

Imperfect Compliance: A Trajectory of Transformation

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IF “No one is starving in Cuba”—what lesson can we learn from that system?

A student suggested: “We need to hold pedagogy responsible.”

A panellist remarked: “We need to unmask the lie.”

A convention delegate asked: “How can you Free Pussy Riot?”¹

Art conferences can be ceremonies—with people gathering to create new ways of knowing and being in the world. As attendees and participants, we become invested in knowledges shared by our colleagues and sit together pondering questions, looking and feeling deep inside ourselves and inside art. Art brings people together. When we think of conference as ceremony we invite, through intention, the potential of transformation. The beauty of these conferences is their ability to make the invisible visible and to invoke thoughts, discussion, fears, and desires. As in ceremony there is a set of rituals we come to expect in conferences: the alignment of speaker tables, introductions, the reading out loud of biographies, the goblets of water and microphones atop tables adorned with fancy table skirts. At the *Institutions by Artists* conference, AA Bronson started his keynote presentation with what he called an “invocation” of artists and peers from his own past. What he evoked through this act was an intentional space of reflection and possibility within the conference structure. This space, breath, pause, and moment is where the ceremony continues to work within us, even after the conference has closed. Spirit needs room to breathe.

Institutions by Artists was strategic in providing such room, allowing ruptures to occur and encouraging debate and self-critique. This is the space where artist-run culture is still radical, in that it invites the possibility of transformation. Despite funding challenges and bureaucratic pressures in Canada, artists here continue to experiment with ways of organizing themselves. The conference exposed these manifestations: from ideas of timely demise, or the unorganizing of institutions, to ideas of appropriating dominant or corporate forms of organizing in order to subvert them. It is within the shifting ground of questioning, experimentation, and engaging with non-artists that we might come together to create models that further challenge current forms of power, whether in the context of art or otherwise. As an extension of the decolonization of knowledge and an exercise in critical or red pedagogy², we as cultural workers need to start at places of

¹ The excerpts from the *Institutions by Artists* conference belong to, in order, Tania Bruguera, an unidentified student, Jaleh Mansoor, and Damien Petryshtn.

² Indigenous authors and artists have written extensively around ideas of decolonization, criticizing colonial thought, and incorporating Indigenous customs and knowledge into academic writing and research as a way of decolonizing dominant forms of knowledge formed out of the European Renaissance and processes of capitalist/patriarchal/imperialist dominance in the Americas. Critical pedagogy is a method of education that holds criticality as important in deconstructing authoritarian approaches to education and advocates connecting knowledge to power and the ability to take

not knowing in order to build up knowledge together. Artists are hunters, artists are on welfare, artists are kids, artists are caregivers, artists are janitors, artists are powerful, artists are refugees, artists are blind, artists are working other jobs, artists pay rent, artists sell art to live, artists are born every minute . . .

Approval of Minutes

“In order to translate minutes from board meetings into music, we mapped out the terminology and operations from *Robert’s Rules of Order* onto [Walter] Piston’s *Harmony*, finding possible points of similarity and connection between these two systems, and developed a harmonic rule base for the minutes. The resulting graphical scores are not complete musical compositions, but represent frameworks upon which music might be made—they are musical works in potential.”³

Kathleen Ritter and James B. Maxwell’s composition *Call to Order*, commissioned by the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres, co-presenters of the *Institutions by Artists* conference, used minutes from local artist-run centre meetings as the framework for a possible musical score interpreted by musicians, which offered a backdrop to the conference’s evening debates. The concept of turning the mundane into this potential for and interpretation of music echoed the sense of transformation that artist-run culture has been invoking and playing with in its forty-year experiment in Canada. Ironically, the sound behind the concept, a concept that really illustrated a sense of potentiality, was used as a cue to warn people when time was up. Thus in some ways the music returned a set of transformed minutes back into something that was again ordered and predictable in nature. *Call to Order* and its subsequent use throughout the conference is symbolic of the journey of artist-run culture—a reciprocal relationship between the possibility of transformation and the organizing and administration of that transformative potential.

