Open Hearing:
Dreaming in Dark Times

An Event Hosted by EMILIA-AMALIA
Toronto, March 2, 2025

Edited and Transcribed by Jennifer Harwart

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction

The following transcript documents “Open Hearing: Dreaming in Dark Times,” an event organized by EMILIA-AMALIA in Toronto, on March 2nd, 2025.

Based on the structure of a town hall and inspired by the Art Workers Coalition’s “Open Hearing” held in New York in 1969, the event brought together more than 200 artists and arts workers from the greater Toronto art community. The crowd gathered in Cafeteria, a former Portuguese sports club turned event space on Dupont Street, on a cold and wintery afternoon to speak, listen, eat, drink and be together at what is widely felt to be a very difficult time in the art world and beyond.

The event gathered a community that is fragmented and disheartened by the state of politics, both in general and in the art world, and in particular, by the way these two intersect in Toronto at present. Organizing against the genocide in Gaza, accompanied by recent waves of anti-Palestinian racism, have had a chilling effect in culture, including unjust firings, artistic and political censorship, and politically-motivated funding cuts. In the last months, many artist-led groups have made important gains against these issues. But these efforts have also made starkly evident the pre-existing and longstanding problems at the heart of our cultural structures. In recent years, these structures have become increasingly precarious and revealed themselves to also be fundamentally unjust and unbalanced. “Open Hearing” offered a time and place for artists and art workers to dream about something better, to discuss the future of our arts sector and what our vision of a viable, just, livable art world looks like.

Nearly 40 people spoke at the event and more than 200 community members were in attendance. The simple town hall format proved to be an effective way to share experiences, air grievances and propose new ways forward. With permission from the speakers, EMILIA-AMALIA is now making this transcript available to the public, to the community and to the institutions, funding bodies and stakeholders who are most directly addressed by the statements. We hope you will read this record attentively and share it widely.

EMILIA-AMALIA would like to thank all the speakers who generously participated in the event. Thanks also to Cafeteria for hosting and an extra, extra special thanks to artist Kiera Boult, who was our valiant and indomitable host. Some of the statements presented here in print have been edited for clarity by their authors.

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Opening Remarks

Zinnia Naqvi (EA Member):

Thank you all so much for coming. My name is Zinnia Naqvi. I am one of the members of EMILIA-AMALIA. I'll just—should I introduce everybody real quick?

We have Annie MacDonell. Joy Xiang. Cecilia Berkovic, and Gabby Moser. We also have a few other members who are not in town at the moment. We're EMILIA-AMALIA. We are an intergenerational feminist collective of artists, writers, graphic designers, curators, historians—all kinds of people. Been a collective since 2016 and have partnered with various institutions in Toronto since then, doing reading groups, writing groups, screenings—all kinds of things. But for the past few years, we've been operating without any funding or any institutional affiliations, and are really happy to be hosting this amazing event with you all.

Thank you for coming and participating. And thank you to Cafeteria for having us.

Joy Xiang (EA Member):

Hey, thanks for being out here with us—this is an amazing turnout. Good energy in the room.

So we begin by humbly being in relation together here and to place. If you think of how you and each of us got to where we are on these grounds in this moment. We're on the land—that's the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Chippewa, and continual home to Indigenous peoples from Turtle Island.

We know Canada is part of ongoing global settler-colonial projects, and stay continually vigilant in acting against racist engines of covert and overt erasure for the liberation of Indigenous peoples here to across *Abya Yala*, to Palestine, from the river to the sea, from rivers to rivers, and seas to seas.

Annie MacDonell (EA Member):

Welcome to Open Hearing. This is an event that we've been planning for a while. It is loosely based or in some ways it's tightly based on something that happened in New York, that was put on by a group called the Art Workers Coalition, who in 1968 [sic - 1969][1] being faced with a wide range of problems both on a social level and within the art community, gathered together on—in a structure sort of like this.

The idea was that anybody could sign up to speak, that you had a set amount of time to speak, and that's all—whatever issues were on your mind were game.

So we know there's a lot of differences between then and now and certainly between New York and Toronto. But at the same time, we thought there was enough of an overlap that *that* structure could also serve our community well.

In this time when it seems like there's so many problems happening all at once—that they're piling up so fast, it's hard to get your heads—get our heads—around them individually or collectively. We thought it was a good time to gather together.

