaboration of the connection between social practice and structural inequity—gentrification, government instrumentalization of culture, how the languages and aesthetics of liberation are co-opted, and anti-hierarchical work is repurposed—is out of scope for this project. However, some of this large-scale analysis has been articulated by Martha Rosler, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello, George Yúdice, and Angela McRobbie.[35] I find in the work of O'Donnell and Helguera the practice of those structural problematics. I seek a figure who moves beyond a 20-year spat between cold elitist critic and righteous preachy do-gooder: a self-reflexive operator working intentionally within shifting hierarchies and contexts to pursue complexity.

Theorists and practitioners alike in the fields of pedagogy, site-specificity, performance, and even documentary video are deeply relevant to social practice and are also thinking about questions of power relations, insider/outsider dynamics, and complexity. Although their thinking would add layers to a more extended research project, these factors are out of scope for this thesis. For now, we must leave aside Shannon Jackson's analysis of performance and theatre.[36] Likewise, though many practitioners also borrow from radical pedagogy as a framework and articulation of ethics, these relate to a dualistic relationship

[33] Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Books, 2010).
[34] Darren O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*; Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.
[35] Martha Rosler, *Culture Class* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013); Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiappello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005 [2006]); George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).
[36] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

between an artist-as-teacher and community-as-student.[37] There are other parties involved in socially engaged art's structures of power that I hope to discuss: not only artists and community, but also institutions (funders, galleries, organizations) and their staff members. These are a looming and oft-neglected part of social practice's intricate power structure and the existing literature on pedagogy doesn't fully address this dynamic. Discussions of site-specificity and public art, such as the work of Miwon Kwon, Claire Doherty, and Boris Groys, are a significant aspect of the broader discourse as social practice often involves working with publics, in public space, making public sites specific.[38] Artist Suzanne Lacy, whose work is an often under-recognized precursor to social practice and relational aesthetics, makes her conviction for this entanglement between space and social practice clear in her compendium *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*.[39] While sharing the commitments of these works (as well as those of Henri Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard) to see space and society as interconnected and reciprocally produced within hierarchies, in this particular text I will be foregrounding the interpersonal and organizational instead of the spatial aspects of power and politics.[40]

RESONANCE

There are many groups involved in the creation of social practice art projects. Community members and interest groups are engaged to co-produce a work. An artist or collective initiates, facilitates, and co-produces the process. A Curator guides and grounds a work, adding context. The staff of galleries and arts organizations support and produce a work. An Executive Director envisions how it fits into the organization's multi-year trajectories and oversees budgets for it, answerable to a Board of Directors which guides that large-scale thinking. Funding can be crowdfunded (supported by community fundraising online), public (from government grants and non-profit organizations), or private (from foundations and charities), and private funders are often involved in programming and budget decisions. As an arts worker engaged in social practice, I am focusing on those

[37] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. The intersection between social practice and pedagogy is also focus for Open Engagement founder and author Jen Delos Reyes in her 2017 research-creation project *The Pedagogical Impulse*, as well as her lecture *Rethinking Arts Education,* CreativeMornings, Portland, December 2014.
[38] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentred Society* (New York: The New Press, 1998); Claire Doherty, *Public Art (Now): Out of Time, Out of Place* (London: Art / Books, 2014); and Boris Groys ed., *Empty Zones: Andrei Monastyrski and 'Collective Actions'* (London: Black Dog, 2011).
[39] Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*.
[40] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1958); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

practitioners who, like me, have also had to negotiate power relations with complexity in ways that are potentially both controlling and controlled, navigating the shifting boundaries between insider and outsider in both institution and community: artists, curators, and staff. This fluid dynamic between work in communities (often as representatives of institutions and funders) and work within institutions (pushing for change and funding allocation) involves a careful navigation of power. Situated within this representational ambivalence, I am also interested in the ways we frame and approach our work. As I note above in the work of Kester, Thompson, Boros, and Finkelpearl, there is a dominant trend within social practice writing towards primarily utopian narratives that favour collaboration and conversation, working together towards an often-undefined 'better future.' Thompson's introduction to his book on art and activism, *Seeing Power*, exhibits this mentality: "Deploying [culture] for the needs of social change can produce wondrous results."[41] This framework similarly echoes within the actions and language of socially engaged art organizations. While I remain enthusiastic about possibilities for collaboration and conversation, I am interested in finding ways to be critical of those practices, which engage their potential discomfort and open a space for difficulty. My notebooks kept over years of working in this field highlight the need for further investigation of power dynamics, the shifting spectrum of insider/outsider/insider, and finding ways to think with complexity.

Other practitioners in these positions (as well as directors and funders further into the controlling end of the spectrum and away from controlled) confirm these concerns in *The Questions We Ask Together*.[42] This almost 500-page document was drafted in 2013 as part of Open Engagement, a yearly conference founded by artist Jen Delos Reyes held in a different city each year. The conference gathers together transdisciplinary artists, activists, students, scholars, community members, and organizations to talk about social practice. At the end of that year's conference the organizers invited attendees to generate 100 questions about some of their concerns about the practice and where it was heading. In preparation for the conference the following year, each question was given to a contributor working in the field to answer through a short-form text, released as blog entries and then gathered into this book. A more in-depth analysis of this tricky and interesting data would benefit from further study.[43] Still, the questions and answers make visible some of the issues

[41] Thompson, *Seeing Power*, vii.
[42] *The Questions We Ask Together*, ed. Gemma-Rose Turnbull (Pittsburgh: Open Engagement, 2015).
[43] Throughout the texts, there are grumbling contentions with the way the data was collected.

socially engaged artists and practitioners are thinking and talking about. In its pages I find other people who are affirming a need for thinking about power (educator W. Keith Brown writes about the White Saviour Industrial Complex), insider/outsider relationships (*Who/what am I responsible to?*), and difficulty (artist Amy Spiers calls in Foucault's idea of criticism making harder those acts which are now too easy in *Is there a place for disruption/reaction/antagonism in social practice art?*). I am encouraged at the potential relevance of this work to those practitioners seeking greater complexity in what we do and how we talk about it—research that, while slightly less withering than Bishop's, contains a needed critical self-analysis beyond Kester and others' earnest advocacy.[44]

FOCUS

In thinking about critical approaches to power dynamics, while I am indebted to Claire Bishop and Martha Rosler for their large-scale theoretical critiques of social practice's collusion with gentrification and neoliberal funding structures, I will be focusing more specifically on the critical practice-based analysis in O'Donnell's reflection on the work of his Toronto-based art collective Mammalian Diving Reflex and Helguera's materials and techniques handbook for socially engaged art.[45] To think through my creative writing and conversations with practitioners in relation to insider/outsider/insider relationships in social practice, I will bring in Helguera's writing about social practice as reaching outside of itself and occupying a space of ambiguity, as well as Bishop's emphasis that social practice is a manifestation of art's desire to do something more social, collaborative, and real, than art.[46] In thinking through owning up to our own power, I will tie in Helguera's reminder to be honest about our backgrounds and hierarchies and Laurel Richardson's implication of self and context in academic writing.[47] Similarly, I will turn to Doyle's awareness of who holds our sympathy and affective orientation in unpacking social practice and Bishop's analysis of how our work might be co-opted by neoliberal government structures in relation to how we might own up to our position and context.[48] In finding approaches for thinking with complexity about art and politics, I will think

[44] The affirmative attitude of social practice as transformational is also ubiquitous throughout the book in comments like that of artists Jules Rochielle, "Personally, I have always been more interested in using my creativity to create social change or impact" and questions like "How do we know if social practice is being transformational?" *Questions We Ask Together*, 122 and 364.
[45] O'Donnell, *Social Acuptuncture*; Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art.*
[46] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 5; Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.
[47] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 5; Laurel Richardson, "Getting personal: writing-stories," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 14, no.1 (2001), 35.
[48] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 90; Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 3.

through O'Donnell's call for discomfort in social practice, in relation to Helguera's chapter on Antagonism, and art critic Jennifer Doyle's writing on difficulty in contemporary art.[49] Although Doyle's focus is primarily on performance-based practices, she also discusses relational aesthetics and the writings of Bishop and Kester in thinking through difficulty and emotion in contemporary art. As opposed to the stark way Bishop writes about antagonism, Doyle and Helguera's writing allows for a richness of impressions that encompass difficulty instead—the intricacy of politics, criticality, and emotion—that deserves elaboration within critical writing about social practice.

[49] O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 31–38; Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 59–65; Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*.

METHOD

FICTO-CRITICISM

There is a historic precedent for scholarly creative writing—Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk reference experimental texts by Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, Donna Haraway, and Barthes in their influential paper on research-creation.[50] There is also a not-insignificant rhizome of feminist ficto-critical art writing in Canada and the US. The term was (she says 'casually') coined by Canadian cultural theorist and artist Jeanne Randolph in 1983.[51] Artist and writer Chris Kraus (author of the alt-lit classic *I Love Dick*) articulates ficto-criticism as "writing about art and ideas with the same intensity and cadence as your own problems or the party you went to last night."[52] As such, it brings together many textures: poetry, remembered quotations, transcribed dialogue, email excerpts, reflections, and theory. Many texts in this ficto-critical vein blur the line between truth and fiction, as in writer Sheila Heti's self-questioning Toronto art world fable, *How Should a Person Be?* and punk matriarch Vivienne Westwood's theatrical manifesto *Active Resistance to Propaganda.*[53] Like me, these authors who have written the ground beneath this work are both artists and simultaneously critically reflecting on art.

Within Randolph's formation of ficto-criticism is both a desire to unravel binary systems and a dedication to self-criticism, which aligns with this work's desire for complexity and self-reflexivity. She writes, "criticism is not simply an objective body of techniques but includes an autobiographical moment of self-criticism, an examination and acknowledgement of one's origins, position, commitments, and antipathies."[54] The self is implicated in a reciprocal relationship with the subjects and objects of one's writing. The result is writing that allows for complexity in criticism. German scholar Gerrit Haas notes that in ficto-critical works if one finger is pointing at the other (work, artist, situation),

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[50] Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances.'" in *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, no.1 (2012): 6.
[51] Jeanne Randolph, "Out of Psychoanalysis: A Ficto-Criticism Monologue," in *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture*, ed. Sheila Petty, Garry Sherbert, and Annie Gerin (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 231. Australian scholar Helen Flavell confirms this origin against the claims of fellow Australians Stephen Muecke and Noel King. "Who Killed Jeanne Randolph? King, Mueke or 'ficto-criticism,'" *Outskirts* 20 (May 2009), http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-20/flavell.
[52] Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997); M.H. Miller, "The Novelist as Performance Artist: On Chris Kraus, the Art World's Favorite Fiction Writer," *Observer*, 30 October 2012, http://observer.com/2012/10/the-novelist-asperformance-artist-on-chris-kraus-the-art-worlds-favorite-fiction-writer/
[53]Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (Toronto: Anansi, 2012); Vivienne Westwood, "Active Resistance to Propaganda" (2007) in *Revolution: A Reader*, ed. Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler (Portland: Publication Studio, 2012), 147.
[54] Randolph, "Out of Psychoanalysis," 237.

three are pointing back at the writer: "this kind of self-reflexivity is usually circumspectly aware of its own practices and their consequences when criticising others."[55] The implication of this, Australian scholar Helen Flavell notes, is that "the individual micro-politics of ficto-critical texts must be engaged with to determine how well the text dissolves its authority and whether the self is ultimately put at risk."[56] Ficto-criticism is a questioning and evaluation of the author as well as the subject. As a research methodology, it supports this project's need to find ways of thinking with complexity about social practice and being self-critical about one's entanglement in power structures. It simultaneously supports my desire to find difficulty in social practice—Australian researchers Kerr and Nettlebeck propose that ficto-criticism is an agonistic practice. They write of ficto-criticism as unruly writing, "a series of investigative writings connected by their agonistic relation to the interpretative gesture."[57]

Similarly, it allows me to confront the implication of myself within the work—struggling with the stickiness of these ideas through four years in the field, drawn to some of the art practices, feeling strongly political, being frustrated with the saviour mentalities of socially engaged art, and having sat around far too many a jargon-laced boardroom table or gentrifying city hall planning meeting. I needed a wry distance: a mechanism to find generosity in an issue that for me had become very polemical. In addition to this self-reflexive facet of ficto-criticism, sociologist and creative writer Laurel Richardson's prompt to "Consider the various subject positions *you have or have had* within [a fieldwork setting[58]]" (emphasis mine) served as a starting point to start to investigate different figures with complexity. With this prompt in mind, I developed a cluster of semi-fictional explorations and characters rooted firmly in my own experiences. **The Executive Director** and **The Coordinator** explore navigating a community and an organization from two different roles and power positions to think about different forms of shifting insider/outsider power dynamics. At the Creative Time Summit in Toronto, artists Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge spoke of fictionalization within their socially engaged artwork

[55] Gerrit Haas, *Fictocritical Strategies: Subverting Textual Practices of Meaning, Other, and Self-Formation* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017).
[56] Flavell, "Who Killed Jeanne Randolph?"
[57] Amanda Nettelbeck, "Notes Towards and Introduction," in *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* ed. Heather Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1998), 13.
[58] Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, "Writing: A method of inquiry," in The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (3rd Ed.), ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 975.

relating to labour struggles in Ontario: "Fiction allows us to say more. We're able to articulate personal details in a broader personal and political context."[59] This resonates within the written pieces below. Although they are fictional texts, they draw on my own discomfort with working for a private charitable foundation, of both being an eager intern and later on working with interns, the discordance of being a rural kid in art school. This allowed me a distance that is critical by being self-critical and generous to some of the intricacies of power. As Haas writes: one finger pointing at the other, three back to the self. Ficto-critical writing has also allowed me to think tangibly about key issues that have long troubled me. Though **The Executive Director** and **The Coordinator** also developed in this way, **The Superb Fairy-Wren** in particular was a hunch that became significant: drawing from armchair science research and memory to explore the exclusionary and protective complexity of boundary-markings and passwords. In another paper, Richardson shares the idea that writing is a method of discovery: "I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it."[60] Instead of trying to assemble a list of points before writing, this process of writing into the thorny details of being imbedded in social practice without a clear itinerary allowed me to see it in new ways.