Points of Dis-Order

The beauty of *Institutions by Artists* is that it allowed artists to discuss themselves and locate their greatness, failings, and possibilities for interruption, intervention, and transformation. The word “beauty” in this instance refers to the Navajo philosophy of “walking in beauty,” which arises when we surround ourselves with well being and balance with all beings (in the four directions, above and below), and that “with beauty all around me may I walk” further, the potential for equality and perhaps justice will emerge as a result. The belief is that beauty is made from a balanced life, and we believe the *Institutions by Artists* convention was attempting to walk in beauty by way of questioning, unpacking, critiquing the artist institution’s role or potential role and function in society. Although institution is a considerable, intimidating word and conjures up all sorts of structures, rules, hierarchies, and enclosures, the conference offered a measure of institutional critique. But we do wonder how the institutionalization of art, whether driven by artists or large institutions, creates yet another rubric of proper

constructive action. Red pedagogy is a method of education and advocacy that is Indigenous centred. The common agenda in critical and red pedagogy is a process of knowledge-making that could lead to liberation.

³ Kathleen Ritter and James B. Maxwell, *Call to Order*, 2011–12, <http://arcpost.ca/commissions/call-to-order>.

taste—meaning another standard by which someone sanctions what art is and isn't, or determines when it's bad or good, or says when it's art or craft. The specialized languages that form along with the compartmentalization of a skill set or profession—as in “art speak”—are, in fact, exclusionary: “I don't even know enough about feminism to be a woman,” remarked performance artist Skeena Reece during the conference. Although she was raised by an original Red Power Woman (her mother is Cleo Reece⁴ who comes from an intertribal, matrilineal society), when confronted with feminist discourse, Reece announced that she was in uncharted territory. Reece, invited by the conference organizers as a performance respondent of sorts, highlighted in her interventions womanhood and motherhood in a language falling outside of mainstream feminist analysis, and yet, despite this difference in context, the issues remained the same—equality and inclusion. Her performance was honest, funny, disruptive, and pointed in the way it addressed issues of accessibility for Native peoples and more implicitly Native women.

The recording of a reinterpreted musical score played as a soundtrack at times during the conference and Reece's performative actions were, in fact, the conference's key moments of possibility, where we were able to move beyond an interrogation of self as artists within artist-run centre culture towards the potential of transformation. But in advance of transformation we do need to understand where we were coming from to see where we are going. Artist-run initiatives started out as voices against institutional power and now some have become too predictable as sites of institutionalization. A transformation is needed in order to get back to the original spirit of artist-run culture in Canada, as opposed to the institutionalization of artist culture everywhere. Further, artists need to ponder the implications of corporate sponsored sites, such as the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, where the conference was held. We believe this is a symptom and symbol of art power that we are attempting to transform.

⁴ Cleo Reece is Cree from Fort McMurray. She is one of the organizers of the Keepers of the Athabasca Healing Walk, an annual sacred walk for Mother Earth in northern Alberta. For two decades she was an active and influential figure in Vancouver's Aboriginal grassroots movement. She started the Indigenous Media Arts Group in Vancouver, which organized the ImagiNATION Film Festival for eight years, and was active with Co-op Radio for ten years. She is now a Band Council Member of her reserve.

“[Regarding] the vibrancy and real flair of artist-run culture that it had when it began in the '70s, we have lost a lot of that intensity to our own bureaucratic stupidity.”

—Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell, Feminist Art Gallery⁵

The roots of the artist-run centre (ARC) movement in Canada since the 1960s have been defined through the creation of spaces for artist-led projects and conversations, yet in practice have fallen into modes of organization that are anything but self-determined. Would any artists' organization really choose to follow the Society Act⁶ if they were really self-determined? The fact is that most artist-run centres are incorporated, not-for-profit organizations with a particular, bureaucratic method of organizing—i.e., defined by writing funding reports, systematizing annual general meetings, reaching quorums, and following grant applications that keep them beholden to funders. In organizing ARCs, artists can become occupied with systems that they originally tried to subvert—namely, bureaucracies with systems of power, which influence control over the production, presentation, distribution, and contextualization of contemporary art. Ideas of egalitarianism among participants in artist-run culture are talked about as seeds that were sown in the '60s and '70s in Canada with movements for marginalized peoples, feminism, queer rights, cultural diversity, and workers' rights.

The concern for social justice within the production of art is an area that continues to be relevant within the geopolitics and sociopolitical realities of Indigenous peoples on the continent. During the '60s there was an outburst of activity associated with liberation movements that operated outside of art, but trickled into the gallery space. More than one presenter at the conference referred to the Art Workers' Coalition's historic 1971 protest outside of the Guggenheim Museum in support of artists' rights and its closer examination of the art world's social and political responsibilities. At the conference, some presenters notably explored the naming of artists as cultural workers, art workers, or art labourers as a way to align artists with the working class within an ideological structure that seeks to place the rights and dignity of workers within the very function and purpose of art in society. Claire Fontaine remarked that art needs “to protect those who create nothing and have nothing to do with art,” suggesting that the artist's role is to protect and remind society of something and, by extension, that art indeed has power. We always want to probe what art does with its power, for which reasons, and why. If art's power can reveal injustice and protect people, then we must also look inward at our entanglements within established systems of knowledge production and

⁵ Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell (Feminist Art Gallery), “Institutional Time: Facts & Fictions” panel, moderated by Magnolia Pauker, Institutions by Artists conference, Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Vancouver, October 12, 2012.

⁶ Incorporation as a not-for-profit organization requires the adoption of the standard Society Act within a given Canadian province or the Companies Act if federally incorporated. These acts set out the legal contract for how an incorporated society should act—for example, necessitating a board of directors, annual general meetings, voting, etc.

the circulation of art power, and by doing so, establish our own way again, as artists, historians, curators, and so forth, as concerned and engaged culture-makers with ideals of responsibility, purpose, and ethics and not get subsumed by those systems, instead letting those systems get subsumed by a culture of freedom determined by the artist.

The process of institutionalization or incorporation of ARCs, exemplified in the development of boards of directors, has compromised the initial freedom or experimental nature of the artist-run centre movement. By building institutions, the once radical artist-led movement has almost settled into a normalized and standardized practice or profession. The difference between an art careerist, defined as someone who wants an arts career without social justice, and an engaged arts professional seems to be in the realm of responsibility, purpose, and ethics. Do all participants in artist-run culture have to be engaged citizens? This question circulated as an undercurrent at the conference and suggested artists have a responsibility to something.

Our question is, do careerists as well?

There are many members of smaller collectives and alterNative spaces that are questioning or critiquing bureaucracy while resisting formalized institutional structures and maintaining transparency and accountability to their members. However, generally, artists working outside of the prescribed protocols and networks that the artist-run context has established are excluded from participation in this context. Often marginal voices to this system are brought in under the realm of social justice on a project-to-project basis, or not at all. Institutions by artists need to be cognitive of how they create themselves—occupying an organizational space outside corporate models that engage in capitalistic competition and class/race/gender biases.

Maintenance Report

Art machinery (by which art power is distributed) and subjective maintenance schedule:

Part 1:

The idea that artists are “forced to be responsible for things that we do not have anything to do with” (i.e., abuses of power) as announced by Claire Fontaine and that “those affected by this are dependent on artists” denies art history’s role in the structural dehumanization of the Other through its production of art discourse, which defines what art is. Certainly, the role of artistic production can expand questions about justice, but to claim that art has no relationship to abuses of power over the subjugated is a complete denial of art history’s complicity in the dehumanizing of the Other through systems of aesthetic value and judgment. Not only has the primitive not been able to make art in the annals of Western art history, but women have only very recently entered the discourse. And, in some cases, women have also supported the devaluing of other cultural modes of production that do not fit in with subscribed systems of contemporary art discourse primarily determined by the West. The privileged site of contemporary art production is fraught with its own abuse of power in its very analysis, or lack thereof.