So we're gonna keep the format pretty strictly in line with what the original *Open Hearing* format was. Which is to say that we did an open call. Anybody who was interested could sign up until all the spots were full. Everybody's gonna have four minutes to speak. You can take less than that, but if you take more than that, we have a couple of bell options that we'll go through in a moment.

[laughter]

That's the basic structure.

Cecilia Berkovic (EA Member):

Organizing against the genocide in Gaza and recent waves of anti-Palestinian racism have had a chilling effect in the cultural world, including unjust firings, artistic and political censorship and politically motivated funding cuts. Artists and arts workers have made gains against these inequalities, charting new paths forward, and generating new models for solidarity. But these efforts have also laid bare many preexisting and longstanding problems at the heart of our cultural structures.

With Open Hearing, we hope to bring together a wide range of artists and arts workers to share these conversations openly, and in community, in order to imagine a new way forward. Today, we will focus on the future of the art sector—on what can be built together, on what remains possible—and on what our vision of a viable, just, livable art world looks like. The aim is to work together to dream and demand something better.

We have copied the format, as Annie mentioned, of the historical event, which means it was an open call. Anyone could sign up. We have about 35 speakers today scheduled. There are printed schedules available around the room. And as Annie mentioned, everybody has four minutes to speak. Kiera Boult has generously agreed to host the event and keep us running smoothly.

[applause]

Kiera is an interdisciplinary artist and performer from Hamilton. Her practice uses camp and comedy to skeptically address issues that surround the role and/or identity of the artist and the institution. She's performed at 7A*11D Arts Festival and Supercrawl [Hamilton Arts Festival]. Her work has been shown at the AGO, the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Artcite Inc. in Windsor. And she is currently Vtape's manager of Outreach and Public Programming.

Thanks, Kiera.

Annie MacDonell:

We have about 35 speakers. Just a note: if you are speaking, Kiera is gonna call your name, and then we ask that you just say a quick word about who you are and what you do if it's important contextual information. And then we're scheduled to run until seven. We're gonna have a dinner break at five with some hot food coming in. And if you have kids, there's a kid zone at the back for hanging out.

[laughter]

See it right over there. Hello! And the bathroom is over here at the back as well. And there's also washrooms upstairs as well.

Gabrielle Moser (EA Member):

To get upstairs, you go out those doors and up the flight of stairs where there's more bathrooms.

Okay, the last thing we're doing is: we came up with some community agreement guidelines. I'm gonna read out a couple, and then hand the mic off to others.

This is just a way to—since the impetus for this event is partly censorship and self-censorship and all kinds of alarming crises in the arts world, we want people to feel like they can say what needs to be said here safely.

So we're gonna ask that folks who stay in the room agree to the following guidelines:

- By participating in the session, we agree not to participate in speech or conduct that is racist, colonialist, imperialist, or that discriminates on the ground of religion, language, or national and ethnic origin.
- This session is not a place to debate the history of Palestine, legal rulings, or the legitimacy of Palestinians struggle for freedom.
- We encourage you to get up and move around as you need to, to use the washroom, get snacks, check on kids, but please do not speak while others are presenting.

Zinnia Naqvi:

In order to hear from as many people as possible in this town hall format, the priority today is listening. There won't be time for questions after the speakers, but informal conversations are encouraged.

Joy Xiang:

So in all conversations, please assume good intent and be aware of your impact. Please be willing to engage with discomfort, respect, differences, and seek to learn from them.

We ask that *what is said here stays here; what is learned here leaves here.*

Annie MacDonell:

Just as a note, the audio is being recorded for posterity and with the permission of the speakers. If anybody who speaks ends up not wanting to be part of that record, that is totally optional. And we'll check in with you after the fact.

Also, Gloria Wong is taking pictures. We've checked in on that too. If you don't want your picture taken, you can let us know. But please, we ask that everybody here refrains from making personal videos or audio recordings for the purposes of sharing online. We want people to feel free to express themselves without repercussions or censorship during the event.

Also, we have community support workers, Fraser and Chelsea—who I think most people know. Can you guys put your hands up? Fraser's there. Where's Chelsea? Chelsea's over there.

[laughter]

So Fraser and Chelsea are community support volunteers. If you feel uncomfortable or need support or have concerns about the event or the atmosphere, you can touch base with them anytime. And we will all also be here, throughout. So feel free to come to us at any point as well. And I think that's it? That's it.

Okay. Over to Kiera.

Kiera Boult (host / moderator):

What a *delight* it is to be here. I was hired to *shush*, and I'm not—let's not make any mistakes.

