

*A Turn Toward “In-Reach.”*

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Introduction to the Ontario Association of Art Galleries (OAAG) workshop “Innovation in Exhibition Design and Installation”

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I am thrilled to be sitting here in the company of such a fierce and innovative group of practitioners. If you are intimidated by them and the tough questions they ask and the kinds of transformative practices they bravely and boldly enact, don't worry—so am I. And since I want to learn from them as much as all of you do, I thought that I would use my time this morning to talk a bit about the workshop today, how it came about, and highlight some of the points of discussion that will hopefully give shape to a *new kind of dialogue* about innovation in exhibition design and installation.

I have to admit that when the OAAG asked me to be the content chair of a workshop on innovation in exhibition design and installation I wondered what that might look like. How does one do a workshop in something that is both practical and intuitive? A workshop that acknowledges that exhibition design and installation is something to be revised: even those of us presenting today are constantly learning how to undo our past practices in order to change gallery practices. So I wondered how we might look differently at innovation in exhibition design and installation with a turn toward accessibility and performativity. More importantly, I wanted to try and get away from conversations of “best practices,” and begin to grapple with new practices that might actually erode some of the “disciplinary management” that make best practices status quo practices: besides, whose best practice are we talking about? How can we have best practices that don't fix ways of doing things but keep things open and evolving, incorporating new voices into what constitutes the very practices of galleries? How we might reconsider what innovation even means today—that is, how are galleries innovating new methodological frameworks for programming itself, not just in exhibition design but *as* exhibition design.

For me, this notion of exhibition design is not just how one designs exhibitions in a gallery, though it is also that too. It is how one changes a gallery through the design of its programming. How can programming change the ethics of museums and produce alternative forms of *knowing* by the kinds of practices we choose to adopt? And, how can programming challenge the art gallery, put pressure on it, and make us—as people who work inside galleries—work differently? Could we then talk about best practices as new approaches to the gallery by innovating new propositions for its future trajectory through our programming? If we wanted to borrow a term from Elizabeth Sweeny and Syrus Marcus Ware, how might we “re-purpose” our mandates rather than adapt them. Adaptation, according to Elizabeth and Syrus, does not require any systemic shift and rarely does its application result in a redistribution of privilege or empowerment. They understand that while adaptation may require an adjustment, which could very well be intended to make a more inclusive world, the language of adaptation implies that there is a way of doing things – a correct way and a traditional mainstream way. Elizabeth and Syrus urge us to think of re-purposing (rather than conforming) those traditions that are really about upholding the status quo.

With this workshop I had hoped to move this conversation away from display—which might at first seem a bit contradictory since, I suppose, what we do in galleries is show things. But what if we thought not about what galleries show but rather about what galleries *do*? When I was asked to chair the content of this workshop, my immediate reaction was to try and move away from issues of representation and display to performativity and embodied practice forms that are changing the very nature and function of the gallery itself; not just what seen inside it but *how* it is seen, felt, approached, and importantly provocatively re-imagined. Wanda Nanibush asks us to consider liveness in the gallery and an embodied curatorial practice as a form of knowing that delinks presentation from western narratives that prefer linearity and preservation in order to “re-purpose” the gallery’s historically entrenched epistemological desires and posit decay, decomposition, and intervention as new ontological propositions toward more dynamic and affective futures that are constituted through radically different approaches to museum practices. I wonder how can touch, smell, taste etc. may be incorporated into our exhibition designs? How might these strategies make the experience of art more accessible and not privilege "display practices" or didactic practices? How could this way of approaching exhibitions (collection based and otherwise), *perhaps* re-order our thinking about "artifacts" (in scare quotes) in a way that is more respectful of their living, breathing role in Indigenous culture? Can we find here new structures of solidarity for objects, cultures, and audiences?

Admittedly, my interests here are also a bit self-serving. And, I approached the day in much the same way I approach my curatorial work, which has, over the past decade, been deeply concerned with demonstrating that any particular cultural frame is neither fixed nor ontologically given. For many years I have been thinking about what it means to change “out-reach” into “in-reach”: to reverse the impulse of galleries to go out into communities to “teach” but instead be open to the *effects* of communities and individuals have on our practices by bringing them into the gallery and ensuring that we change our institutional approaches in response to the demands put onto the institution through this process. I see this workshop as an opportunity to collectively conceive of in-reach as a practice: indeed, an institutional practice.