Maintenance Required

1. Does your organization have a mix of members from diverse cultures, religions, and sexual orientations? Do identity politics still scare you and your friends? If not please perform Maintenance Schedule B: Deconstructing Art Power 101.

2. If Schedule B is complete, please review and make changes according to Maintenance Schedule C: Questioning Your Very Existence and Relinquishing the Organization Ego.

Troubleshooting

Many of the origins behind ideas of social justice, egalitarianism, and democracy are more properly attributed to Indigenous societies in the Americas and colonial interaction with, and understanding of, those societies. We are not suggesting a return to some kind of pre-colonial utopia, but at least a reconsideration of the influence Indigenous-centred knowledges had on the collective community building ideas of the '60s and '70s and how Indigenous thought, politics, struggles, and aesthetics have influenced art on this continent and beyond. We are suggesting the implementation of Indigenous knowledges that promote generosity, bravery, wisdom, and fortitude. We need to be aware of the self-reflexivity of artist-run culture and not limit its vision and sense of self. So, to start with, we want a deeper sense of roots, not just a hollow acknowledgment of "being on traditional Coast Salish Territory," which, while an important declaration, cannot actually assist with justice for the Salish community nor can it provide an understanding of why we continue to OCCUPY contested lands.

Housekeeping Report

"Dirty diapers need to be changed. Let's move on ..."

—Skeena Reece

Regarding the professionalization of the artist: All professions have a level of training and skill so participants can function, deliver, or even organize politically. The broader question is, what happens when that professionalization becomes hierarchical and exclusionary? What was once a "movement" (i.e., artist-run) has now become an institutional model that functions with presidents and vice presidents, and in this transformation the role of the collective has been co-opted to meet bureaucratic structures internal to artist-run centres and funding and public demands that are external to them. The call to disorder and to challenge institutional models of art within the artist-run movement is now pale, predictable, and de-radicalized. The standardization that plagues the cultural industry has seeped into artist culture through the mimicry of larger institutions. These once radical sites of cultural production are now either lying in archival boxes, offering launch pads for artists to get into exhibitions at larger institutions, or providing safe havens for artists to return to. Artist-run centres function both within and outside the corporate art world (defined by commercial art dealers and institutions who have corporate sponsorship), as do artists, curators, art historians, technicians, and installers, among others. The flow between mid-size and large public institutions and artist-run culture is reciprocal in strange and wonderful ways, especially in Vancouver. The circulation of art, thought, and bodies go from space to space with fluidity, but perhaps everyone is wearing the same interpretative uniform

dyed in the same prescribed notions of power. All in a single day one can go from a large to mid-size public art gallery over to a commercial gallery, and then on to an artist-run centre and sometimes encounter the same artist, curator, or historian. Note that we are not saying the people or art here are “bad,” but rather that the uniform they wear is the same. Although we are all in the same field, the conference questioned if, indeed, our field needs to expand its borders, as well as its fixed boundaries.

In Canada, an artist might exhibit in an international biennial one day and an artist-run centre the next, such that the lines are getting blurrier and blurrier between the practice of international art production and artist-run initiatives, thus creating a relationship between corporate art power and the art establishment. The professionalization of the arts now signifies a network of relationships between the academy, artist-run initiatives, mid-size and large public institutions, and the market. The blur between is almost gone. Is this the kind of blur that artists in artist-run culture really want? Do we allow the blur to disintegrate completely, or do we question how to stay radically separate without continuing the relationship with visible hierarchical models that artist-run culture is playing with? Artists operating within artist-run culture have worked really hard and established themselves as participants in exhibitions and discourse, and parts of the conference suggested that artists need to question where they are located and where they are heading. It became apparent that artists need to have clear lines drawn between the corporate art-power system and a sense of self outside those systems. Perhaps it's too late for some, and perhaps some may not be interested in exiting from the art-power system—but how can artist-run culture maintain autonomy from those systems while working from within it without becoming too similar? And, if one is working inside it, should one take on an infiltrator role? How can artists continue to challenge power without becoming pure or dirty power? If knowledge is power, we believe that wisdom is manna. How can artist culture practice manna within the realm of justice and equality? We use manna as a nurturing spirit.