So you have four minutes. I have generously brought a time keeper. If you prefer for someone else to keep the time or keep your own time, that is okay, but I will be keeping time. And I will give you a one minute warning and then I will give you a four minute bang of the gavel.

If you go over—I will ring a cowbell and I will also allow for the audience to boo. I'm kidding, we won't boo here.

And I think that's all I have to tell you. So shall we begin with the show?

[applause]

You can do better than that.

[more applause]

Come on! Thank you. Thank you.

Presenter Segments

Kiera Boult:

Laura Grier?

Also, I'm going to say names horribly wrong, and it's not a part of the act. I'm just a bad reader.

[applause]

Laura Grier (Artist):

Okay, I'm Laura. I didn't know I'd be first, but I am a Sahtú Dene artist, reluctant academic, someone who likes school but doesn't like school, I guess, if that makes sense.

Oh God, I don't know. There was a lot of things I wanted to say, which was mostly that I'm really sick and tired of shit. And I just wanna become a radicalist. But I also have this thing that's funny. I actually had a dream about this last night where when I got up here, I was flooded by questions, by white-privileged people who wanted me to tell them what to do. And then we ran outta time before I could even speak. So that kind of summarizes a lot of like what I'm thinking about and experiencing.

But Audra Simpson talks about privilege and the self-reflexive settler,[2] and there's a roundabout ritual that they like doing where it doesn't really amount to much. There's like no political project, there's no actual dismantling of structures of domination and of oppression. But she does give us answers. But for that, like, I'm not gonna sit here and tell you that answer. You read Audra Simpson yourself. You'll find those answers there.

But there's a lot of things I think about, which is me being in school for 10 years and how I think about creative institutions. I think about the wellness of our students and the future artists, the possibilities of nonviolent extremism, and the possibility of like—the *impossibility* of decolonizing institutions.

But I also think about something that Leanne said once—Leanne [Betasamosake] Simpson. And when she was asked, "How does she know when we're well or when people are well"?

And her answer was that: "We know when we're well, when we are well and safe enough to help each other."[3]

And for me, I'm not well. I physically react a lot when I have to go into any university meetings now. And like, my window of tolerance has gotten small, my voice has gotten even smaller, but I

show up. I show up to these awful committees or like whatever faculty meetings I have to, getting these like actual physical reactions to university now. But I always have to show up to these things alone, still.

So my biggest question is that like, where are my so-called allies in these spaces? By no ways do I think that institutional structures are ways forward, but that is currently like my reality, right? It's like art and university. That's my reality.

And my biggest vision is to have students be well and safe. And that's a big ask, right?

So I guess I wanna—there's lots of different things, right? Like a friend told me about how the university is this intense colonial machine and that I—like not to get overrun by it. And that sometimes I need to put my wrench down and maybe trust that someone will pick up that wrench.

But that's, again, I'm only alone. So therefore you can't dismantle this colonial machine alone. So why do I always find myself alone? I don't really know.

But, I'm going to kind of end with a quote by Leanne Simpson, which is that:

> For my *kobade* [which is really like your connections] to survive and flourish for the next hundred years, we need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, profound caring and create constellations of coresistance, working together toward a radical alternative present, and based on deep reciprocity and the gorgeous generative refusal of colonial recognition.[4]

I had lots of things to say, but I wanted to like end with something more hopeful than me being really angry, which I'm angry all the time.

That's about it.

Kiera Boult:

Well done.

[applause]

It is not, it is not easy to go up first in a town hall such as this. So give another round of applause.

[applause]

I also wanna say that you outlined something really important, which is when you are in an institution, you are far more isolated than a lot of cultural workers.

I'm in an artist-run centre and it's difficult, but I don't share space or have to really worry. Like, I know everybody that is around me. We share the same ideas and views, and there isn't that fear, and I don't feel alone. So, I hear you, and I'm so glad you got to speak. And you aren't alone. We're here. And I'm so sorry that I don't work in the institution with you. I'd love the benefits —I'm kidding.

[laughter]

I mean, I'm not.

[laughter]

I have benefits, but I'd love better, you know?

Anyways, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make a joke about the institution being good for just benefits.

Kiera Boult:

So up next we have Marie Sotto. Marie, where are you?

Marie Sotto (Artist & Art Worker):

Hi everybody. My name is Marie Sotto.