Finally, a brief note: in a pursuit of better articulating the fluid dynamic between insider and outsider, it is interesting that Flavell articulates ficto-criticism as a hyphenated approach. Like Kerr and Nettlebeck's eponymous attention to *The Space Between*, Flavell articulates the dash itself as indicating a generative middle: neither fiction nor criticism, but something else.[61] The hybrid line connecting two ways of being, the raised finger that traces it. This further confirms it as an appropriate method for writing about socially engaged art, a practice similarly in-between, similarly shifting, similarly hybrid.

CONVERSATIONS

Concurrently with the creative writing for this research, I continued conversations with artist/priestess Orev Katz, artist/scholar Cristóbal Martinez, and writer/curator cheyanne turions. I have worked with each of them in some capacity and interviewed Cristóbal and cheyanne on *The Secret Ingredient*, the radio show I co-hosted with my colleague Alissa

[59] Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, "Labour," Presentation, *Creative Time Summit: Of Homelands and Revolution*, Toronto, September 19, 2017.
[60] Richardson, "Getting personal," 35.
[61] Haas, *Fictocritical Strategies*, 11-12.

Firth-Eagland in Guelph. I have seen Katz, Martinez, and turions practicing and talking about navigating their own roles in relation to art's power structures critically both inside and outside institutions, and these early interactions contributed to shaping my research. Interestingly, Randolph contends that the personal relation of the writer to the articulated is a tenet of ficto-criticism—"that loyalty and tenderness be shamelessly acknowledged."[62] In addition to my ongoing engagement with their work, what these artists and arts workers share is a way of operating, not necessarily a demographic or geographic positionality. Lawrence Neuman and Karen Robson describe this as purposive sampling, used "less to generalize to a larger population than it is to gain a deeper understanding of types."[63]

Speaking with these three as practitioners who are at a further stage in their careers but similarly pushing with complexity from a range of positions of power was a way for me to both articulate some of their approaches and determine the resonance of my own thinking and writing. In this matter I have been inspired by Dawn Marsden's writing on personal, internal, and external relational validity to confirm the agreement or fit of an idea.[64] Personal validity she describes as checking how the research fits with knowledge gained through prior experience, internal validity she describes as relevance to a community, and external validity is the connection to the broader field or society. This aligns with how Qualitative Research theorists and educators Sharon Rallis and Gretchen Rossman describe the three domains of validity found within critical inquiry: personal, community of practice, and community of discourse.[65] They situate this within a confirmation of dialogic interchanges as having "the specific aim of learning; they explore the underlying meaning and assumptions for the purpose of reaching a new level of understanding."[66] While this research project is critical of dialogue as a solitary political endgame, this framing of conversation as a process of learning and co-learning matches the impulse to reach out to artist-practitioners. The personal validity in this work is present in including my notebook entries as a form of temporal reflexivity that allows new considerations to emerge from past thoughts and experiences; the internal validity to my community of practice is confirmed through conversation; and the external validity to my community of

[62] Randolph, "Out of Psychoanalysis," 234.
[63] W. L. Neuman and Karen Robson, *Basics of Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Toronto: Pearson, 2009), 132.
[64] Dawn Marsden, "Expanding Knowledge through Dreaming, Wampum, and Visual Arts," *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 2, no.2 (2004): 56.
[65] Sharon F. Rallis and Gretchen B. Rossman, *The Research Journey: Introduction to Inquiry* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 52.
[66] Ibid.

discourse manifests in the connection of these ideas to social practice theory in my final analysis chapter.

Drawing on complexity thinking in social science, I understand these three conversations to be what Lesley Kuhn and Robert Woog describe as 'coherent conversations.' These aim to be both "[p]ermissive, accepting of the entirety of knowledge, information, and opinions that people bring in to it" and "[c]ritically self-reflective of the processes via which the conversation emerges."[67] Though the conversations cohere around a topic and an initial set of questions, both researcher and conversationalist are able to stray from the topic and aren't limited to that set of questions. As the authors lay out, the "ways that individuals' views have been shaped by the cultures to which they have an affinity, along with their values, hopes, and lived experiences can be made visible and thus open to critical reflection and perhaps even review."[68] Ensuring that the conversation stays on-topic yet eschewing an interview for a dialogue allows for a flexibility of responses and makes possible more complex material. It also enables self-reflexive learning to emerge for both parties. I wove these conversations into **The Artist, The Curator, The Priestess**, which is still poetically written but finds connections in my hand-written notes from those meetings to grapple with working inside and outside: reaching out, leveraging, and ceding power.

SCOPE

All three modes of engagement in this thesis—ficto-critical writing drawing from notebook entries, my conversations with Katz, Martinez, and turions, and the theory I engage—speak to the fluidity of social practice across cultural contexts. Katz, turions, and I have mainly engaged on the land now known as Canada with its consequent majority-public funding dynamics.[69] Each of our experiences is unique outside of that, however. My writing engages my work experience within a private foundation working internationally in Europe, turions and Katz have both worked within both private and public frameworks. turions has worked internationally and Katz has worked and went to school in the United

[67] Lesley Kuhn and Robert Woog, "From Complexity Concepts to Creative Applications," *World Futures* 63, no. 3 (2007): 184.
[68] Ibid.
[69] "The land now known as Canada" is how turions refers to this place in relation to Wood Land School's work at Documenta 14 in Athens. Tanya Lukin Linklater and cheyanne turions, interviewed by John Hampton, "Wood Land School Goes to Documenta: A Talk on Indigenous Institutional Critique, Part 2," *Canadian Art*, August 31, 2017, http://canadianart.ca/features/wood-land-school-documenta/.

States. Martinez has worked both in Canada, the United States, and internationally and speaks to the differences of doing social practice projects commissioned by organizations and crowdfunded. All three practitioners engage both within and outside of artist-run centres, museums, and gallery spaces. Though Katz and Martinez more frequently work in social practice, turions's writing about art and society also overlaps with social practice discourse. The theorists I engage reflect a similar spread. Although most of them were educated in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, their work draws lines across specificities and contexts. Despite the particularities of each situation, this work responds to this fluidity of cultural context while considering approaches for practitioners—artists and arts workers—to acknowledge and engage their own specific identities and contexts when reaching in and reaching out.

It is my hope that this writing contributes to teasing out the tight knot of affinity, complicity, funding, training, frustration, guilt, and desire inherent in working outside of standard art contexts. With this work, I aim to articulate processes of self-reflexivity, intentionality, and complexity for artists and arts organizations entering both institutional structures and communities. Because socially engaged art reaches out beyond its own boundaries, research in this area could also have relevance to the many other fields it touches. This work I hope could find resonance with practitioners doing community-engaged work more broadly.

THE SUPERB FAIRY-WREN

So there's this bird.
It's called the superb fairy-wren. (That's its name, it's no joke. Its cousin is the splendid fairy-wren, which is almost as good but not quite as.) It's tending its eggs in a nest woven of spider webs and grasses. It's singing a little song.

But here's the thing: this little song it's singing isn't like the little song of any of the other superb fairy-wrens. Each family of superb fairy-wrens has got their own little song that they sing. So: this particular superb fairy-wren is singing its own little song to its own superb fairy-wren eggs. The still half-formed babies are listening. They are growing bigger and bigger inside their own speckled eggshells. They are listening and learning the song as they grow. The parent wren learned this song from its own parents. It is passing it on to its wren babies. It's like a surname, this fairy-wren song.

This is us, it flutes, *we belong to this family*.

When the babies hatch, they sing the little song back when they're peeping, hungry. The superb parent fairy-wren leaves the nest to find food in the wild: grasshoppers, weevils, larvae, bugs, ants. It flies back to the nest, it lands on the edge. It sings the little song. The little birds answer back with their sweet higher-pitched version of the same little song.

This is us, the parent wren calls.
And then the baby wrens respond, *yes*.
They say, *we belong to this family*.

There's a reason the superb fairy-wren has its own little song that it sings. The reason is this: it can't count. So when the parent fairy-wren returns to the nest, it can't say to itself,
when I left, I had four eggs.
It can't murmur suspiciously on the edge of the nest,
and NOW there are FIVE.
It can't say tremblingly,
but five minus four is ONE.
It can't realize in a brief searing moment:
THERE IS AN IMPOSTER IN OUR MIDST.

Some cuckoo species lay their eggs in the nests of other birds. They leave the other birds to raise their hungry babies who are much bigger than their surrogate mothers. Who sometimes eat all the food and leave the other babies to starve. Cuckoos lay their eggs in the nests of superb fairy-wrens.

Sometimes a fairy-wren will leave her nest of four eggs and return to five eggs, one slightly larger than the others. An imposter. And because they can't count, the fairy-wrens sing their family song to the eggs instead.

We are us, it sings to the eggs.
And the little wrens inside their shells learn the song, quickly as they can: *we are fairy-wrens, we belong.*

It's a password. It tells the parent birds which of the nestlings to feed.[70] Whose peeping mouths to drop pieces of caterpillar and grasshopper into: the small superb fairy-wrens' and not the cuckoo's. The ones in the know are the ones with full bellies.
At the end of the day.

In art school, our teachers sang to us, *Rosalind Krauss*. And we called back sweetly, *OCTOBER*. *Minimalism, Fluxus*, they sang, and we answered *Donald Judd, Yoko Ono.*[71] They sang *television interventions*, we responded, *Stan Douglas, Monodramas*. *General Idea,* they sang, and we said, *SHUT. THE FUCK. UP.,* and they said *Right!*[72] It, too, was a sort of a password, one they learned from their own teachers, who learned it from their teachers before them. One unique to us, different than the other disciplines: the learning of a canon as the learning of a code. Was it to make sure, that when the time came, it was our bellies that would be full instead of a hungry interloper who didn't know better?

(It is unfair, though, to make a metaphoric leap between mother wrens and teachers and funding. It is both related and also far more complicated than that.)

We secure the boundary of our knowledge through language, and those not in the know come away feeling empty.[73] It felt elitist and withholding, this cultural capital we drew in up close close close to our chests. Could we not stretch the boundaries of our discipline to include others, I wondered? Reach out from art to bring farmers and city councilors and cashiers and therapists and parents and roofers and servers and

[70] Diane Colombelli-Négrel et al. "Embryonic Learning of Vocal Passwords in Superb Fairy-Wrens Reveals Intruder Cuckoo Nestlings," *Current Biology* 22 (2012): 2155-2160.
[71] Peter Rand, *Double Rainbow/ Donald Judd Mashup*, 2010. https://vimeo.com/14081289
[72] General Idea, *Shut The Fuck Up,* Video, 14 Min., 1985.
[73] Triple Canopy has an excellent article about the development of this language which takes the digital press release as a starting point to unpack the origins, use, and future of International Art English. Alix Rule and David Levine "International Art English: ON the rise—and *the space*—of the art-world press release," *Triple Canopy* (They Were Us, July 30, 2012). https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english

salespeople into our discussions of soaring beauty and political poetics? It is perhaps the same impulse that drives interdisciplinary thinking: to draw equitably from many different tools and understandings, to think with complexity and in relation.

Maybe they're not fed by the same things I am, though. Maybe I am the large egg in the nests of others, I am the unwanted incursion. The imposter, desiring sustenance from a different inside. I'm still not sure which song I sing at the end of the day.

I still can't quite sing *this is us*.
It sticks in my throat, a little: *I belong*.

*A nest (loosely woven grasses and spider webs): close to the earth. The outside rests nestled in thick vegetation. Inside: four matte eggs, safe. Figure and ground divided by the wobbling opening: a smooth aperture, a mouth opened. *pkwhoouh**[74]

Vocal passwords and boundary-markings have many reasons. To make sure that the police don't show up at your protest or rave. To be very specific, to have a more nuanced conversation among colleagues. To speak words of truth to each other in a language your oppressor can't understand. To be on the same page. To feel kinship. To keep an imposter out of your nest. To speak to two audiences at once. To define class lines and boundaries. They develop both intentionally and organically. They're read differently from shifting angles, from a spectrum of power positions. Both we and these borders are in motion.

They articulate difference: that is there, this is here.

That is you, this is us.

[74] "how to write out an inhale"

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

tick tick tick tick tick scccatick tick tick
ssssctickа tick tick tick sckkkea tick tick tick
tick tick shtick tckaaaa tick tick tick tick tci
tcks tisk tsik tisck tssaaa tk tick tick tsssick
tick tik tik tik tik tik sccrkt tick tick tik tk tkick
tick tick shhh tick tik tick tick

She is walking.
She is looking down.

She is looking down at her grey blazer. She is looking down at the dress that means business, with the shell buttons all down its front, which is also her front. She is looking at the hole in her nylons. She is looking at her filed and pinkly nails. She is looking down at her clicking heels (real plastic, fake leather).