Safety Report

Part 1: Risks

Artist-run centres in Canada have taken on different modes of regional and national operation. What seems to be unique about Vancouver is that organizations that were once working outside of established institutions and practicing institutional critique have begun to transition into institutionalized, established spaces that maintain enormous art power and are now in need of self-critique—unpacking the implications of the dominant narrative they have established nationally and further afield. After forty years of artistic production, curation, and exhibition, participants in the artist-run centre movement in Canada have established themselves as leaders and experts in the field of contemporary art. Each centre in the ARCnetwork has a unique mandate to fulfil through artist-led curatorial practice and the acceptance of unsolicited submissions, although some centres have now become curator driven in the sense that professional curators select works, artists, and programs to present at these institutions. Thus, the once relatively democratic practice of posting an open call juried by artists has become less frequent with the professionalization of curators. The shift from artist-driven to curator-driven practice has changed the ecology of some ARCs. Since most of the curators in these organizations have attended graduate-level curatorial or art

programs, is the field producing cookie-cutter curators and artists? Since artist-run centres are now filled with BFA, BA, MA, MFA, PhD graduates trained within systems of knowledge that maintain meta-narratives, what can be radical in these spaces? Can any of us get away from the institutionalization and professionalization of the arts? Since artist-run culture in Canada is now firmly established and maintains institutionalized art discourses, and, by extension, art power, the *Institutions by Artists* conference attempted to unpack this power and recognize the artist's responsibility to that power. Artist-run centres have enormous art power, developed through years of dedication. Now, with the globalized professionalization of the artist, artist-led initiatives are now even more important and urgent. Artists need to reclaim their own spaces, outside of any institution, as hegemony lingers in the most liberal of spaces. From Romania to Beijing to Cuba, the conference presenters showed how processes of artist-run initiatives intersect in various ways through the professionalization of process (i.e., curators and art historians are professionally trained and they come from an institutional context or are headed towards one). How does institutionalized training affect the creative process, especially regarding the work and outlook of art historians, curators, and artists? What role has pedagogy occupied in reproducing dominant approaches to art-making and analysis? Neoliberalism may be a Western condition, but certainly in other countries the professionalization of the arts is tightly linked to the market, capital, the elite, individuals, and a formal education system. How does cognitive imperialism function within art history, curation, and artistic production?

Review and expose the gaps. Or even interrogate the gaps.

Part 2: Incident Report

The claim that artist-run spaces can exist free from hegemonic influence seems slippery, and the nature of the dissemination of art knowledge within fixed frameworks of thought and hierarchies makes artist-run culture complicit in how the circulation of art power continues in ways that are not always identified and perhaps reside within the realm of denial, refusal, and enclosure. If, by the nature of the conference, artist culture is critiquing its own power, how and who decides which power mechanisms in the field will remain and which mechanisms, whether pure or dirty, will be discarded?

An intervention into areas of power can create various degrees of anxiety, frustration, or pleasure for those witnessing the event. Whether issues of stolen land, freedom of speech, reframing history, or Pussy Power, the call to order changes into a call to bear witness. If the viewer witnessing the intervention fails to receive the gift, how will the transference of a different kind of institution of life be received?

Someone at the convention asked the question, "Can we struggle together?"

And we ask further:

Is art a struggle for pure liberation?

Can gender, race, and class struggles even be fought or won in an arts arena?