I have been an arts and culture worker for over a decade now. I grew up in Scarborough. I do a lot of community arts work, in addition to being an artist, illustrator, micro-retired comedian. And I've done a lot of other—also front work, front-facing frontline work in terms of housing advocacy and community defence in different aspects, and also Palestine solidarity initiatives.

I wanted to talk today about building a robust social infrastructure—a web of support. And this is drawing from my praxis, inspired by *Sailor Moon*—truth, justice, love, and friendship. It's very anti-fascist. [laughs]

So, what I have seen, based on my experience, is a lot of—in terms of grassroots, youth-led initiatives—there's a lot of gaps with folks understanding on a base level, like what community is and how that's defined to each and every person. And I think there's opportunity to develop a strategy around understanding that.

And my definition is inspired by my culture, as a Filipino *bayanihan*. The word *bayanihan*, which is, it's about—the definition is coming together as a community, as a town, and understanding your interdependence and interconnectedness.

I see how this has been actualized on the ground with mutual aids, such as community pantries, supporting your neighbour—things like that. I think what happens is—I think community often gets imagined as something that's very formalized and very structured—whereas what it comes down to is just a person-to-person relationship within these fractals. And I think, if we were to better understand each other, like, understand materially what the needs are of the folks within our communities, then I think we can develop something out of that.

And, I think I wanted to run a workshop with a Filipino artist who was censored by the AGO. We wanted to—what I'm thinking, what I've seen, is that when we make these calls to boycott, when we ask people to divest their—and/or withdraw their labour, often what is the challenge is [to] create having a safety net or a network for folks.

So, how are we speaking to someone that's the single mother in Scarborough? How are we asking someone to join their union in Starbucks and to withdraw their labour? I think the better we understand that, the better we can support. And I think it doesn't have to take a lot of imagining—like these systems exist globally.

From my research, I've recently listened to a talk by Dr. Nisrin Elamin, who is studying Sudan's Counter-Revolutionary War.[5] And she spoke about these neighbourhood resistance communities, and they work in tandem with labour and student unions. They support folks within their communities. There's pop-up clinics. They oversee COVID clinics and—you can build it. I think we've done this when during the lockdown. I think it's something to actually operationalize. If you connect with someone today—can you think of a way if you're gonna ask them to unionize—can you ask them to—can you be like:

"I can offer, I can help, like can help you take your groceries to your car,"

or:

"I can—" [laughs]

or like:

"I can help you if, if you're asking your artist to boycott, I can, I can name drop you. I might not be able to support you monetarily or I can help you write a grant."

Things like that.

Okay. That's it.

Kiera Boult:

Thank you so much.

I threatened to give a one-minute warning, and then I felt guilty cause I am a people pleaser. So, I'm—when I give you a one minute warning, I am just gonna—I'm gonna walk and I'm gonna do a little wave like this, and that'll be your one minute warning. If you don't notice me, I'm offended.

[laughter]

It is—thank you so much, everybody, for taking the stage because taking the stage—(oh sorry,) there was a child dancing, and I felt like I should dance back.

[laughter]

Taking the stage is not easy. And, congratulations, everybody, for getting up here and really speaking it. And four minutes, no less, even at an open mic comedy night, you get five.

Kiera Boult (host / moderator):

[redacted]

[Statement has been removed at the speaker's request.]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kiera Boult:

Now our next speaker—honour and a privilege—I promise I will not shush *you*. You rip it, you go as long as you want, my king.

Karl Beveridge! Come on! Yes!

[applause]

Where's the carpet?

Karl Beveridge (Artist):

Thank you. I'm a visual artist, photographer. I've been involved in, and a member of CARFAC. Worked around A Space for many years and generally try to make trouble.

The first thing I wanna say: I think it's kind of interesting that the reference for this talk is the Art Workers Coalition in the U.S.. We're always deferring to the U.S.—and I think there's an interesting history in Canada that parallels that history in the U.S. And, I'm thinking in 1968, CARFAC was founded. The Art Workers Coalition was 1969.

CARFAC, interestingly, different than what the Art Workers Coalition did, which the kind of two main points that came out of the Art Workers Coalition was one, the structure and policies of art institutions, and secondly, diversity—and in New York at the time, was mainly around gender and the Black and Puerto Rican communities.

CARFAC, on the other hand, in Canada, went for the economics, and basically that artists get paid, and that, I think, had much longer-term impact. It's still—CARFAC still exists today.