Down at the flagstones of the plaza in front of City Hall.

pasta – salsa verde walnuts
Asparagus spinach cheese
Haddock
Roasted Chicken
Burger
Asparagus salad Quinoa, feta + veg
Gluten free pizza artichokes, red pep.
Veggie stew, salad, chicken bacon, Spanish omelette focaccia.[75]

She is looking down at her lunch. It is in a plastic take-out container. It is a very nice lunch: a nice sandwich, next to a nice salad, in a nice plastic take-out container. There is a recycled napkin, the kind with brown paper, fluttering on top of the container. There is a plastic fork pinning down the brown flag of the napkin.[76] Though she did not ask for it nor expect it, she can tell without asking that the plastic fork and plastic container are not actually plastic but made of corn or whatever instead of something that will lacerate fishes and fill the bellies of birds once she makes quick work of eating (once she returns to her office in the corner) and throws it away.

[75] Menu, capitalization, and punctuation taken as originally transcribed from an old work journal.
[76] Artist Kristina Lee Podesva has a project about brown—brown flags, a brown globe, brown silkscreens. The exhibition write-up for her show at the Darling Foundry, curated by Alissa Firth-Eagland, talks about the colour. It is caught in the middle: it is not part of the visible electromagnetic spectrum. As a pigment, it can't exist without being mixed. It offers "a space for considering paradox, suspension, and signification." Is this a paradoxical paper pennant to this moment in the Executive Director's life? Like all power, existing without being seen? A mix of rural and pagan and reasonable wealth and feminist sensibilities? In this context, no doubt a flag of convenience. Kristina Lee Podesva, "Brown Studies," June 16, 2011 - August 28, 2011, http://fonderiedarling.org/en/brown-studies.html.

A *kind* kind of container to hold her nice handmade lunch. She is looking down at herself: all 173 centimeters of executive directing business-casual nylon-wearing shape-nailed click-heeled nice expensive lunch-eater.

I bet you feel soooooo soothed that your goddamn container is biodegradable, she says to herself. *Don't you.*
Don't you? Of course it's biodegradable. Of course it fucking is.

The Executive Director is looking down at her life (like, really looking down, like glass floor of the CN Tower looking down). Looking down and finding it hard to find herself in this body, in these clothes, eating this lunch, going back to this office in that corner. She's looking down and wondering how she got here.

She's thinking: *I once went to hear Renowned Art Critic Dave Hickey speak*. He was a curmudgeon and a superstar, which is an entertaining and unkind situation. He was talking about his ideal art school. Among other things, he said: "If there's a cow near your classroom you probably shouldn't sign up."[77]

There had been a cow near her art school classroom (within a few hundred meters, which is what Dave Hickey had meant by 'near,' she thinks). A cow which had a *rumen fistula*, a hole installed directly to the cow's stomach, for students to learn more about bovine digestion. Not too soon after seeing this at the Veterinary College Open House, the Executive Director had learned in a vague way about abjection. A prof might have mentioned Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, or it might have been an offhand comment from a friend. What she remembers is, abjection is the horror felt on seeing the line breached between self and other. Blood, pee, cum, vomit, spit, shit: the insides outside. Something not in its right place. It was the rupture of the fistula she thought of when she heard this: the scientist-professor popping off the rubber lid and reaching in to rummage through the cow's rumen *(her first stomach)* to pull out a handful of quarter-digested[78] hay and corn and silage.

A cow with a perfect circle on her mottled upper back, a hole into her insides.

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[77] A short selection of quotes: "We had probably the only graduate program that met at a titty bar." "In my ideal art school you would have painters, you would have flute players…" (and here he licks his lips), "Oh yeah, you'd have flute players." "Wouldn't allow any treehuggers, fundamentalists, or farmers. Nobody who would confide their abortions to me." (This in particular described and dismissed most of her roundly in one hot sentence.) Dave Hickey, "It Takes a Village to Make Bad Art," Shenkman Lecture, University of Guelph, 20 March 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4bc-9kMtfE.

[78] "how many stomachs cow"

Selves and others are relative, though, the Executive Director thinks now. *Insides and outsides, too. Only the western scientific hand makes the interrupting breach of abjection horrifying. What is actually inside the cow (what is pulled out by the rubber-gloved hand and spread out by a thumb across four sweaty fingers to display to the crowd of visitors) is something more hybrid, complicated. What is actually inside the cow is food, grown in the earth, turned into energy. Acid, gasses, enzymes, fermentation, saliva, microorganisms. The stomach walls slowly contracting, expanding.*

There had been a cow not far away from her childhood bedroom, too. Its great-great-great-great-great-granddaughters[79] are still there, standing in their stalls, waiting in the dark to be milked, and being the sole reason the young women in the rolling hills around them will never be great artists.[80]

Poet Ariana Reines wrote about cows and rumination and the body and being a woman. She says:

"It is not easy to be honest because it is impossible to be complete"

Later on:
"Are you so intelligent your body doesn't have you in it."[81]

The Executive Director struggles to be both honest and complete, it's true. She doesn't feel more intelligent than anyone else but still she finds it hard to be in her body, a body which once slept in a small pink bedroom not too far from a cow. She was strange and loathsome and unacceptable, then. Then, she wanted nothing more than to leave her gangly unloved body (and then there was the head, shaved in a moment of fix-jawed determination at 13). Making the pros had never been the question: she was searching in the dark of the art world for other weird people.[82]

[79] "how long milk cow lifespan"
[80] Or, as Dave Hickey put it in the same lecture, "making the pros."
[81] Ariana Reines, *The Cow*, (Albany: Fence Books, 2006) 1, 93.
[82] This is perhaps how many of us are drawn to art. In the anguished wake of the deadly Ghost Ship Fire in Oakland, Gabe Meline wrote of the tragedy in relation to the necessity of art spaces: "we gravitate to the spaces that say: Welcome. Be yourself. For the tormented queer, the bullied punk, the beaten trans, the spat-upon white trash, the disenfranchised immigrants and young people of color, these spaces are a haven of understanding in a world that doesn't understand — or can't, or doesn't seem to want to try." Gabe Meline, "It Could Have Been Any One of Us," *KQED Arts*, 4 December 2016, https://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2016/12/04/it-could-have-been-any-one-of-us/.

Now, she is not sure how to hold the complexity of herself in one honest and complete handful for a different reason. Now she feels in herself a distancing from her body that does not have her in it, a body that has power and money. She almost can't recognize herself.

But no: that is her grey blazer there, in the puddle. That is her briefcase (she thinks of it as a leather satchel, a school bag, but who is she kidding?), reflected in the window of the "outside of the mainstream" bridal store for the modern bride. That is her mind thinking about multi-year strategies, bobbing as if tenuously tethered to her body far below.

It seems unreal. Her sweeping hand writes out checks for hundreds of thousands of dollars.[83] Her firing neurons and synapses make decisions for a yearly budget of over a million dollars.

Her fingers type it all out in an Excel spreadsheet like this:
click click click click pshh click clicka tik click clik click click click click ck click pshhh tap tap click click click click click click

She sends off emails to their accountant confirming the transfer of sums like this (like a plane taking off):
fwooooooooooosh

It's a small organization, so it was she who conducted an exit interview with one of their interns last week.

She asked the intern:
1. *What was it like to work for us?*

She asked, ***2.*** *Did you have any new thoughts, what did you learn from being here?*

She asked ***3.*** *Was there anything we could do differently, we're always looking to improve, want to make sure you have a voice? etc.*

These are questions she asks each intern and volunteer when they leave the organization. She feels as though it's an important step in making their organization more egalitarian. She likes to think of herself as more a colleague than a boss. Everyone has agency, everyone contributes, we should be open to criticism and feedback. But she knows these are loaded questions.

[83] "rupaul one hundred thousand dollars gif"

The intern can't tell her the truth, even though she presses:
Please feel free to be candid, you know, we want to learn and incorporate feedback.
Even though she says, leaning forward confidentially like she's whispering,
You can tell me.

She had hoped that the intern would be open, or maybe even call her out:
I was glad to receive course credit for this, but course credit is the loophole that makes unpaid internships okay, but it's not okay.
But instead the intern says, *No really this was such an amazing opportunity for me.*

Weeks later, the newly-ex intern sends a thank-you card.

The Executive Director can't help it: she holds the strings. A spider waiting on crisscrossing red-acrylic wool strands,[84] purse strings, the long strung-out line of her signature on a reference letter or a cheque. She can't get away from it, she's implicated—sustained by it and sustaining it through each decision she makes. It is she who calls the shots, she who is responsible for justifying the organization's actions to the Board of Directors. She who ensures they'll get funding for another year.

She is looking down, down at her body which is tied up inside the business end of things. And because she's on the inside, she often finds herself sitting around boardroom tables. She finds herself rubbing elbows, shoulder-to-shoulder, cheek by jowl, neck in neck (and other trite phrases we use to describe the touch of colluding bodies) with social innovators. Their eyes are vacant stars, they want to SAVE THE WORLD. They say things like "I like urban grit. I really do."[85]

She finds herself talking about art in a way she never expected to be talking about art. She finds herself hearing about gentrification and Richard Florida's idea of the creative class, with art and artists made into tools to bring about generic positive economic change in cities.[86]

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[84] (No doubt woven by Yarn Toss, that ageless team-building exercise that demonstrates interconnectedness where someone in a group says something revealing and then throws the yarn across the circle to someone else.)
[85] Taken from an old work notebook.
[86] Richard Florida is an urban studies theorist who developed the idea of a "creative class," where high numbers of artists, musicians, filmmakers and designers pave the way for corporate engagement and urban renewal. (*The Rise of the Creative Class,* 2002). Artist Martha Rosler has written an excellent critique of Florida's work and the easy cooptation of artists to gentrify cities in her lecture "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism." (Hermes Lecture, AKV | St. Joost, Avans University, 2010); Florida would go on to regret this, citing deepening class divides and the failing middle class. Sam Wetherell, "Richard Florida is Sorry," *Jacobin*, August 19, 2017, https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/new-urban-crisis-review-richard-florida.

She is invited to consultations at the city hall where art is seen as a way to make the downtown *livelier, active, attractive.* The consultants say they want to make people *want to spend more time there*. They shrug: *To maybe visit the shops, who knows*. (Who can blame them though? She wonders. They get money from a downtown that's making money. The making of art into an instrument is only a problem if you believe in art as something that makes you human and lets you make sense of the world.)

She used to lash out with a tongue like a sharp plant, heart beating fast, but now the Executive Director wonders if it isn't better to try to reach out—to build bridges across ways of thinking. They have money and she knows people who need it. Maybe they'll even learn something from thinking about art the way she does. Maybe she can help them see it as something beyond just a tool. So she repeats their language (it's a way of teaching them, she thinks), she reframes her team's strange and sticky projects to make them legible (also, she worries, oversimplifying), so her Board of Directors and her stakeholders and their partners and the people in the think tank and those on the outside can all go away nodding.
Full of hope and croissants and coffee.

The Executive Director's tongue is tied, too. She feels a rise in the back of her mouth when she sees that she's losing the attention of a room, and dry-heaves looping words onto the whiteboard.

2.0
accelerate
big ideas
change-making
diversity
entrepreneurship
future
grassroots
hope
innovation
laboratory
marginalized
network
outcomes
potential
question
resilience
sustainability
training
urban
values
wellbeing

One X at a time.

She knows that these words came from good ideas and best intentions (whatever 'good' and 'best' mean): of living together, sustaining life outside of a capitalist system, of feeling supported and hopeful. She knows these words don't mean much anymore. Their teeth have been pulled out. They were once feral, running wild in the brambled underbrush of the underground. But they've been tamed, or at least co-opted by the language of new business enterprise.

It's hard for her heart to stir, now, when she hears the next new plan. It used to. Her balled-up fist would pump her knee slightly with a rush of glee. Nato Thompson writes about this hardening: "All direct meaning has, to some degree, found itself tainted by a dominant means-end capitalist visual culture," he writes. "Every speech act—be it about Miller Lite or the Baptist Church or police brutality—concludes with a desire for someone to do something—a call to action."[87]

She knows that people like her using these words around a boardroom table desensitizes the hurt and struggle and frustration they were born from. On the inside, she can't help but use them in the wrong way. She can't help but use them without context, or worse, in a totally different context. An Executive Director can't cry wolf.

The Executive Director wonders if funding makes art into an instrument always or only just sometimes?[88] She was recently in an archive (CDs labelled with numbers and underscores, heavily policed library border) and listened to a conversation between Lorraine Monk, a curator, and Martha Langford, the woman who would take over from her as the Executive Director of the National Film Board's Still Images Division. A conversation between Executive Directors. From one Executive Director to another. It is confidential, chatty. Monk is a storyteller, her words crest and fall punctuated by polished punchlines. The Executive Director found herself deeply sympathizing. Monk toes the line between advocating for the artists she works with and maintaining the relevance and position of the "Stills" (as she calls it). Between pushing boundaries and placating audiences and funders. "I am responsible to a board of trustees," she says aghast, under pressure from the 15 West Coast artists of *B.C. Almanac(h) C-B* to include nudes in their show despite Canada's obscenity laws at the time.[89]

As the one who calls the shots, the Executive Director is of course responsible to her own board. (They're not so bad, in the end. She's become friends with some of the people she meets with. They go out for wine and dinner together to strategize.

[87] Nato Thompson, Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century, (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 46-47.
[88] This rings from Toronto filmmaker Deirdre Logue's 6-channel installation about monstrosity and self-destruction 'Why Always Instead of Just Sometimes' (2003-2006).
[89] Jack Dale et. al., *B.C. Almanac(h) C-B* (Ottawa: National Film Board Still Photography Division, 1970). Lorraine Monk, interview by Lilly Koltun, National Archives of Canada, December 15, 1976.