By incorporating different kinds of cultural and aesthetic influences, different forms of social organization and economies, and differing cultural contexts and forms of expression *into* the institution as a curatorial methodology, from my perspective, “in-reach” is designed to transform the very nature and function of the institution from *within*, or from the bottom up. For me, In-reach is a dialogical practice that is brought about through sustained relationships created through collaborative working networks. It is a long-term project that sets in motion relations between different people, ideas, and spaces where the brokering of divergent viewpoints, perspectives, and forms of artistic production is a central part of the curatorial work undertaken.

Everyone presenting here today is transforming gallery practices from within through their work, the challenges they have taken up with their programming, and their innovations in exhibition design and installation, especially with regards to “accessibility.” The “challenges with their programming” though is not just about difficult knowledge. This is programming that challenges the status quo of the museum’s “best practices.” I should also add that have a very expanded notion of the curatorial. I think of the curatorial as an engaged methodology, of putting things

together or people into relation differently and not just a job someone does at a gallery. I'd like to think that budgets are curatorial ways of thinking, for instance: certainly the money allotted to different kinds of programming at a gallery is a political thing that makes bifurcating distinctions between exhibitions, education, public programming, etc. What would it mean to think of our programming as always being all these things at once? Why is education a separate program with a different kind of budget scale? So when I speak about the curatorial role, I also mean it in this way. And to this end, I wonder how programming at a gallery might fit those things we do inside it together differently?

Many of the programmes at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) are conceived and executed collectively and work across so-called disciplinary or programming boundaries so that a single project is neither readily recognized nor categorized as education, public programming, exhibition making, etc. but in its singularity brings different people, who might not have any natural affinity together: such as young spoken work poets from Jane-Finch, Malvern, and Regent park through a year-long mentorship program and Toronto-based disability dancers and the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation through a parallel year long residency with Trinidadian visual artist Marlon Griffith – a project that I will speak about later today. In the case of this project, entitled *Ring of Fire*, these various activities and people dovetailed resulting a single performance to which everyone contributed by learning from one another. As gallery staff, we also learned from each other—for gallery staff also approach programmes from different points of view that deserve respect—and from all the participants we brought to bear on the arch of the project's development and making.

This brings me to a number of questions that I have been thinking about over the last few years that I hope we might keep in the back of our minds over the course of the day:

How can we, as people who work inside galleries or museums provide alternative ways of thinking about the social function of art galleries by way of example rather than critique?

How do we develop new working methodologies that do not reproduce the power structures found in mainstream culture or perpetuate the economic and/or geographic hierarchies or notions of authorship so entrenched in the western art system but instead work along-side and within the social realities of the local context to which the gallery is intrinsically connected by learning from *them*?

That is, how can our institutional practices privilege process over a final product so that our actions enact alternative forms of civic engagement or develop new social roles for the gallery? Or, conversely, how can engagement steer our programming away from representational, one-off projects toward the creation of long-term practices that facilitate new social relations between different individuals and groups that, in turn, transform the processes, protocols, and entrenched institutional practices of galleries to meet *those* demands?

And, what does it mean to make *this* visible, not as an object, or through an exhibition thematic, but rather as an ever-evolving transformative concept?

In putting together this workshop for OAAG, I looked to a group of leading practitioners in what I am calling “in-reach.” These folks are taking serious what it means to reverse the flow of information in galleries from *out to in*. These are individuals who are concerned with time, or rather, in taking the time to enact change with their work in the long-term. Many of our projects here at AGYU are long-term projects, such as *The Awakening/Giigozhkozimin*, a three-year collaboration between the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation and Parkour Athletes orchestrated by Panamanian artist Humberto Velez or we commit ourselves to ongoing exhibition programmes such as the Centre for Incidental Activisms (CIA) which has taken place in 2011, 2014, and upcoming in winter of 2016, a performance project that uses the gallery in very different ways other than as a display frame. Taking on three to five to ten-year projects (such as our spoken word mentorship programme) means letting go of what traditionally has been a central goal of the contemporary art gallery: to produce exhibitions on a seasonal rotation with a three-week installation period followed by a static three-month exhibition where a public comes and views art-on-display. Incorporating new methodologies into the institution itself in order to change it from *within* takes time and trust. It requires the gallery to commit to sustained relationships that create different kinds of partnerships with artists and communities that are allowed to deepen and become far more complex than more traditional approaches to exhibition making might allow. It also means rethinking how the gallery views its own trajectory from a project-by-project timeline, to a seamless, ever-evolving entity where change is not always visible in spatial or representational terms. Stephanie Nadeau’s collaboration with nine women artists from H’art of Ottawa—a studio that supports the creative practice of artists with developmental disabilities – was a ten-month engagement with the Firestone Collection of Canadian Art (FCCA). As an exhibition that actively sought to generate new perspectives on historical works in the collection, *Open Spaces* was also about creating space for new interpretation, not just for the participants but the future audiences of the Ottawa Art Gallery. Here is an example of a program that served institutional transformation. Gallery staff learned from this collective and Stephanie’s intervention marks a reverse model of pedagogy: a so-called “education program” intended for the gallery and not program participants in the traditional top-down sense of education programming. *Open Spaces* productively critiqued the institution by raising questions about whose stories are told in our public galleries and museums by actually producing new narratives. The approaches these women took could also become a model for the gallery staff. At the end of today’s workshop Stephanie will facilitate an interactive session that focuses on strategies for recognizing and disrupting institutional power dynamics and embracing collaborative strategies for exhibition making from a public engagement perspective. Let’s use this opportunity to put some ideas for your own programming on the table and let’s really put into practice collaborative strategies by working through programming ideas together that benefits from the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in this room today.