The unfortunate thing is we don't pay enough attention to it. We don't get involved with it. CARFAC has managed to achieve many things and is working on many things, but it needs much more strength if we're to deal with things like the AGO and their policies and those sorts of things, we need a strong organization.

Which brings me to probably the immediate point that would need to happen is to get status of the artist provincially. That would allow us to deal with institutions all across the board.

The federal status of the artist only affects federal institutions.[6] So, we're able to negotiate with the National Gallery and get a collective agreement, which is unique, I think, pretty well in the world. And, I mean, the thing about CARFAC is, it was unique globally too, in establishing fees and these sorts of things. But we do need status provincially in order to deal with all the other institutions that are under provincial control.

So, I'm gonna stop there, cause that's the main point I wanna make is that: we really need to get together and organize. And I really stress that we need to build our union, which is CARFAC and make it strong and able to deal with a lot of issues that may come up today.

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

I want you all to know that this is how gracious—you still have two minutes. Professional. That's how it's done.

Thank you for that.

Kiera Boult:

Alright, up next we have Morgan McKinnon [McGinn].

Morgan McGinn (Lawyer):

Hi. I'm so happy to be here with all of you. The energy is really amazing. It's special to be part of it.

I'm coming to you, not as an artist, but from the world of community organizing, coming mostly from climate justice, but also working with migrant justice and prison abolition. Right now, I'm working as a labour lawyer for a large union representing public-sector workers like education assistants, hospital workers, janitors, and snowplow drivers.

For the Open Hearing, I'd like to offer a bit of an outline of formal options for worker organization—so we fit well together—and to trace the perimeters of those formations and the boundaries where they're open to being pushed.

As long as there have been workers, there's been collective action. It's all power play. The employer-employee relationship is legally defined by bosses having control over their workers. It's directly inherited from the days of master-servant relationship. Unionization, then, is an effort to upset the control that bosses have over workers.

Unionization is the product of workers coming together, organizing strikes, and other workplace disruptions to really leverage collective power. It's about being stronger together. In our current legal scheme, it comes out of a series of tripartite compromises between worker orgs, bosses, and the state.

And the deal goes like this: your boss is obligated to recognize your rights and make a deal with you as a unit. So, you have one contract, you negotiate as a group, you make decisions together. But, in exchange, you give things up. You can only strike at certain times and in certain ways. It can't be a political protest. It can only be about your own workplace, not about what's happening elsewhere. And the opportunity to strike only comes up every couple years, when your contract is up.

But what workers win is the power from having the threat of a strike. And bosses get to minimize business disruptions by letting workers strike during pre-agreed periods. So, that's what a union is like. Another convention is an association. So, people from a workplace come together and have individual contracts, but choose to negotiate together and accept the same conditions. So, I think this is CARFAC. The problem is that it's voluntary, and it doesn't have teeth. Otherwise, there's advocacy groups and social movements.

The challenge in accessing union protections is that, as artists, you don't have a traditional workplace. You don't come to work every day for certain hours, or do specific tasks. Like, who even is your boss?

The law would say that you're not workers, but you're independent contractors. Other workers face the same exclusion: gig workers, delivery people, Uber drivers, incarcerated, prison workers and sex workers—they're all denied labour protections.

Year by year, the contours are tightened, both politically and presidentially. Then, when we take on these pushes for gig workers, Uber drivers and sex workers, we rely on case law from construction workers. There's a precedent that, because construction workers hop from site to site, hour or by day, courts have allowed the idea that construction workers are dependent on the industry rather than a single employer.

This is the same precedent that was expanded to apply for actors and film workers—it's the idea of industry dependence. I think there's potentially an analogous case to be made for visual artists and arts workers. This could mean a formal union with conditional right to strike mandatory pay rates, and obligatory participation. What I mean to say is that: precarity is constructed. The scheme attempts to exclude artists as workers and to disconnect artists from other workers.

[gavel bangs]

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Sorry if that felt a little harsh. I enjoyed it. I hope it was good for you.

Kiera Boult:

All right. Up next, we have a legend in my mind. Amy Wong. Where are you, Amy?

Amy Wong (Artist):

Hi everyone. Thank you for being here. I didn't even realize there was gonna be an audience. I came to learn and I'm learning so much from all the speakers. I'm an artist, professor, parent. I'm a single mom. I live in Scarborough.