They love good food and the same kind of weird movies she does and have got the wildest stories from all of their travels. Some of them invited her to join them in the Muskokas, at their second home they call a cottage, and she's thinking about it.)

She is responsible to the money, to her artists, to the communities they work with. She feels this responsibility like a weight on a pulley at the back of her throat. She trusts the artists they work with, and they've worked with some of the best. Still, she wants to make sure each project aligns with the organization's other work. She trusts her staff, but she wants to make sure she knows what they're doing at all times, just so she can make sure they're optimizing their time and the money she puts into them. She sees far, she knows how to connect the projects to their mandate. She remembers what they've done over the last few years, she's envisioning where they're going. She's seen what the city and its communities need, and where artists can connect to it. Mama knows best.

How do I use art, she wonders? And she must, she's an administrator, so she's positioning it some way whether she's honest about it with herself or not. She thinks about the strings she holds, and the control she executes sometimes like the jerk of a knee when it's tapped by a rubber reflex hammer: sometimes on purpose, sometimes without even meaning to. Sometimes she oversimplifies, trying to build bridges.

"Do-gooderism, as such," writes artist Darren O'Donnell, "merely maintains and reiterates problematic power dynamics by maintaining the offending inequity. A really effective intervention recognizes that improving conditions for others must also somehow improve conditions for yourself. In this way selfishness is recouped—but in the name of wider social good."[90] She's trying not to be a do-gooder. She's a critical thinker, she thinks about systems and poetry and what art actually does. She thinks about what her own selfish investment might be, and it is this: she wants art to find more people, maybe even people who (like her) grew up or went to school next to a cow.

She's looking down at her body in front of City Hall. Her head is bobbing away from her body that doesn't have her in it. What can she do from this high high up vantage, how can she shift this power a

[90] O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 38.

little more? She's there already. How can she leverage these connections and resources for people who don't normally get that shot? Should she just step aside?

She never wanted to be a company woman. And yet, here she is now—pink nails, nice sandwich, grey blazer.

Walking back to the office:
tick
tick
tick.

THE COORDINATOR

clickclick clickclick clickclick clickclick click click clickclick clickclick clickclick clickclick clickclick click click clickclick clickclick click click

Hard curve of (bitten, whatever) nail reinforces its skinbed underneath. Skin covers flesh, bone back support, thumbpillowcase with printable creases.[91] Press into hard nub of blue plastic, press into spring, press into self, press into thin white plastic well, press into ballpoint. The raw tang of ink: oil, dye, tannic acid, iron sulphate.[92]

sheath/unsheath
sheath/unsheath
sheath/unsheath

The fricative middle between each click like a match striking.

Here is the hyperbole some of us share. Here is how I remember it: as a lump in my throat, as a flash in my eye.

A white space. White/white. Well-lit and echoes (our wet shoes yelp on the concrete floor) and and and painted half polar bear white. A desk in the way way back room, someone angular and beautiful is sitting there and and and and looking *down* at us (they're seated, we're not). A panel on the wall, delicately mounted, in this language you need at least one degree to understand. Even the threshold is awkward to cross: stumble over the gaze of the way way backroom person. Trip over out of place. This art is separate. Closed up inside, disinterested in the messiness of the real world. It is examinable and precious here. It is wry and clever and thoughtfully put together here. 'Pretentious,' we dismiss at it. It's trying to be obtuse, isn't it? It is very nice to look at, clean lines and bright colours. It doesn't laugh at your jokes. What good is it, housed up in here? What good is it, if you have to have at least one degree to understand it? If it's bought by people who can afford it, if you have to become one of those people to sell it? We were painters and sculptors and photographers once, but felt weird and rich and exclusive.

[91] "human thumb cross section"

[92] "what is in ballpoint pen ink"

So—we try to envision an art tied up in purpose and equity and 'real people.' We justify that the work we do is borrowing from the best pieces of art: thinking complexly and relationally and abstractly; where we can envision new creative institutions that challenge existing institutions. Where what we are good at can be of use. Maybe it's not doing anything but at least it's worth it to try? There's a quote from Dostoyevsky and I can't remember where I read it, "The most monstrous monster is the monster with noble feelings."

This is the story some of us tell ourselves, am I right?

The story that our selves tell us, am I right?

The story that tells us something about ourselves, am I right?

My past self is hopeful
she makes my teeth hurt.

I am the Coordinator and [so] am unsure which voice should write this. I used to write my diaries in third person. This made them more distant and less embarrassing. "Her memories of being bullied surfaced in her disagreement with a friend," means that I talk about it without owning it, without it being a part of me.

But no: this is different. Distance is something understandable in matters of childhood trauma and unfair in adult situations you are yourself more responsible for. More implicated in. Writing in the third person is unaccountable. So I have to use I, perhaps an expanded 'I.'

In her extended love poem named after a cheese, Ariana Reines writes, "Now that I am not addressing you / But the 'you' of poetry I am probably doing something horrible and destructive. / But this 'I' is the I of poetry / And it should be able to do more than I can do."[93] Let my 'I' do more than I can do. Let me be both responsible and expansive. Let me go further with the 'I' of poetry than I can go on my own.

[93] Ariana Reines, *Coeur de Lion* (Albany: Fence Books, 2011), pages unmarked.

I am uncertain.
I have dressed my body twice today. The office, the desk. First: pencil skirt, bright blouse, yellow tights. Then no, the neighbourhood to meet with the community partners, so. Second: jeans, sweatshirt, sneakers. I don't want to trumpet, to lavish. My work clothes aren't fancy. Most of them are thrifted, but I still look showy. I look like I work for the arts organization that I work for. Dress up / dress down. This framework buys into a hierarchy that's definitely more complicated, but I know. I know it's privilege that lets me fake it both ways.

My face is a company face, I hide it.
I'm not sure if this act is respectful or deceptive, probably both.

The artists we're working with are from Europe. They want to work in one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods to make a community garden. They did a similar project in Europe and they want to continue to develop the idea here. This neighbourhood already has a community garden, in front of the school. The artists say they want to make a mural about the community's food initiatives to go on the front wall of the school, to give value and a name to what is already existing. They want to do some programming to teach people how close they are to natural spaces (the conservation area, the trees in the neighbourhood). The artists want them to learn what they can do with garden food. They want to connect the neighbours with a former city planner who will tell them how to better approach the city with their requests for space and equipment for the park. They plan a picnic where they will launch the mural at the end of the summer with food from the community garden. They insist that the project will not be imposed on the community, but taken on by the community after the project is over.

Their dream is that the community's public park (with a rusty baseball diamond and unsafe play equipment) will eventually become an urban farm.
It is not clear the community wants this.
They want to call it the 'Brant Academy for Sharing Knowledge,' after the neighbourhood. The community partners tell the artists that the Brant Academy for Sharing Knowledge sounds like a private school. That they should use ten cent words instead of one dollar words. They tell the artists that the pressing concern is having milk for cereal and that the neighbours don't have a lot of time to garden. That they are suspicious of outsiders. The artists say they understand. They change the name to *TheBRANTClub*, and press on.

They explain to us and each other about rituals and play and community and the garden as a relational object, a path to place-making, civic participation, and empowerment. They have a vision for the city, for this neighbourhood. They and I share the same desire to reach out beyond the white cube. One of them quotes Victor Burgin, that art disconnected from the social world is free to go anywhere but has nowhere to go.[94] They and I are insiders yearning for connection to a different inside. (I think the neighbours probably wonder why we want inside so bad. This impulse is the same for me and the artists. Are our reasons that different, our acts?)

My boss has already warned them that this work is based on relationships, which take time to build. She encouraged them to think about making a different project, where those relationships are less important to the success of the project. The artists viewed this as a resistance on our part to working with a marginalized community. To be fair to them, this is maybe true, in part. To be fair to us, it's the vast complexity of working in community. The importance of being realistic about time and resources and roles.

I have gone to many community meetings. Sometimes I go alone to meet with the partners. I am the artists' delegate. *My face is a company face.* Sometimes I go with the artists when they have flown over for a week from Europe. They will go on to fly back and forth seven times, never for longer than 10 days.

Sometimes it is just me and the neighbour the artists have hired to tend the garden and to champion them in the community. The neighbour is a good-natured woman and I feel like we get along well. From time to time we share lunch together at the office with my colleague. This connection around food is not a part of the project. She teaches me how to make a coffee cup easier to wash by putting some water in the bottom when you're done using it but don't have time to wash it. I still do this before I leave the house on hectic mornings. In three weeks I will tell my colleague that the neighbour taught me to put water in the bottom of cups and my colleague will tell me that she knew this already. That she thought everyone knew that.

[94] Victor Burgin, "Work and Commentary" in *Situational Aesthetics: Selected Writings*, ed. Alexander Streitburger (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 40–41.

The neighbour is an insider in the neighbourhood in that she lives there. She is an outsider in that she only recently moved there. I am an outsider in that I live downtown and work at a rich arts organization. I am only an insider in that some of the neighbours remind me of some of my relatives. Or a high school friend's mother in the half-country: bottlebleach mane, pearlpink lipstick, draped in a chain of smoke. I am more of an outsider than an insider. The neighbour is more of an insider. Even still, she defines her distance to me. She tells me she does not feel like she belongs to the neighbourhood. Before, I did not want to belong to art's elitism, either. Now, I do not want to belong to socially engaged art's strange invasions. We both distance ourselves: we're not like those other neighbours, not like those other artists. *You're not like other girls*.

(I wonder if the desire to be inside is more about what you take outside than being an insider. It is a halfhearted impulse, a misleading gesture. A sleight of hand's misdirection, deceiving possibly even the magician.)[95]

I am still unsure.
Uncertain, looking down at my notes in blue ballpoint. Down from the community meeting.

The municipality has gathered the neighbours to discuss the proposed park developments. The neighbours are frustrated. The city workers are frustrated. They want to explain to the neighbours why other neighbourhoods have more resources than their neighbourhood. The city's like, *when a developer builds a whole new neighbourhood, they chip in 50/50 for new play equipment, that's why they get it.* They say, *It's not because you're poor, it's just that we don't have enough.* They say, *and the developers.* I don't say anything. It is my first year at the organization. I don't want to speak for the neighbours. I feel as though I should say something. My stomach feels like a passenger's clenched ankle raised over a nonexistent brake. The neighbours look tired. The city workers look unrepentant. The room is tense. I anxiously scribble, "Very defensive! Wow. Will the community get a chance to respond? Sooo condescending oh boy."[96] The artists don't say anything either. They aren't there to see any of this. They have sent me, instead.

[95] "what is it called a magician's trick for getting people to look away"

[96] Taken from my work notebooks.

Three years later, the city has decided to build a community garden downtown instead of in the neighbourhood park, blaming this on a water reservoir that needs repair. The mural still clings (probably only barely) to the wall of the school. The artists have written elaborately on their website about the neighbourhood in terms of rituals and play and community and place-making and civic participation and the garden as a relational object. My colleague and I meet with the neighbour again, after the project, for breakfast at her home. We plan to do it again but I never get around to it. Three years later, I will run into her in the street and we will hug, warm arms. I will give her my number but she won't call.

This project stays longer than is necessary. It is reluctant to leave. It lingers prickling in my throat like a stuck seed. When I talk with people about social practice, I use it as a case study in what not to do. The misrepresentation: my own clothes, the artists' reason for being there, their boosterist elaboration of the project after the fact. Is this harm? In the macro it seems well-intentioned and deeply ineffective. An unfair allocation of resources, of international airfare. I feel strange being critical. I also worked on this project. I was paid to go to those meetings. I was an imposter in the neighbourhood, going through the motions. Feeling uncomfortable but pressing on anyways. *My face is a company face.*

There's a battery of buzzwords that socially engaged arts organizations and social innovation and enterprise people overuse and one of them is 'catalyze.' Another one is 'ignite.'[97] These are chemical antonyms but used metaphorically in the same breath. What catalyzing means is: to accelerate a reaction. A dissolving, a making ready. A match has a head full of sulfur and potassium chlorate[98] and powdered glass. The friction, the rasping: red phosphorus in the strip blanches white, igniting. Potassium chlorate decomposes, releasing oxygen, which ignites the wood. I'm not sure if art is the wood or the glass or the sulfur or the potassium chlorate or the oxygen. The trick with metaphors is that they fail in the micro. But let me just tease out this strange friction, here, in the middle.

[97] Ignite is accompanied by a cluster of other fiery words: spark, explosion, tinder.
[98] Potassium chlorate is also used in the dancing gummy bear demonstration in chemistry classes in small Ontario towns, of which we forget the science but remember the spectacle: a small sucrosey bear thrashing ecstatically in violent purple flames.