What is the artist's role in class struggle?

How can artists fight against oppression for the working woman and man?

What can artists learn from class struggles?

Do artists have an obligation to the poor?

Do artists have an obligation to the oppressed?

Ongoing Maintenance Schedule

-Host an event for real, live, working-class people. – Ask yourself: Do you struggle against neoliberalism? – Talk to Glenn Alteen at the grunt gallery⁷.

Artists have witnessed some gender scuffles with some wins and losses on art's battlefield. Race in the field of contemporary art in Canada has played a role over the last twenty years and Indigenous/First Nations/Indian voices have been heard in many of Canada's large public institutions. What role do American curators, gallery directors, and art historians have in the continued dehumanization of American Indian people by denying visibility of contemporary American Indian art? Concerning this matter, most large, mainstream American institutions have never shown Indigenous contemporary art and the matter can be extended to the global, international art community. Why are there so few Indigenous artists circulating in that arena? The fact that Canadian and American Indian/Native/First Nations/Aboriginal peoples have a mythic presence internationally yet don't exist in contemporary consciousness, especially in contemporary art discourse, is an example of how art power is exercised over an entire people who do not get to participate. The fear and denial of the existence of Indian people is still very real in the United States, so much so that our art is refused a place within contemporary life.

Safety Equipment Needed:

The transference of Indigenous knowledges to larger publics through the dissemination of contemporary Indigenous art.

Auditor's Report

There is a need to discuss money, as financial concerns came up in a number of panels at the conference. In Canada, artist-run centres are subjected to and organized in response to funding guidelines and systems provided by municipal, provincial, and federal governments. Although as jury members and committee members artists have played a significant role in determining where funding should be allocated in Canada, the government's arts agenda and policies still influence artists and ARCs that apply for public funding. There are set guidelines and requirements that must be met before institutions receive funds. Many panellists at the conference suggested other models to work from rather than state support—from the artist-entrepreneur, to collectivization, or revenue sharing through networks in a "matronage" model proposed by the Feminist Art Gallery. The cultural public purse for funding, especially in Canada, has allowed for artist-run culture to flourish, and because these funds are limited—and in some countries don't exist at all—artists are finding alterNative ways to develop economies in arts production or funding. Artists stepping outside conventional institutional spaces and funding models are essential to challenging and

⁷ Glenn Alteen and grunt gallery in Vancouver have demonstrated an important commitment and mandate to exhibit Aboriginal artists and community-engaged practice, as well as innovative, collaborative, and provocative Canadian and international contemporary art for the last twenty years.

examining how established institutions and funding sources are not serving artists—which is not to say they *shouldn't* serve artists; almost all artists in the conference would agree or stated that there should be more funding for the arts, but the methods of delivering, judging, and organizing that funding should be questioned.

Recommendations:

If you can, make an annual donation to an artist-run gallery or artist collective of your choice.

The Red Paper Report

The emergence of Aboriginal artist-run culture was a response to the exclusion of Aboriginal art and curatorial practice nationally and materialized in the wake of artist-run culture in Canada. The Professional Native Indian Artists Association/Indian Group of Seven opened up spaces inside the field of contemporary art in Canada, followed by the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA), who advocated for spaces for Aboriginal expression within art institutions. The 1972 exhibition *Treaty Numbers 23, 287 and 1171*, featuring work by Daphne Odjig, Jackson Beardy, and Alex Janvier, was a landmark exhibition in that it brought a new sensibility of Indigenous critical artistic practice to Canadian art audiences. Despite the fact that SCANA and the Professional Native Indian Artists Association were both in operation for only short periods of time, their influence on generations of Aboriginal artists is significant. And, over the last two decades, SCANA activities surface from time to time. This legacy of Indigenous artists who claimed space within contemporary Canadian art discourse has also had a major impact on artist-run culture and funding. For instance, the Canada Council for the Arts and the BC Arts Council both have mandates to specifically support Aboriginal practice, and while we can point to insufficiencies in funding, these strategic priorities are a result of Aboriginal artists and supporters advocating for inclusion.