Grace Lee Boggs said that:
"The only way to survive is by taking care of one another and to get out of the lens of self-interest and to centre relationship and community."[7]

She advocated for the need to redefine representative democracy with a reminder that you should never expect that people in power will do things to help us progress.

This forum is meant to address the pre-existing and longstanding problems at the heart of our cultural structures. We've known about these problems for a long time and have been discussing, protesting, infiltrating systems for a while now.

Recent events are horrifying, to say the least, but in some ways not surprising. And despite ongoing activism, pushback, and on the part of institutions—diversity and decolonial statements— ultimately, I think artistic and academic freedoms are values that come from within us and not prescribed to allow us. And therefore, creative practice is inherently a form of resistance—not things that are granted by institutions or policies.

We are facing a time where it's like lancing a boil. We are seeing the grossest shit so that we can clear the infection. I think we all agree that what Toronto, the art world, or you know, what the world needs right now is protecting basic human rights, safety, and security, holding governments and institutions to account.

And especially as QT BIPOC arts workers refusing to be window dressing or merely window dressing, I think, do not give institutions your whole self. Continue the invisible and small acts of daily change within one's power and always be suspicious. Call to task the differences between representation, justice, and access.

Maya Mackrandilal reminds us that diversity statements and hiring diversity candidates is not the solution to the problem, but only a step in the general direction where the problem is occurring.[8]

Inserting women and people of colour into capitalist, white supremacists, cis-hetero, patriarchal spaces, does not magically dismantle the very fabric of an institution's culture. Amy Fung

reminds us that those who are happy to benevolently oversee and control diversity in all its frivolous forms but who immediately enforce the power of their laws the moment difference seeks actual power.[9]

I'm also gonna quote Leanne Simpson's quote, that:
"We need to create and continue constellations of co-resistance that are firm, life and world-building at a time of acute racial violence and inequality."[10]

We need to protect and nurture the voices of the arts community who are the most vulnerable in some ways, and especially the voices of young creative people who come after us. The art world romanticizes this scrappiness and perpetuates an industry of precarity, but we must prioritize sustainability.

I'll just end with Grace [Lee Boggs] again that: "Another world is possible and that it is happening."[11]

I'll end there. Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Everybody that is in this area—I'm gonna hold some space for you to come in. Come in, get closer.

Go over there.

[laughter]

We have things called *fire codes*. I think—I imagine this is a concern. This is a fire-exit issue.

Alright, how is everybody feeling? How's everybody doing? How well has everybody done so far? All right?

I wanna remind everybody that you have free will. That means you can get up and pee when you need to. Do not feel guilty if somebody is in the middle of pouring their heart out, you may pee.

[laughter]

I also want to point out that there are two bottles of red wine over there—that bottle.

Unnamed Audience Member:

[heard in the background] And two bottles of white!

Kiera Boult (host / moderator):

Oh, and what?

Unnamed Audience Member:

[heard in the background] And two bottles of white in the cooler.

Kiera Boult (host / moderator):

Oh and there's two bottles of cold white in the cooler. I know it's a Sunday, but I'm really waiting for somebody to crack it open so I can have a glass.

With that, I'm going to invite our next brilliant speaker.

Oh, another thing I wanna say: when talking into a mic, I know. Intimidating when you hold it here? No revolution.

[laughter and applause]

It's gotta be right here. Right here. All right?

I know, I know.

Kiera Boult:

Alright, up next is our brilliant friend Meagan Christou. Where are you?

Meagan Christou (Art Preparator & Artist):

Taller than me.

Kiera Boult:

It's the shoes and the hair.

Meagan Christou:

Well, that's true.

Kiera Boult:

And, you know.

Meagan Christou:

So I'm Meagan Christou.

I used to be an installer at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I used to be a collection specialist at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I am an unemployed member of society, part of the 8% of unemployed people in Toronto. And I'm a current board member for OPSEU/SEFPO [Ontario Public Service Employees Union], which is real awkward for them [the AGO].

[laughter]

I began my career at the Art Gallery of Ontario at age 25–26. I worked in agriculture out in Peterborough, but I went to art school in Toronto. Annie MacDonell was my teacher. And, I needed to be able to make art and also work with my hands. So I went into installing.

But last year I kept asking myself, how at 33 [years old], am I still the youngest art installer at the Art Gallery of Ontario?

Well, you know, we're jacks of all trades. We do everything. We do painting, design, carpentry, art-handling, registration, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And once upon a time, you could have had a full-time job. You could have bought a house, you could have raised a family. But that's not true. And I'm sure many of you know that. Most of us work occasional part-time contracts. And that's how they get rid of you.