The sea is aloof, the sky is wan. A protest of children rushes through a narrow stone street. They are defiantly clad bright against the grey sky. They pound a once green door, now solid rust. GIVE. US. THE KEY, *they demand.* GIVE. US. THE KEY. *A fumbling rattle, shrieking metal. The building breathes in half a sigh. For just a moment, before they surge in, there is just light in her mouth.*

It is years later, and I am a little less certain. Sure, I still don't have anything worked out yet. But: I am working *(face still a company face)* from afar to support a project overseas. I see a different way of engaging, one that also sticks with me. It too stays, reluctant to leave but for another reason. This one lingers warmly, I hold it gingerly in my mouth. When I talk with people about social practice, I use it as a case study in how to engage in a more complicated way. It is critical of itself, of its own connections to power. It is strange and dark, pointed and lovely. The organization has commissioned Althea Thauberger to engage in Rijeka, a mid-sized post-industrial Croatian city we are working in. The city has several youth theatre collectives which are competing for resources and participants. It also has a factory—Rikard Benčić (named after a local folk hero)—formerly a sugar refinery during the Habsburg monarchy and then a worker-managed manufacturer until its workers were fired during the war and the privatizations of the 90s. The city officials are in the midst of a proposal to develop the factory as a site for creative industries. Perhaps because she is an outsider, because she isn't involved in the city's internal politics—she isn't a theatre worker, a family member didn't work at the factory, she doesn't have an economic agenda for the city—Thauberger is able to do work locally without the same repercussions as a local artist. But she has found strong local partners who could connect her to the right people and resources. She works with 67 actors between the ages of six and thirteen, their parents, theatre instructors, and childcare workers. Thauberger weaves together *Preuzmimo Benčić (Take Back Benčić)*—an experimental film, part documentary and part fiction—out of the improvised dialogue and movement the young actors created in the factory during a six-week occupation. Some of them play the roles of former workers re-skilling as artists, others are mayors, making decisions about what the factory should become (hotel, airport, castle). The film ends with a face-off between mayors and artists when the mayors come to reclaim the factory. It is deeply political, talking about labour, play, art, memory, space use, municipal funding, loss.

It is intricate and critical, never one-sided. Later, on a bus to Ottawa for a different project, Thauberger will tell me that she sees her work as undermining itself. Proposing something and subverting it, constantly self-critical. She examines the implication of her intervention in a place, with a group of people. She looks at her funding, and the role she has as the initiator of the project, the one calling the shots.

After the project ends, I help to shape the conceptual and activist underpinnings of the Benčić Youth Council on behalf of the organization with Natali Bosić and Ivana Golob, a pedagogue and a researcher both actively involved in the film project. The group's first members were actors, the artists and mayors in Thauberger's film. Through monthly workshops and meetings, their presence in the city's cultural institutions softly stretches boundaries of what is acceptable for youth within Rijeka's museums, libraries, archives, and galleries. They make movies in the rusted remains of Yugoslav communist revolutionary Josip Broz Tito's yacht. They interview bands at the local punk club, curate shows, write manifestos.

Before I leave the organization, I go to Croatia one last time. I meet with Natali and Ivana and our partners at the Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art, Slaven Tolj (political performance artist turned museum director) and Nataša Šuković (a curator). We talk about the middle ground that the Youth Council walks. Here are what my notes say from that meeting: "People think of Natali and Ivana as a neutral independent thing than any other institution. Everyone is at war with each other to get more money from the city. We touch every part of culture." A week earlier, the city approached them with a proposal for a cultural development grant. They are affiliated with the museum. But the museum doesn't have the resource power the city does. Natali and Ivana are reluctant to work too closely with the city. Being the membrane, perceived as neutral, touching every part of culture allows them to work with anyone they want to.

Nataša and I speak of this later, smoking inside upstairs amidst the peeling yellowy paint of the staffroom where the windows are always half open even when it's raining. We talk about this neutrality that is still political and pointed, a midpoint that refuses to be moderate. She tells me about Zvezda, the occupied

cinema in Belgrade taken over by students in 2014. It is the oldest cinema in the city and was given its name, meaning 'star,' during the Yugoslav communist regime. Thauberger's film just screened there, earlier in the year.

The student activists had a political agenda, but they very actively resisted this label, Nataša said. *Actually, when an administrator at the city brought the head of the far-left party by to campaign, they didn't let him speak. Although their actions—taking over or occupying this space—is obviously a political act with political aims, this idea isn't associated with a particular party. They want to avoid being didactic, but prefer to operate in an anarchist way, a more complex way.*

Nataša takes a drag from a hand-rolled cigarette gesturing wildly. The sun is streaming through the window behind her, golden light.

They chose to show Althea's film but wouldn't show the film of a different organization that had a more political message. It's like, fuck you government, you're not what we believe in. In a way, being politically affiliated allows you to be reduced by the "opposing" side. Being overtly non-political opens up a space for immeasurability and complexity. Like the youth council doesn't want to align themselves too closely with the city or an institution, preferring instead to be open to new connections with different places and people to find themselves in it in their own way.

(This is not exactly what Nataša said. It is how I remembered our conversation when I stumbled sparking into the street minutes after saying goodbye, scrawled jagged and feverish. *clickclick clickclick*)

I am still uncertain. Years later, I am typing up and sifting through these old records, trying to find ways of working better within institutions, within power and funding structures, within this position of coming to an inside from a different inside. The artists working in the neighbourhood, Althea working in Rijeka, me working within Rijeka and the neighbourhood, even the youth council working within other organizations, all of us are imposters. Insiders / outsiders / insiders. But we came in differently, we left differently. We worked differently within. How is this boundary, between insider and outsider functioning? As we cross it, do we think about where we are coming from, and why, and what we are taking away? Althea said once in a public discussion about the organization's work

in Croatia that we needed to make more specific where our involvement is coming from.[99]

Where *are* we coming from? *Where am I?*

Years later, I am thinking back to a conversation my colleague and I had with Pablo Helguera on the radio. We asked him about working with a group of people, about collaboration. We asked about hierarchy. He said, "What one needs to consider is that any relationship can become exploitative or unequal when it is dishonest. And hierarchies in themselves are not necessarily a good or a bad thing, they're just realities. It is a fact that there are artists out there who have vast knowledge who collaborate with people who know nothing about art. And I don't think there's anything wrong in acknowledging that." He goes on, "that other individual…has their own rights and their own individuality and it's something that should be respected at all times. But that doesn't mean that you completely ignore the fact of who they are."[100] A funder is a funder. An artist is an artist. A coordinator is a coordinator. A neighbour is a neighbour.

I need to recognize who I am and that I am getting something out of this. I need to tell people what I am getting, what I am taking outside. When I am outside, I need to represent what happened in a way that engages with the complexity of the situation. The story of the white cube is hyperbole. It distances us from exclusivity, a yearning to reach outside ourselves. It is about complexity and criticism and a desire to learn openly. It needs to be done carefully and draw attention to where we are coming from, though. The friction of a tightly wound spring. The middlepoint between match and strip as generative combustion.

What role do I play, whose face am I?

Am I grit of powdered glass, sigh out oxygen and combust, change myself (red to white phosphorus) on contact?

Do I break in a critical moment, am I discarded irritably?

Am I lit up at the head burning steady glowing orange stick bending down down to shy fingertips?

[99] Musagetes, "Rijeka: The Promise of a City," group discussion, Rijeka Café, Musagetes, Muzej Moderne I Suvremene Umjetnosti, Rijeka, Croatia, April 26, 2014.

[100] Pablo Helguera, interview by Danica Evering and Alissa Firth-Eagland, *The Secret Ingredient,* CFRU 93.3 FM, June 24, 2015.

THE ARTIST
THE CURATOR
THE PRIESTESS

(Imagine these like many-coloured transparencies placed on top of one another, held up against the light. To try to see through time, find patterns. To draw lines through three different conversations: with Martinez over wonton soup, with turions at a brew pub, with Katz at the theatre. Am I the line? Is it something bigger? Maybe I am the line but it is also something more.)

Inside - a tall university atrium made of that early 21st century blue-green glass for skyscrapers and other large buildings. Late afternoon summer light. Scant students pass, mostly towards the sweaty clanking of the gym downstairs. Martinez has just finished a day of testing a virtual reality piece.
He seems tired but not exhausted.

Outside - a busy street. Watch us walk companionably—we both slightly slouch, you can see. Neither appears nervous. (This is an error in re-writing. Look closer: I am quite nervous, this is my first conversation. It's relayed by the wren-like twitch of my head. I'm remembering through the lens of our good conversation, but at this point we hadn't yet had it.)

Inside – the king of wonton restaurants, evening. The gathering dark. Three other patrons: two students hunched over soup bowls (brackets face each other) and a suited person with a plate of General Tao. Classical music in the background. Overhead, an off-white lattice laced with dusty plastic grapes. It is peaceful, [so] we breathe out. Later: the stone steps of a church, doors closed.

Cristóbal Martinez (the Artist) is an artist-scholar with a PhD in Rhetoric. He researches Indigenous convolution media, finds metaphors, codes, makes drone music, is a diplomat, fashions instruments, performs conceptual art. We met when his collective, Postcommodity, was commissioned by the organization I used to work for. They made a year-long socially engaged project, People of Good Will, collaborated with the Black Heritage Society to build on the underground railroad as a living metaphor. It opened a portal for art projects and new music and self-determination for people of colour within the downtown core. *Martinez is drinking green tea and eating an eponymous bowl of wonton soup with noodles (cut egg, lettuce, green onions) and a little shortbread cookie (the indented ridge of the fingers which formed it). Then, a bottle of Coca-Cola from the convenience store.*

Inside - a thrumming bar, mid-winter. The dark [glittering] raucous beginning of a Friday night. Music clamours to be heard over hoarse voices over excited laughter. turions approaches, we kiss each other's cheeks (left on left, right on right). We're at the end of a long week. She's at the end of a long trip, finally out of the train. My arms taut cause I admire her and I want to be incisive with her. We perch on stools. (It is too late and I am too tense and I do not feel incisive at all. Still -)

The next day, a different inside – the sticky overhot glowing fluorescent giddiness of an art gallery. She smiles and says she's glad I've come. It's hard to tell, even now.

cheyanne turions (the Curator) is a curator, cultural worker, and writer from the farmlands of Treaty 8, of settler and Indigenous ancestry. Her work positions exhibitions and criticism as social gestures, where she responds to artistic practices by linking aesthetics and politics through discourse. When I first met her in our old office building (a long wooden table), she spoke about holding a space for being wrong, which I furiously scribbled into a dark blue notebook. Later on the radio show my colleague and mentor Alissa Firth-Eagland and I co-hosted, cheyanne talked about the importance of reading together as a way of figuring something out in real time. These have become part of how I understand art practice. While she is not directly a social practice curator, many of the projects she works on carefully trouble power and positionality. She has also written about art and society, which overlaps with social practice discourse. *turions is drinking a pint of [wheat] beer and a glass of water.*

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*Outside, power-walking down Yonge Street in Toronto, just past dinner and growing dark. Unusually warm for late February, you can see people wearing light coats. You can see neon signs flashing. You can see me button-mashing frantically. *fwooosh* "(7:44) Hey Orev, the Yonge Line is delayed, so I'm walking down now. I'll be there very shortly. Until soon! Danica." *ding* "(7:46) Hi Danica; I'm just trying to find parking. Be there asap. Orev." We're both late but it doesn't matter. Inside the inky grotto of a queer theatre, Katz introduces me to their friends. Handshakes [I am further inside, I feel conspicuous]. Both of us both of our knees crossed in the second row. Watch us watching a performance by Bambitchell:* The Cock of Basel – *a real-time typed trial transcript, augmented by Google searches, audio and video clips, and GIFs of RuPaul's Drag Race. My eyes are alight; my skin is crackling.*

The night: a grey rental car (in or out or something else depending) flashing past convenience stores, low-rise apartments. We can't find anywhere. We get out, we ask a waiter if they're still serving even though his wince and the mopped floors say NOT OPEN. We finally find –

Inside - a reasonably quiet albeit bougie restaurant. Meat is 'their thing.' I believe there is a diagram of a pig on the wall (this is maybe conjecture).

Orev Katz (the Priestess) is also known as Radiodress. They use live and recorded talking, singing, yelling, and listening to consider bodies as sites of knowledge, and communication as a political practice. They are an artist and activist who speaks radio and brings in non-artists and makes queer intentional community. Katz has also recently become an itinerant Jewish prison chaplain in Southern Ontario. Our first meeting: they were almost a part of People of Good Will, and they spoke in the group about their history with DIY and punk and the importance of recognizing labour. Our second: in Pittsburgh for Open Engagement. This is our third meeting, but their openness makes it feel more familiar than that.

Katz is eating smoked meat of some kind (salmon / maybe prosciutto). They ask for some bread to go with it and are given a whole basket. They are drinking a glass of white wine.

I am eating: wonton soup, small cookie, a few pieces of smoked meat.

I am drinking: green tea, Coke, beer, water, wine.

We are sitting around two tables (glossy barnboard / rickety formica) and also at a bar.

It's a bit hard to pull this all into focus, these conversations happened in the summer and in the winter, in two different cities. Martinez, turions, Katz (appearing in the order I spoke with them) have reached out to groups they wanted to engage. They've also all had to find grants or funders. They've worked inside institutions, in galleries. Martinez and Katz have also worked outside. They've each had different experiences than I have, different even than from each other. We're insiders in different ways. Yet—it is important that each of us have had to engage with groups and people and organizations from many angles. We've all had experiences where

we had to think about the control we had in a situation, and also moments where we were constrained. Speaking with them was a way of making sense of the kind of work we do. How can someone shifting between inside and outside navigate the often-sticky situations of identity and money and politics and power and justification and reasoning that accompany that move? I recorded these interviews in much the same way as I recorded my working life (how I record most of my waking life): in a notebook. So, this is what I find a line through here—a conversation between three professionals about their work constructed out of the notes I took at three different times from three different places. Let me reconstruct, best I can.

*(In the space between the four of us, I inhale. The sound I make before I say something. A signal that I want to speak, a stall cause I don't quite know how to frame it yet like this *ksfffttt* and air rushes in and then held behind my teeth, behind my tongue, waiting.)*

WHY DID WE EVER THINK THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA?