Ironically, discourse around contemporary American Indian art in the United States, while lagging behind Canada in some senses, has been successful in creating large public institutions like the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian. Although this museum is not governed by Indian people or Indian imperatives, it has dedicated exhibition spaces for American Indian art. The Museum of Contemporary Native Art (MOCNA), within the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA Santa Fe), which is part of an Indian-operated arts educational institution, exhibits and collects art. In addition, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art offers a fellowship, awarded biannually to American and Canadian Indians, through the purchase of art, and now holds one of the most significant collections of contemporary Native art in the United States. In Canada, we have no nationally significant gallery for Indigenous representation, though the National Gallery now collects Indigenous art and the inclusion of Native curators has been vitally important for securing exhibitions and building such a collection.

Although all these spaces, (MOCNA, Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian and Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art), are outside the artist-centred realm and still governed by a board and donors within prohibitively expensive institutional walls, they are dedicated to exclusively exhibiting Indigenous art. Failing the sudden political will to create Indigenous models of art structures, education, and interaction, we need to look to the artist-run centre movement to identify opportunities to create novel hypothetical/discursive

spaces where new ideas can inform and invoke ancient knowledges. The seeds are there: from site-specific, Indigenous performative actions to installations and direct land interventions. The body of knowledges that exists within contemporary Indigenous artistic practices can be nurtured, germinating seeds to form roots. These are practices in which art is felt, heard, and touched, or where birds and animals and plants are a part of the audience, or where board meetings transpire in ceremonies, or openings take place with feasts. Indigenous knowledges and aesthetics can be integrated into a new institution of life, not just art. The moment we connect our hands and our hearts to the land around us: this is what our ancestors would call art. We respond to the land, from basketry to making clothing, and we enter into holistic engagements with animals and food. These acts are interconnected relationships to the land where we live. Our languages are here in the earth, the rocks, the trees, and our art is here, too.

In practice, a more complete sense of equality and accessibility for Aboriginal artists has been more elusive. Despite Aboriginal artists represented in art institutions and some forms of Aboriginal-run spaces like the Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg, the proliferation of alterNative methods of organizing, interpreting, and appreciating non-Western art traditions is not yet apparent. The bifurcated presentation of Indigenous arts within museum and gallery contexts still exists as work is compartmentalized into pre-contact artifacts relegated to museums. Contemporary Aboriginal artists need to be informed about contemporary art systems in order to be permitted entrance on their own terms. If these knowledge bases around “art speak,” theory, and established networks are missing, admission to the art world is tainted by paternalism and primitivism. Artists created the Professional Native Indian Artists Association and SCANA to have a voice and claim space, but are we now just fitting ourselves in between the cracks (as the cracks get wider) instead of creating our own circles? Is an Indian art gallery really just a copy of a Western-style art gallery? Is there potential for it to be something else? Should it be not exclusively Indigenous but rather guided by Indigenous principles in some way? We have been successful in intervening and claiming space inside external institutions but we have not yet truly created our own.

There are no contemporary art galleries or artist-run centres on First Nation reserves/reservations because people have been too busy surviving. We want to ask the spirits: Is it a good idea to have Indigenous art galleries on a reserve or on the land? What do Indigenous artist-run centres look like on Indian land? Do they just look like artist-run centres in cities?

We want a natural gallery, which has no space and no money but rather spirit and thought. There is no particular way of organizing it and we haven't had any exhibitions there yet. Think no money and no building and no institution. It is a space to make art, but the openings are attended by bears harvesting the last of the berries before hibernation and maybe the neighbours' horses or cows are grazing, and there are crows, reservation dogs, and the spirit of the land, lots of spirits. This gallery is a gallery of the land, of Indigenous culture(s) and language(s); this gallery can show new media with basketry, beading with installation art, performance art, and storytelling. This natural gallery can exist anywhere, but it has to start at the root—the root is radical, literally: *radicalis* “of or having roots.”