They say: “You haven’t shown up for a shift!” Well, it’s because they haven’t scheduled you. And now you’re terminated because of a clause in the contract which allows them to. You’re gone. You never had sick days, you never had parental leave, you never had anything, and you’ve just put 10 years of your life into an institution that has picked you up and dropped you like a piece of trash.

I worked with people in their seventies—art installers, who had worked there since the 80s, who hadn’t had a salary increase in decades. So, in late April of last year [2024], we went on strike. We wanted to get protection for 60% of unionized workers who were part-time and precarious.

We picketed six days a week in sleet or shine. We had no loss of momentum. We were joined by many, and I felt closer on that picket line to the people who wiped the dirt off the floor in that museum than I had to anyone else in that building.

But in those days, our picket lines were crossed daily by management. And that includes curators. We hate our job, but we love the work. And that’s why we fought. I am one of the over a dozen art installers that has been terminated through attrition since the strike.

People within the arts love to talk about progressive ideas, but vague policies. Unless these discussions and practices are tied to a coherent oppositional politics, an organized politics that actually poses a collective challenge, and not just to the make-up of the board of directors, but focuses on the livelihoods of people that make this industry possible, the ones who are struggling to get by. The ones who can’t hope for a grant which protects them from the rest of society.

Without this, any oppositional culture remains tentative, isolated, and easily ignored. But even worse, it is easily co-opted and recuperated into the very institutions it claims to oppose. Art doesn’t exist outside of politics. In both its public and private forms, it comes into the gallery dripping from head to toe in the blood and the sweat, carried by hands who can’t pay rent, and placed on the floors maintained by the most thankless labour.

Art privileges the object in a way which is not unique to itself, but is isomorphic with our mode of economic production. Nested within the art industry is a concentrated form of global exploitation—public and private. And like other commodities which circulate around us—yeah, you might disagree with me, but [art is] a commodity—they stand reality on its head and they give life to things by draining it from people like vampires.

It is time for everyone to give a hard look at who their audience is. Is it for donors and collectors? Is it the executive whose wealth is the direct result of expropriation at home and abroad? Is it the people who, every day, make decisions from up high, framing every decision

solely in terms of “economics” and “pragmatics”? That audience may have money, but that audience is part and parcel of the problems we discuss today.

If you look at the political reality around us, it is clear that most of these things we hold dear are negative images of the actually existing governmental and economic structures. The company that decimates ecology for extraction is not hurt by an image of itself. They may even buy it. There is crisis within crisis, and none of these larger political questions, or answers, will ever find their ground if it isn’t rooted in an organized politics.

The artwork is obviously never enough.

What I’m saying here is not to make your art more explicitly political, but to join us in the streets to continue the fight even after a strike is done and we’ve been thrown out.

Art won’t change the world on its own, but art is indispensable and inseparable from politics, which is might.

Kiera Boult:

That was effing perfect. Well done. Well done.

And by the way, shout out to the installers. I am useless and can’t see straight. And I feel like they definitely do not like—I feel like as cultural workers, we certainly don’t like hold enough space, and thank you all enough for literally doing the lifting. And also the like, the secret curating. Okay, there are many. I do not—I… anyways—

Installers are our compasses a lot of times when it comes to where art should go and what should happen with it—and we thank you.

I’m also just curious, how many—and it’s okay if you don’t wanna put your hand up—but how many like AGO people are here? Like, don’t boo them. Like, no. I mean, we wanna know. Like, we wanna hold space for like—thank you. I—it is not easy being in a—so what’s it like to be in the Titanic?

I’m sure there’s other cultural institutions, but the AGO just seems to be the one that’s on fire the most. Anyways. Thank you for everybody. Thank you for the AGO people. Thank you for the AGO people that are like, that still have to stay.

We love you and I hope that, I hope your stress leave is long and I—anyways, moving on.

Kiera Boult:

Stunning. Next person. [laughs]

And just like that. We can move on. Oh gosh, I'm gonna, forgive me for what I'm about to say this name cause it's—I'm like low key dyslexic, so don't be too mad.

Okay. Dipka [Deepikah]. That was easy.

Oh, how do I say it right?

Deepikah RB (Artist):

I'll say it right.

Kiera Boult:

Okay.

Deepikah (Artist):

Thank you. Thank you so much. Hi, I'm Deepikah. My son can tell you how to pronounce my name. He's right here.