For a number of reasons—because we spoke last, because I don't know them as well as the others, because I'm feeling existential by this point—Katz is the only one I ask: *How does it feel, when it's working well?* Here is how I ask it: leaning beseechingly over the table, arms raised. Even the gesture is frustrated.

Here are my notes of what they said: "Why I got into SEA was justice and service. Cum pee spit—gallery. Studio practice was about people. Facilitating social justice projects. I like navigating that." And later on: "When I think back to the beginning of a project, when you're hopeful, when you're writing a grant—I was always excited and had faith and belief in the project and what I was doing. There was a usefulness I felt, a purpose, something palpable in those moments."

I felt this desire for service and justice too, particularly in the beginning. I wanted to apply the skills that I had as an artist and a lateral thinker in addressing political issues. In the beginning, I was so eager to have found other people who were thinking about art that relayed outside an exclusive gallery space. People who wanted art to also be social justice.

This is why we thought this was a good idea: We wanted to be of service, to connect to justice beyond this immediate often unjust context, so we reached out.

(Purpose is a kind of belonging. At a lecture artist Rebecca Belmore gave, she told us that she wanted to make herself useful to her community, so that her community values her.[101] *Usefulness feels like worth. It rumbles golden in our chests.)*

THE TROUBLE WITH REACHING OUT

Katz and Martinez agree on the trouble. Katz says: "SEA often does the harm it's trying to prevent." (I put this in bold later, when I type up my notes.) Martinez says, "The problem with SEA is that there's no training for the situations artists are expected to handle…public policy, human relations. We're not the UN but we think we can meddle in situations we're not equipped to handle. Organizations are fully implicated in the outcomes and often deny any accountability." What Martinez isn't saying is: we should stop reaching out from the boundaries of our discipline. What he is saying is: maybe socially engaged art does the harm it's trying to prevent because artists and organizations aren't trained well enough for this reaching. And further, that we assume that the impulse to reach is enough without accepting responsibility for the outcome: the fallout that often comes from doing work we're pretending we know how to do.

This reaching into other disciplines also means that the expectations of social practice (and the fields and tools it aims to engage) don't always align with the resources allocated for it. Martinez notes, "Art as PR, or as cheap labour from highly-skilled workers." After working for years in social practice, Katz has since become a prison chaplain. Although the work is emotional and service-based, there's an understanding of the intensity of the work at a structural level—it's well-paid and chaplains are encouraged to rest and take time to recover from the work. In social practice, I wrote that they said: "The arts system is so exploitative" and also "In the end, there was a lot of giving. Interest and skills are there, but no support structurally for this kind of more involved work. And if you're going to do this work, you need a different kind of support."

[101] Rebecca Belmore, Big Ideas in Art + Culture Lecture, CAFKA and Musagetes, November 20, 2012.

This precarity and frustration is palpable: the current contextualization of art and social engagement means that although its practitioners step outside its boundaries, funding and support structures are still configured for an object-based framework. These structures often don't follow the artist into this new configuration.

Socially engaged art's intrusion into other environments and disciplines and institutions can also lead to an uncritical reframing of the work we do. I write that Katz (into an unseasonably warm dark evening) says: "Institutionalization of SEA." They say, "Investments in justice co-opted by urban planning."

Yes, I reply later, looking out the window to the church across the street. *Institutionalization happens because we need money, because we want our approach to art to relate to law and to planning and to science. What if artists were consulted by politicians?*

What if?

But when we try and reach out to these hierarchies, it's irresponsible to do this lightly. We can't assume that what we do won't be co-opted by systems contingent on positive economic benefit: urban planning or social innovation. Even the language we use is important. A few weeks earlier, turions looks pensively into the corner of the bar: "Transformative potential, 'evolution' – stopped using this word." The idea of thinking about the transformative potential of the arts, about social change and evolution—all of this is too intangible, too easily misguided and reframed.

Adding his voice from half a year before, Martinez notes that "SEA, despite its anti-oppressive rhetoric, often corporatized, but this time w/ the idea of engineering society." He has seen many socially engaged art projects that talk about anti-oppression. But because these projects are reaching out into social innovation, their actions end up functioning as an attempt to engineer society instead of resistance. Martinez says, "Social justice fails on the inside—keep your house clean, you can't have this power imbalance." When you wear a face that is welcomed within the conversations of the rich, of the well-intending bureaucrats whose interests do you work for? What kind of weight, your words?

This fluidity has a weight of its own, though. turions talks about how an "exhibition bears on larger systems."

She notes, “Exhibition spaces are civic spaces.” She proposes, “Insisting on acknowledging representation and reputation. Taking themselves seriously on their own. To be certain, they’re richer and whiter—we need to take it for real and read it as what it is. So it’s about adapting its tactics.” I understand this to relate to how we hold projects accountable and what kind of value we give them. If we see exhibition spaces and art projects as closed-off private spaces, we let them off the hook for being political, for thinking about representation. Although turions is speaking to her work within the context of Canadian artist-run centres, this thinking could also relate to the fluid ways social practice operates. An exhibition space can take on the guise of a private space and depoliticize itself, or it can take itself seriously as a civic space and hold itself accountable. We can insist that an art project has political relevance.

The art project looks at itself completely, coming to terms with its constituents, taking stock. Questioning: Who am I mutable for?

Martinez speaks alongside this ambiguity, too. He says, “Postcommodity strives to generate noise and confusion, which provides humans the opportunity to recover and generate knowledge, conclusions of the world for themselves. They are invited. The project is a container where people there are catalyzed into thinking critically about the world through the mediator of complexity.” Later he says, “How can you make an art where cynicism and optimism can coexist in ways that are rivalling one another, in ways that are socially productive?” How do we hold all of this in one hand?

LEVERAGING, OFFERING SPACE, CEDING POWER

The Artist, the Curator, and the Priestess each in turn speak of how they have worked within. (Across three separate days, in three different spaces, their eyes glint recognition. Across the bar/in stale fluorescent light/over a table/fake candle citric flickering.)

There are many reasons to cross the boundary of an institution or an organization. Sometimes they’re asked to produce an art project. (My notes from my conversation with Martinez records this particular tokenizing gesture: “[social practice] often thrives in a self-serving economy, making POC the conduit for white people to talk politics.”) Sometimes they approach a gallery with a proposal. Sometimes they work for an organization. Sometimes they’ve attended a university, for school.

Martinez begins: his art collective, Postcommodity, sees a role for themselves of leveraging for people of colour within the organizations that invite them. There's the idea of "engineering society" in a lot of socially engaged art contexts. These are often leftist organizations who want to see the world in a certain way.

"With white leftist people there's a lot of nodding," he adds.

I can suddenly feel my own white leftist head bobbing:
mmhm
mmhm
mmhm

There's not always a lot of action though, not a lot of tangible economic and political follow-through. The collective sees themselves in a position to leverage real resources and expertise within this situation. *Yes*, I think, *to hold organizations accountable to their words.* As people of colour, Martinez says, instead of leveraging for individuals, we want to leverage this power for other people—*for our kin, for family.* Diverting the conduit for others to talk politics into a conduit for resources back to kin: a shift in power.

Katz (salmon folds in half over torn bread) elaborates on how they saw their role working with a community, "Being in service: as an audio engineer, I could make a CD. I can draw. Skillset, cultural work. I saw myself as an *outsidear*." (An outsider, an outside ear. This error in my notetaking opens many potential ways of being, both a not-obviously-belonging and a perspective of listening that comes from being outside.) Shifting perspective, they talk about their time at Parsons, one of The New School's five colleges, where they did their MFA. My notes: "I offered my studio space up to the African American Students' Union." Inside, who do you hold open space for, when it is allocated to you?

turions talks about space and structures too, in relation to the Wood Land School: *Kahatènhston tsi na'tetiátere ne Iotohrkó:wa tánon Iotohrha / Drawing a Line from January to December*. Wood Land School is an ongoing project first instigated by artist Duane Linklater with no fixed place or form, and the most recent iteration is opening space in the former SBC, a non-profit public gallery in Tiohtià:ke (Montréal). turions, Duane Linklater, Tanya Lukin Linklater, and Walter Scott are practicing Indigenous self-determination and collectivity by tracing a line from the first month to the last

month of 2017. They are exploring how civic institutions and social structures control and silence Indigenous thought and making, and call on them "to give labour, space, and funds to support Indigenous ideas, objects, discursivity and performance."[102]

The Wood Land School is performing this call. Though the container is a public gallery, the collective's work inside it makes space for thinking complexly about enacting "new ways of being in relation."[103] These ways of being play out through many levels of autonomy: organizational decisions, public face, programming, curation. The completeness of this assertion is important. It not only holds a place for ideas and objects and conversations and people who might not otherwise be programmed or might be programmed in a different context, but also addresses shifting power structures. The inside intervention requires a willingness on the part of the gallery to cede its audience and space, yet it is the Indigenous artists and curators who are making decisions about the flow of political, economic, and cultural capital.

Martinez nods [flashback montage splice]: *Leveraging. For our kin, for family.*

"It's about a Symptom vs. a System," I wrote that turions said. Taking the classic social innovation band-aid solution to provide citizens with more bike lanes that comes up through the overlap with socially engaged art, she elaborates (in my shorthand), "A bike lane is a symptom; it doesn't encourage people to bike more. Bringing a black person into an arts organization doesn't change the system - tokenism." Who is actually in economic and legal control of an art project? Who is crafting the trajectory and making decisions? This question is a critical one—it stresses the importance of investigating who is holding power and whether we're looking at end results and band-aid solutions or if we're exploring systems. This investigation of power is critical in crossing a line (inside to outside, outside to inside) for institutions, artists, cultural workers. Can we be critical about what our role is, in all of this? She proposes: "Operating with best intentions. Self-selecting." She has proposed this act of ceding power when she is asked to contribute to group conversations about art and politics and

[102] Duane Linklater, Tanya Lukin Linklater, cheyanne turions, and Walter Scott, "Wood Land School: *Kahatènhston tsi na'tetiátere ne Iotohrkó:wa tánon Iotohrha / Drawing a Line from January to December*," January 2017, accessed May 11, 2017, http://www.sbcgallery.ca/wood-land-school-gestures-c1912.
[103] Ibid.

hope. Many times, these groups are made up largely of white middle-to-upper-class cultural workers. When she suggests this ceding of power, here is how turions says those groups reacted: "Reception was not warm." A few weeks later, Katz responds, "I don't have a lot of faith in power. Or in institutions to let go of the power they wield, though there is an ethical imperative to do that. These things [socially engaged art projects] are trendy, contemporary. But it doesn't push the boundaries enough. Distribute power." Martinez agrees completely – "Holding of power." Postcommodity's latest project is crowdfunded. This shift made them see power completely differently, to be accountable to their community instead of a gallery. On three separate days, I feel the same resonance. It sticks in my throat, a mellow lump. In my work as a cultural producer, I have seen also power—institutions, organizations, galleries—hold control of social, cultural, and economic capital tightly to its chest. When turions says "Reception was not warm," I am reminded of suggestions I've made for an opening of power and autonomy which have been quickly rebuffed—smackdown. It seems impossible to the people steering, insurmountable. In relation to socially engaged art projects that respond to symptoms and focus on alleviating guilt without manifesting a power shift on a structural level, turions notes: "Action registers in the world. Affect registers in the individual." She mentions Tuck and Yang's writing on 'settler moves to innocence'—settler attempts to reconcile our guilt and complicity and the dismissing of decolonization as impossible.[104] *We can't just...*I share their doubt in institutions to cede power.

Still—there are many reasons to cross the boundary of an institution or an organization. Sometimes you've approached a gallery with a proposal. Sometimes you've been invited for tokenizing reasons, and you leverage resources and expertise and hold the inside accountable in a tangible way to that symbolic gesture. Sometimes you work for an organization. Sometimes even, you've worked for a very long time from within and have been hired to lead it. Even then—you can cede the power and space you have to voices that otherwise are controlled and silenced. These are shifting shades of inside and outside, and your relation to that spectrum changes how you push from within. But in any case: you push.

[104] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 25–26.