Today, I would like to take a closer look at what the potential forces of change that can transform the gallery or museum institution from *within* might be. Let’s take a closer look at some concrete examples so that we might better understand how the art institution prepares and equips itself to work with artists and communities in the realization of challenging projects and programs that require significant gallery transformation. This transformation means that the gallery/museum does not “absorb” new practices—which might be akin to “adaptation” or “representation”—but performatively undertakes them, that the gallery/museum does not neutralize politics but enacts them along side the artists, curators, and communities the institution works with, and that the

gallery/museum does not pay lip service to “priorities” of arts councils but instead actively leads the charge toward new cultural paradigms. Ellen Anderson reminds us changing regimes of visibility also changes the aesthetics of exhibition design. The role that technology might play in the constitution of new exhibition aesthetics is also key to understanding how we might broaden and enliven the experience at galleries. The principles of *Universal Access in Exhibition and Design* that Ellen speaks about today is not only marking significant change in exhibition design for visually impaired and blind people, children, mothers with infants, persons with disabilities, and elderly populations but these audiences change the experience *everyone* has of exhibitions by bringing together a new sociality between the audiences of art. With over 24 years of experience in a range of programming at the Creative Spirit Art Centre, Ellen has integrated exhibition installation and design with accessible programmes where we need not make distinctions between these two things and consider them intrinsically inter-connected.

It is my opinion that underlining all of the presentations today is a commitment to the creative practice of change. Furthermore, many of the projects that will be spoken about today are not so much thematic but *operative*. They are proposals for questioning the nature and function of the gallery and thus enact change through the ways in which the programmes not only are conceived but also how they function in the long-term trajectory of the gallery itself. Rebecca Gimmi, Christopher Régimbal, and Erin Peck, who worked on all aspects of the multi-venued exhibition *The Flesh of the World*, which was programmed in conjunction with the Pan/Parapan American Games in Toronto this past summer, provides a case in point. From instituting new forms of didactic practices, such as audio description and braille for the title plates and exhibition texts, to the creation of performances and ancillary programming that creatively engaged viewers in the exhibitions concepts, this group of gallery professionals talk about what has to happen behind the scenes to change time-lines and budget-lines to ensure a commitment to new audiences for the University of Toronto’s art galleries. They will also, importantly for us today, discuss what worked and what didn’t. New practices must be evaluated and creatively incorporated in the processes and protocols of the gallery and we must learn also from the audiences we are engaging through new approaches to exhibition design and installation.

To this end, I also want to wonder today about what might constitute a set of best practices by way of failing, taking risks, and understanding what works and doesn’t through engagement with processes not procedures. Or, whether we can develop new procedures based on the processes we undertake through our programming, programming that invites a new kinds of procedures—or protocols—be they social or cultural—into the gallery so that those experiences and those new practices inflect our work. We begin today with Christina Kerr, who will talk about the *Art of Inclusion*, which is a “best practices” guide but one that encourages flexibility and partnerships in order to respond to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) with meaningful programming that goes beyond simply ensuring that a gallery space is “accessible.” It is designed to ensure the guidelines of the AODA are not just “adapted” but that our programs are “re-purposed.” These guidelines are also more than simply best practices to be applied, they are intended to underscore sustainability. Change sometimes takes time and any *art of inclusion* is an ongoing process.

Let’s also consider this workshop as a practice form. If we are talking about different modes of engagement in more than conventional ways by eroding boundaries and barriers that constitute

knowledge structures in museums and by making work more accessible, by being inclusionary without being, necessarily, about consensus, then let's keep this workshop open as a dialogue and as a form of conversation that can perform as a method for co-learning and skill-sharing and not deny the radicality of our propositions today.

For me, change in exhibitions is not just one show closing and another one opening. We are tasked with changing the institution itself. How we can get there is the tall order of the day.