Other Business

The West likes slaughtering things—people, animal nations, and the natural world.

The Western art world likes slaughtering things as well, with the death of painting, originality, authenticity, the subject, and the author. Now it seems the Western art world is trying to kill itself in order to liberate itself from its own overestimated, inflated value. If there should be no more art after capitalism, presumably this means no more Western art. The Western art world has been plagued by its own idleness and neoliberalism. The long overdue collapse of agency (read: domination) in the crisis of its own value (read: domination)⁸ in Western art is a result of centuries of interpretive art power over the entire field of art discourses. The killing of self through self-sacrifice and beginning anew will allow for “desert creatures”⁹ to show themselves and to begin anew. This is a courageous, generous, fortuitously wise gestural action that will make a new institution of life for artist-run culture, especially in Canada. And, through this act, the gift for other countries from Canada’s forty-year history of artist-run culture is the gift to question how dominance circulates even in the most liberated of art spaces.

Operators’ Manual

—Institution + Intuition = Transformation

Now that we have discussed maintenance, safety, troubleshooting, risks, and incidents, we are left to consider the realm of operations. Where do we go from here? The conference presented debates, ideas, interpretations, critiques, and examples, so where do we take them? How does the ceremony of the conference continue to work inside of us? These operational guidelines are a series of actions, symbolic and spiritual actions used to invoke an altered state of organizational consciousness. Instead of better or more institutions by artists, let’s have more intuition. Intuition stands in opposition to institution, to logical, hierarchical organization. Institutions need intuition. Intuition keeps us honest, wild, and allows the realm of spirit entry into this domain. The possibility of transformation requires the collapse of hierarchies and rules to allow the nuanced, the unspoken, the spirit to be heard. Institution is the body, intuition is the spirit, we need both but they have to be in relationship and responsive to each other, and when they are, we have inspiration, a sudden intuition as part of solving a problem or getting to the “root” of the problem.

Mitakuye oyasin —pronounced mee-tah-koo-yay o-yah-seen¹⁰ —is a Lakota (Sioux) belief that means “everything is related,” and sometimes is spoken as “all my relations.” The core meaning is everything is related—plants, sky, water, animal and bird nations, and people. This phrase is an offering acknowledging that everything is related. When stated as “all my relations” we are acknowledging our ancestors as well. Further, *mitakuye oyasin* means we

⁸ At the conference, Jaleh Mansoor proposed art’s collapse of agency and a crisis of value. Our emphasis is domination all around.

⁹ A conference delegate suggested that we should have no fear of the unknown or new, and that desert creatures will survive. We didn’t see his face, but the voice sounded like Vancouver artist Damien Petryshyn’s.

¹⁰ (Lakota language)

Takuya: to be related, to have kinship with.

Oya’s’in: all as individuals or units, everything, everyone.

are all related—all bodies, all spirits, all rivers, all mountains, all beings—and by being related, we entrust each other the care for each other.

Mitakuye Oyasín:

This is a prayer, a manifesto, to ask how we use the experience of the conference to transcend and transform ourselves or our organizations into all possibilities, where we can make our dreams and visions real. We need to open the doors, allow the ruptures, unorganize—that is to say, organize as assembly as opposed to organize as an exclusionary act of professionalization or institutionalization. We have a gift before us, this ceremony has given us a gift, and now we carry it and what we do with the gift is up to us. We don't have to have faith in anything, but just a belief that: ART IS . . .

Endnotes:

On the use of Indian, First Nations, Native, Indigenous, Aboriginal in this essay: What can we say, these are all terms we use in defining ourselves and that others use in defining us. We use them interchangeably throughout as they of course all have different political connotations and relationships; we invoke all of them, all of us who have been defined as and how we define ourselves. We also say NdN or skin or sister or brother. We are fluid in our definitions.