THE IMPOSTER

BOUNDING // CROSSING

(This is how I have to begin: looking at why people focus inward. I have to begin this way because reaching outward is focusing inward's parallel impulse, its recoil. **pkwhoouh**)

Vocal passwords and boundary-markings have many reasons.[105] *To make sure that the police don't show up at your protest or rave. To be very specific, to have a more nuanced conversation among colleagues. To speak words of truth to each other in a language your oppressor can't understand. To be on the same page. To feel kinship. To keep an imposter out of your nest. To speak to two audiences at once. To define class lines and boundaries. They develop both intentionally and organically. They're read differently from shifting angles, from a spectrum of power positions. Both we and these borders are in motion.*

I came to socially engaged art frustrated with the exclusivity of the art world, the elitism of the white cube. In many ways, Katz did too—their studio practice was about people and they wanted to engage in social justice, to be of service in a way they couldn't be in the art world proper. A boundary is a container for power, keeping money, energy, resources inside it. It is protected by passwords: there are those who know them and those who don't. I used to see this impulse to turn inward as elitist and unjust, but it doesn't have to be. Jennifer Doyle writes about the audience for the gender-bending, bloody, cutting-and-piercing sadomasochistic performance art of Ron Athey. She reads in an event photograph not the mildly interested "general public," but a tightly packed collective elation, leaning in.[106] Though the performances take place in clubs—non-art spaces—their audience is undeniably a circle of insiders, as Doyle writes, "those that stayed:" those that didn't pass out or leave in disgust.[107] It is not open nor welcoming. This lets me reframe bounding, an inward focus. It keeps power inside, surely. Yet it is only an impulse, contingent on context

[105] Drawing on the work of sociologist David Berreby, Helguera concurs that contemporary art and countercultural practices alike employ exclusionary passwords for status, role, distance, and protection, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 22.
[106] My colleague Alissa Firth-Eagland reminds me often that general publics don't exist—rather, publics are made up of hot-blooded, opinionated individuals drawn together through mutual interest, and the audiences for the social practice we worked on together responded to this. Still, there is a frequent call for social practice to be open, enough that many of *The Questions We Ask Together* presuppose this idea of openness: "Is social practice about inclusion or exclusion? Is it really for everybody?" (256), "What are the risks/possibilities of approaching the public with a predetermined mind?" (350). Doyle, *Hold it Against Me,* 27.
[107] Ibid.

for its meaning. Amongst highly-educated wealthy people, it serves to further contain cultural, social, fiscal capital. Amongst sadomasochist queer performers, it contains desire and rapt togetherness. *Cum pee spit.*

To cross a boundary—to not stay where you're put, where you're supposed to be—has many reasons, too. To leverage resources for your kin. To allow for a more intricate discourse beyond the ideas you're already discussing. To alleviate your guilt. To practice equity and justice. To be visible, to have relevance beyond your discipline. To gain social and economic capital. To distance yourself from your own power (*more a colleague than a boss*). To be of service. To find complexity in relation. To change the practices and discourses of another group. Because you don't fit into your current inner circle (*there had been a cow near her art school classroom*). This desire makes us cross some sort of boundary: roles, spaces, institutions, disciplines, communities. From one inside into a different inside.

inside/outside/inside/outside
sheath/unsheath (clickclick)

These impulses—bounding and crossing—stretch and twang. Each plays out on many levels: communities, institutions, individuals, groups, organizations. Like 'openness' or 'change,' neither impulse is good or bad or even a binary. Neither is more virtuous nor selfish nor just nor wondrous. Each is simply a desire. A need, held in relation to its context.

WE DON'T BELONG HERE: CARELESSNESS

This reaching out, this yearning—for relevance, for connection, for justice, for the real—is intrinsic to socially engaged art. American artist Dan Graham's proposition that "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, more real than art" is frequently quoted in texts about social practice.[108] Helguera affirms this boundary-crossing: "Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making

[108] This quote was first cited in art historian Claire Bishop's article "The Social Turn,"178. It has since made its way into her book *Artificial Hells*, artist Martha Rosler's 2010 Hermes lecture on creativity and urbanism, researcher Sophie Carolin-Wagner's text on connection and poetry, performer Jacob Wren's musings on collaboration, and the yearly gathering of social practitioners, Open Engagement, just to name a few.

that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines."[109] Social practice also engages in places and with audiences outside of the standard purview of art, crossing disciplinary and community boundaries. Helguera defines its "expansion to include participants from outside the regular circles of art and the art world" as a factor its practitioners must consider.[110] While still tied into discourses of art and aesthetics, its generative energy is in its impersonation of something it is not: diplomacy, pedagogy, social work, activism. In its ideal sense, this allows for the generative ambiguity Helguera advances, for borrowing the right tools from other disciplines to apply to the complexity of a project.

There is trouble with reaching out, though. Amongst ourselves we acknowledge the complications of participating in an imposter discipline. In my conversations with Katz, Martinez, and turions, we spoke of our concern that the ambiguously polymathic nature of socially engaged art can also lead artists and organizations to carelessly enter situations we aren't prepared to handle.[111] We rarely have the training or experience to deal with the trauma and negotiation and politics that we open up in the situations we set in motion. We do not always do this cautiously. Katz talked about their frustration that social practice as art outside of its context means that the expectations for the project (politically rigorous, attending to many people's needs) doesn't align with the resources available (budgets configured for solo object-based exhibitions), leaving artists doing way more work than they're paid for.[112] We all share a concern that what Helguera sees as being visible to other disciplines also makes us co-optable and (more or less consciously) prone to collusion with neoliberal structures.[113] In my own writing, I read multiple imposter representations: the more casual clothes I wore to work in the neighbourhood and the dressier clothes I wore to the office, a tepid project elaborated into a critical success.[114]

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[109] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 5.
[110] Ibid., 12.
[111] *The Questions We Ask Together* asks "Who/what am I responsible to?" (38), "How are the roles of ethics changing?" (153) and "Does social practice have ethical responsibilities that other (art) practices don't?" (194).
[112] "Who gets exploited––the artist or the participants?" (176) and "How do artists get remunerated for experience-based work?" (382).
[113] "How do you reconcile values that are different between you, your collaborators and the work's public or audience?" (66), "How are our conversations framed by the context of institutions?" (182), "To what degree does socially engaged work support or challenge a neoliberal framework?" (226), and "Why is social practice looking at replicating models from social science and activism?" (378).
[114] "Which dishonesties/honesties are good?" (30), "How do we work towards more honest documentation? How do we document our failures as well as our successes?" (130), and "What happens when the artist leaves?" (456).

These issues often develop from unintentional action—because we are idealistic and eager we are not wary enough of our inexperience. Because the discipline learns from the tools of other disciplines but only does so for each project, there is not always a solid knowledge through-line. Funding structures don't respond to the weighty emotional and physical labour implicit in this reaching, this engagement with people. Making ourselves visible to other disciplines means they misunderstand us or fit us into their 'empowerment' frameworks. We are deceptive in our self-presentation to the people we work with or the way we tell stories about our projects to art audiences. I am going to work from the assumption that these glowing narratives of our projects, the inaccurate characterization of our power as organizations, and the underfunding of artists are most often not deliberate. But we can be terribly careless imposters.

OWNING UP

I take sincerely to heart Steve Lambert's pert recommendation against "trying to invent 'problematics' and the indiscriminate questioning of strategies that can only be determined by artists on a case by case basis" and also Helguera's assertion that a socially engaged artist might eschew art's traditional self-reflexivity and criticality for being deliberately instrumental. Still, the ways artists and arts organizations locate or avoid addressing self, power, and contexts as evidenced in both the ficto-critical and conversational sections of this work suggest that a possibility for addressing the unintentional complications of social practice might be in self-reflexively owning up.[115] Locating ourselves—on an individual and institutional level—in relation to role, audience, context, and power structures gives us more information when transgressing boundaries. (This is work that of course by its very nature must be done on the case-by-case basis Lambert advocates.) Of writing, Laurel Richardson notes: "People who write are always writing about their lives," and later, "Writing is always done in socio-historical context," and later still, "Writing is always done in specific, local and historical contexts."[116] This bringing of self, trajectory, locality, and institutional dynamic also applies to social practice. This location of self is clear within the theory I draw on, though some are more overt (Helguera talks about his focus as an educator, Doyle articulates a desire to write about her difficult art experiences) and with others we must read between the lines (Kester's commitment to togetherness, Bishop's pitiless defense of the importance of

[115] *Questions We Ask Together*, 134, Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 35.
[116] Richardson, "Writing Stories," 35-36.

aesthetics). In my work I can read my formation in conceptual art: though I consider aesthetics and ethics, my priority is an idea with an intentional form and context and audience and execution. I read this same concern for deliberateness in Helguera's manual when he entreats artists "to be aware of why we are acting and to learn how to act in an effective way."[117] I see it similarly in the frustration apparent in my conversations with some of the cavalier practices of artists and organizations detailed above. Being severely truthful with ourselves allows for informed action. Our role and context might shift from situation to situation, and we might choose deliberately to conceal or reveal certain facets, but we might at least do it with intention.

OWNING UP: LOCATING INWARD

There is a tendency within social practice—both as individuals and as organizations—to distance ourselves from authority, electing instead a non-hierarchical framework of collaborating, planning, and creating.[118] It is hard to implicate ourselves, to recognize the full extent of the role we're playing. I read this in my creative writing as The Coordinator, in my resistance to accept myself as an "I" and retreat into a more distanced "she." Though we might try to elude hierarchy, many of us bear the face of power. *My face is a company face.* As representatives of an organization, we cannot remove ourselves from speaking with the voice of that institution. Though there may be practical stopgaps within the institutional framework, our disapproval is perceived as a threat of withholding resources—we cannot collaborate equally. This hierarchy is also apparent in The Executive Director, who spoke to my experiences with interns: because I was writing their reference letters, they were unable to respond to me honestly when I asked ***1.*** *What was it like to work for us?* What power (cultural, financial, social capital, networks) am I holding or withholding or giving access to?

Those working outside of institutions still come with educational and personal backgrounds and intentions, which play out within a cluster of intersecting hierarchies. As a white settler writer I approach my work from a different subject-position and in relation to different historical contexts than Martinez, who speaks of leveraging within an Indigenous framework for people of colour, or turions, who in relation to the Wood Land School is thinking of making space for Indigenous thought in a gallery on this land now

[117] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, xv.
[118] The fact that we need to ask "What do we mean when we use the term participant instead of artists?" reveals this trend within the discipline. *The Questions We Ask Together*, 330.

known as Canada, or Katz, as an activist, artist, and Jewish prison chaplain. This owning up should play out on both an individual and an organizational level, in the micro and macro. It relates to our situated knowledges, our identities, our discourses, our backgrounds, our politics. *We ask [Helguera] about hierarchy. He says, "What one needs to consider is that any relationship can become exploitative or unequal when it is dishonest. And hierarchies in themselves are not necessarily a good or a bad thing, they're just realities. It is a fact that there are artists out there who have vast knowledge who collaborate with people who know nothing about art. And I don't think there's anything wrong in acknowledging that*." Who is calling the shots? "Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the notion of authorship, but to do so they must accept and affirm their existence in the realm of art, as artists."[119] What am I bringing from my background to this work? Artists come with knowledge of art. Communities come with a range of experiences. Organizations come with money. We are each our own complexities, and never fill just one role, but we need to honestly take stock of what we are bringing to the table and how it might be interpreted. What is my role, what is our role?

Katz: SEA often does the harm it's trying to prevent.
Martinez: Organizations are fully implicated in the outcomes and often deny any accountability.

Owning up to our role also involves accepting responsibility—Helguera refutes the assumption that an artist can be a neutral invisible catalyst. *(A dissolving, a making ready.)* In the case that a community has had little prior involvement with art, he says "the artist is a teacher, leader, artistic director, boss, instigator, and benefactor, and these roles must be assumed fully"—we must be accountable.[120] Executive Director Deborah Fisher echoes this in challenging the question posed to her ("How (and why) do the "inner circle" get to set the tone/form of the discourse?") that it is a euphemism for power without saying the word. "What if this discourse were built around an expectation that we claim the power we have and declare what we intend to do with it openly?" She asks, "What if our discourse around power was about accountability."[121]

Who benefits? *"Do-gooderism, as such," writes artist Darren O'Donnell, "merely maintains and reiterates problematic power dynamics by maintaining the offending inequity. A really effective*

[119] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 5.
[120] Ibid., 53.
[121] *The Questions We Ask Together*, 62, 64.

intervention recognizes that improving conditions for others must also somehow improve conditions for yourself. In this way selfishness is recouped—but in the name of wider social good." Artist Justin Langlois responds to the question "What motivates us? Are we asking questions about our intentions?" with the reflection that in asking this "we might provide ourselves with an occasion to check on who exactly our intentions are serving."[122] Can we own up to what this work is giving us? Can we think critically about what it is offering our collaborators?

OWNING UP: LOCATING CONTEXT

This thesis work also reveals a concurrent urgency to take account of our position within larger contexts: funding structures, social dynamics, and the land and its histories and agreements. Institutions and organizations—galleries, colleges, universities, art centres, foundations—remain a locus of funding, political clout, cultural capital, and acknowledgement within socially engaged art discourse. Each organization's position and security within those structures of power is in turn complicated by the manner of their funding: private endowments, federal grants, municipal arts coffers, university organizations, philanthropic foundations. Each source of revenue and its consonant expectations shifts the nature of how an organization or a project engages in social justice, place-making, and advocacy through art. Each source has a role in shading how an organization reinforces or resists structures of power. Each source has its own reasons for funding and supporting social practice, both stated and implicit. These shift in relation to national contexts—though social practice discourse and projects relay across borders, funding structures are more fixed. *The Executive Director is responsible to her board. She is responsible to the money, to her artists, to the communities they work with. She feels this responsibility like a weight on a pulley at the back of her throat.* The people operating within these organizations often get tied up in this context through relationships and responsibilities. How am I responsible? *Martinez notes that "SEA, despite its anti-oppressive rhetoric, often corporatized, but this time w/ the idea of engineering society." Martinez says, "Social justice fails on the inside—keep your house clean, you can't have this power imbalance."* Depending on how far inside funding and class structures we are, our actions, despite their anti-oppressive rhetoric, end up replicating power-over dynamics. *Who is actually in economic and legal control of an art project? Who is crafting the trajectory and making decisions? Whose bellies are full, at the end of the day?* No matter where, socially engaged art projects

[122] *The Questions We Ask Together*, 302.

take place on land, which has its own histories and original treaties and agreements. At Creative Time's 2017 Summit in Toronto, architect and activist Tings Chak began her presentation by acknowledging territory and described this act "as a reminder whose resistance we live in the footsteps of."[123] Whose resistance do we work in the footsteps of? Particularly for settler artists and organizations locating context, it is important to consider ourselves in relation to the land, its original agreements and relationships and responsibilities, and its histories of resistance.[124]

This taking stock also relates to the people you are reaching out to. Helguera asserts, "To get the results they desire, artists must be clear with themselves in articulating the audiences to whom they wish to speak and in understanding the context from which they are addressing them."[125] We must be clear with ourselves about who we wish to speak with, the language we use to address them. In thinking about audience we might also critically question who it is we are focusing on. In her analysis of relational aesthetics, Doyle challenges Bishop's interest in the antagonistic social practice work of Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, who within gallery contexts pays undocumented workers and prostitutes to do menial and often humiliating tasks like sit inside cardboard boxes or have a line tattooed at the same height across their backs. These projects are meant to confront the audience with their implication in labour systems—how can you find Sierra's work exploitative but accede to precarious labour in the creation of your clothes? Unlike Kester's revulsed ethical objection, Doyle complicates Bishop's focus on an affective orientation towards the "guilt-ridden liberal art consumer" and not the exploited performer.[126] She relates a moment when Sierra's performers walked off the job, saying it was demeaning to be used as props: "Their protest registers the offensiveness of the idea that they would not be aware of [this] difference [in the kind of labour] and that they were so economically vulnerable as not to care."[127] She sees in this the larger context of the policing and negation of the emotional lives of the exploited, even within art that claims to be engaged with this exploitation.[128] *Maybe I am the large egg in the nests of others, I am the unwanted incursion.* This process of taking stock of our audience and context often involves

[123] Chak, "Undocumented."
[124] These questions are drawn from and informed by Chelsea Vowel, "Beyond territorial acknowledgements," *âpihtawkosisân* 23 September 2016, http://apihtawikosisan.com/2016/09/beyond-territorial-acknowledgments/.
[125] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 25.
[126] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 90.
[127] Ibid., 93.
[128] Ibid.

a questioning and re-questioning, a trying out and an adjusting, a constant evaluation. Who is our audience, what is our focus?

Finally, we must own up to ourselves how our work might be co-opted and positioned within larger structural systems by private and government funders. I note in the **Canon** section that Rosler, Boltanski and Chiapello, Yúdice, and McRobbie have investigated the collusion between social practice and larger issues of instrumentalization and commodification. In addition to connecting to these more general trends, Bishop also delineates Tony Blair's 'New Labour' policy in Britain as a case study in social practice as soft social service. The stance "encouraged the arts to be socially *inclusive*. Despite the benign ring to this agenda, it has been subject to critiques from the left, primarily because it seeks to conceal social inequality, rendering it cosmetic rather than structural."[129] Bishop would caution us to acknowledge the limits of what art can do in a larger context and be wary of how the work we do might be instrumentalized as a cheaper replacement for social programs within a dismantled welfare state.[130] This macrocosmically aligns with Helguera's microcosmic entreaty that artists acknowledge their role as artists within the realm of art. As we reach outside of art, it is important to assess our capacities and how these might (or might not) support structural inequality. Because of this potential for instrumentalization this work perhaps has broader implications to government, corporate, and academic institutions. What happens when socially engaged art becomes an opportunity to leverage aesthetics with neoliberal intentions through artists and the communities they work with? How are we supported, how and who and what are we supporting?

OWNING UP: REVEALING INTENTIONALLY

Helguera's description of hierarchies as realities that are neither good nor bad (and I would argue, constantly in flux) allows for a more honest owning up within institutions and individuals. This assessment allows for intentional action and engagement with the form, content, and context which define social practice.[131] This set of information—power, roles, contexts, audiences—need only be a process of reflexively owning up to yourself. I share Helguera's impulse not to impose moral or ethical demands on art-making, and his assertion that "Unethical artistic actions, while crossing the line of acceptability and even

[129] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 3.
[130] Ibid., 4-5.
[131] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 23.s

legality in some cases, are part of the role that art plays in challenging assumptions in society."[132] For the same reasons one might choose to make a boundary or transgress it, the reasons for revealing or concealing one's self and context are multiple and have a range of ethical implications. I might be accountable to a board of directors, and only give them certain information. I may have power as an artist and yet draw attention to that hierarchy in a generative way. The final section of this chapter elaborates on ways of intentionally impostering discussed within the conversations and theory that might in some cases desire to keep certain facets hidden. How much do I reveal? How am I making the invisible visible? How am I undermining or drawing attention to power? *Who am I mutable for?*

IMPOSTERING

Socially engaged art is an imposter discipline. It crosses boundaries, it does not stay comfortably where it is put. It reaches out beyond art to other disciplines, places, and audiences. Many of us are also imposters on an individual or organizational level, (mis)representing ourselves, our roles, our hierarchies, our intentions, our narratives. This lack of clarity with role and context leads to many of the complications discussed above, initiated and sustained unintentionally. Bluntly owning up to ourselves about the sticky intricacy of who and where we are gives us the information we need to act with more intention, potentially resolving—or at the very least making meaningful—some of the unintentional problems of social practice. We might consequently propose a more active practice of *impostering*: the alchemical transformation from noun (*imposter*) into verb marking its change from a passive (albeit honest) descriptor into a deliberate and deliberated act. This allows us to consider potential practices of impostering: ways of acting outside one's milieu with intention, having considered oneself in relation to structures and roles. In this final section I draw potential practices out of the conversations and ficto-critical writing of this thesis in relation to theory: de Certeau's idea of strong and weak positions, Doyle's writing about noise and difficulty, and O'Donnell's writing on social practice and discomfort.

LEVERAGING // CEDING

Despite social practice's desire to work within communities, its practitioners fluidly relay across a range of boundaries. We work in neighbourhoods, engage with municipal figures, partner with community groups. Because our funding is most often distributed by

[132] Helguera, *Education*, xiv.

galleries, colleges, universities, art centres, and foundations, artists and arts workers almost always work within institutions as well. These might be physical spaces but can also be organizational frameworks operating within many places. *There are many reasons to cross the boundary of an institution or an organization. Sometimes they're asked to produce an art project. Sometimes they approach a gallery with a proposal. Sometimes they work for an organization. Sometimes they've been within a university, for school.* Once you have located the implications of where you sit in this configuration, you can determine how to intentionally act within it. In his articulation on the practice of everyday life, French scholar Michel de Certeau articulates tactics as the practices of the weak in relation to strategies, the omniscient positions and acts of the powerful.[133] Where tactics are on-the-ground actions that operate to disrupt these systems, the strategies of the powerful can end up reinforcing them. This helps us frame how one might imposter within an organization depending on if one's position is weak or strong.

Impostering within from a weaker position (practitioners outside the organization who are less familiar with the context and lack the relative security of a salaried job) might mean tactically and intentionally leveraging. *Martinez' art collective, Postcommodity, sees a role for themselves of leveraging for people of colour within the organizations that invite them. The collective sees themselves in a position to leverage real resources and expertise within this situation. Yes, I think, to hold organizations accountable to their words. As people of colour, Martinez says, instead of leveraging for individuals, we want to leverage this power for other people—for our kin, for family.* Like transgressing or bounding, leveraging is an action only. One can leverage in the interests of oneself, or for one's kin. Who you are and where you are located within the power structure determines the ethics of this action. One might also leverage even if one is very far inside an organization, but still in a weaker position in relation to a board of directors or a funder. *They have money and the Executive Director knows people who need it. She repeats their language, she reframes her team's strange and sticky projects to make them legible (also, she wonders, oversimplifying), so her Board of Directors and her stakeholders and their partners and the people in the think tank and those on the outside can all go away nodding.* O'Donnell suggests a skeptical coordinator, "working out of a selfish need to make her world a better place and masquerading as a do-gooder to generate support from both private and public sectors."[134] We might choose to conceal or misrepresent our intentions,

[133] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkley: University of California, 1974), 34-45.
[134] O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 44.

or merely be a responsible diplomat, affirmatively holding an institution accountable to its stated desires.

Impostering within for those in a stronger position (firmly entrenched and stably located within an organization) involves ceding our power. Those more firmly on the strategies end of de Certeau's configuration must think about the strategic move of stepping aside. *Inside, who do you hold open space for, when it is allocated to you?* This position too is in relation—Katz speaks about making their studio space at Parsons available to student groups that didn't have their own space. Ceding power is a radical act and is often seen as impossible to those in control. *When she suggests this ceding of power, here is how turions says the cultural workers reacted: "Reception was not warm." Katz responds, "I don't have a lot of faith in power. Or in institutions to let go of the power they wield, though there is an ethical imperative to do that. These things [socially engaged art projects] are trendy, contemporary. But it doesn't push the boundaries enough. Distribute power."* O'Donnell notes that "there are wealthy individuals and organizations who can be considered allies or whose resources can be accessed and utilized, to some degree, in efforts to re-redistribute."[135] (He cedes to our mental vexation soon after, "if they don't walk their talk, *then* we'll burn them to the ground.")[136] Ceding power lays out a possible course for impostering from a strong position within. I see in turions' articulation of the workings of the Wood Land School in Montreal the parallel impulses of leveraging and ceding power. turions and her collaborators Duane Linklater, Tanya Lukin Linklater, and Walter Scott leverage within the SBC by calling on them *"to give labour, space, and funds to support Indigenous ideas, objects, discursivity and performance."*[137] The SBC (in the form of Director / Curator Pip Day) responds to this call, ceding its power: organizational decisions, public face, website, programming, curation, staff, budget. These acts of leveraging or ceding can be enacted intentionally in relation to one's (re)located (though fluid and changing) self and context.

INTERFERING

Crossing a boundary is always an act of interference. It is an incision, an incursion, a disruption, an insertion of oneself into an inside. *A perfect circle on her mottled upper back, a hole into her insides. The stomach walls slowly contracting, expanding.*

[135] O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 43.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Linklater, Duane, Tanya Lukin Linlater, cheyanne turions, and Walter Scott, "Wood Land School: *Kahatènhston tsi na'tetiátere ne Iotohrkó:wa tánon Iotohrha / Drawing a Line from January to December*," January 2017, accessed May 11, 2017, http://www.sbcgallery.ca/wood-land-school-gestures-c1912.

As an act of transgressing with intention, impostering in this framework complicates and makes difficult that moment of interference, of breach. In speaking alongside difficulty, Doyle writes about noise in music. She says, "The noise in and around music appears as interference, as an interruption of a signal—an incursion on harmony and order." The affective density of the political works she discusses "may be understood as one way of working with noise, in which case affect appears as an interference, as a rupture in which the viewer is thrown back onto, into a disoriented self."[138] This is how Martinez speaks about Postcommodity's aim, too*: to generate noise and confusion.* Noise is produced when a signal—a single tone—enters a detour, is rerouted, fed back, reflexively looped into itself, mixed. It is distorted, made more complex, more confusing. For Doyle, this difficult density is emotion, which throws the viewer back into their disoriented self. In social practice, this affective complexity and disorientation is thrown onto, into both the outsider who crosses over a boundary and insider located within. If done undeliberately, carelessly, interference potentially causes trauma.

Impostering then, as an act of an outsider crossing over intentionally, acknowledges and prepares for the complexity of this moment. We come owned up, with a full understanding of our self and context, knowing that like a signal entering a board, this owned-up self will change on contact, as will the context, and the other selves within that context on our incursion. Interference, this moment where our self-reflexivity and the insider group's identity comes undone, is uncomfortable. It is a moment O'Donnell advocates for: "Social discomfort," he says, "while a pain in the ass to endure, is often necessary if we have any interest in increasing our social intelligence. It's like mental confusion: any learning process must encounter a period of confusion – without it there's no learning."[139]

Martinez said, "Postcommodity strives to generate noise and confusion, which provides humans the opportunity to recover and generate knowledge, conclusions of the world for themselves. They are invited. The project is a container where people there are catalyzed into thinking critically about the world through the mediator of complexity."

[138] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 22.
[139] O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 31.

I have learned from this thinking to conceptualize impostering as the generative and ambivalent quality of interference. Instead of writing our experiences as an easy, knee-jerk narrative that either sells social practice as balm for our alienation in the age of the mass spectacle or critically dismisses it as naively hopeful, impostering offers a practice of holding a space for complexity and difficulty. It makes room for emotional interference and disorientation, for discomfort and for learning, for politics and intentions and understandings that don't agree, for the interfered to recover and generate knowledge for themselves, thinking critically about the world.

Like the difficult political practices Doyle discusses that skirt the positive messages of political art and avoid a singular narratives of representation,[140] impostering-as-interference is a practice of persistently generating noise and complexity instead of seeking a harmony and resolution. Like the occupied cinema Zvezda, it is deeply political without falling in line, opening *a space for immeasurability and complexity*, stronger for not being reduced. Helguera shares this aim for social practice as a discipline as well. He contends that socially engaged art's "links to and conflicts with both art and sociology must be overtly declared and the tension addressed, but not resolved."[141] Impostering is an act of carefulness, as Doyle writes, even "the care one must take in order to avoid simplifying difficulty."[142]

One of the questions we asked together is, "Is there a place for disruption / reaction / antagonism in social practice art?" Impostering would argue that social practice, in its act of reaching out and crossing boundaries, is *always* an act of disruption. Aimee Spiers answers this question with a reminder of Foucault's insistence that the role of criticism is to make it "so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy."[143] Interference recoups this practice of criticism within social practice: to make the invisible visible, to make difficult the optimistic narrative, to question and undermine our own power, to seek discomfort and ambivalence. Social practice is an act of ingression, a boundary crossed for so many reasons. But interference is difficult (*A smooth aperture, a mouth opened. *pkwhoouh**). It should be uncomfortable. It should never be easy.

[140] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 95.
[141] Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 4.
[142] Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, xiv.
[143] Spiers, "Is there a place for disruption/reaction/antagonism in social practice art?" 145.

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