I'm an interdisciplinary artist, mother to Viraj, and a TA at OCAD University. And I'm fairly new to Toronto. I moved here in 2021 from New Delhi because I couldn't breathe in my home city. And, here in the city with clean air and great infrastructure for the arts, I often wonder: who deserves to breathe fresh air?

That's also the central theme of my art practice. And, moving here, didn't actually like take me away from extraction or harm. Instead, I began to see pollution as—isn't just the air we breathe—it's embedded in the system we sustain.

The systems, like deindustrialization here that I see often, that makes cities back home, you know, the systems like deindustrialization that makes cities like Toronto livable depend on displacing crisis elsewhere. And I often try to think about this 'elsewhere' a lot. And whether it's through ecological destruction, exploitative labour, or just placing all of the manufacturing somewhere else, this dislocation is just—is not just environmental, it's cultural too.

As an artist, I work with materials like algae, kombucha, found objects, things that grow, decay and refuse to be fixed in place. My installations aren't meant to last forever. They aren't meant to be owned. They often grow mold if they're boxed. They fall apart and they shift. They demand care, and attention in the moment. In doing all of this, I challenge the colonial logic of the art as

property—as something to be acquired, controlled and given value—only when it exists indefinitely.

But in an art world still built on ownership, this kind of work struggles to find place. The grants aren't coming. [laughs] They want for permanence, not process.

And so, as artists who work outside these structures, who refuse to make work that can be bought, resold, and turned into capital, find themselves fighting for space, resources and legitimacy. The pressure to make sustainable art while surviving within an unsustainable system is a contradiction we can't ignore. The same institution that champions sustainability still extract labour from artists, still police political speech, still prioritize corporate partnerships over community care. The question isn't how we sustain these structures. It is whether we should sustain them at all.

I build speculative worlds in my work. And I believe we need to do the same for the arts. What if we embrace work that refuses to be owned, work that falls apart, that transforms, decomposes and regenerates? Maybe we need to let go of what no longer serves us to break open, to refuse extraction, to imagine an arts ecosystem that feels more like community and less like a market.

That's it. Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Alright folks, this is a very exciting time.

You now have 10 minutes to go to the bathroom. Don't forget, there are washrooms upstairs as well as in there. There is food on the counter. Drink some wine—or not. There's bubbly, I think. Enjoy. You've 10 minutes. I'll be back to remind you that it's time to start.

Kiera Boult:

All right, everybody, it's time to get back to your seat. I generously gave you a two minute warning. Everybody. It's time to get back to your seat. We have a long list of people that we have to hear from. Some of these people are your lovers, your friends, your coworkers.

And I'm just gonna say again—a warning to the bottleneck over there. Come on in. Come on in. Do not block the exits. There's a whole lot of talent in this room, and it would be awful if we all couldn't get out. In case of emergency.

[laughter]

That's a quick way to deal with us. Don't worry about funding cuts. Just give us one fire exit and a bottleneck. A little too dark to laugh? I don't know. And in case people don't know what I'm talking about, just make sure that this area where the person in the red scarf is standing, if you could—person in the red scarf—just come in a little bit more so you're not blocking the exit. That's it. Thank you. Call me the fire warden.

Alright, how's everybody doing?

[applause]

Can we give an applause to the children?

[applause]

You all are behaving so well that I might have one—

[laughter]

Alright. It's not that funny.

[laughter]

Alright. Moving on. I am so excited for the next person. My dear, dear Charlene Lau. Come on up.

[applause]

Charlene K. Lau (Art Historian & Curator):

Hi everyone. My name's Charlene and I've been working in the art world in and around Toronto-ish for 20 years. Kind of scary when I hear about that and hear myself say that.

Started off as a carnie selling tickets for John Körmeling's ferris wheel at The Power Plant in the summer of 2004.[12] So I've been around a bunch, worked in a bunch of organizations. See lots of new faces here, which is cool—and I don't know you and that's great. I'm also living between moments of darkness and levity and sheer toxic positivity.

So, I don't actually know what to say and I hope I won't take all four minutes up because I live in fear of the very-sharp-sounding plastic gavel. (Okay, well it's, I don't know what kind of wood that is, but I don't kinda wanna, okay, so just watch me go over the four minutes. This happens all the time when I teach.)

So, okay, I'm gonna try to play a video into this mic.

> [Clip from video played into mic]
>
> I have the best advice for women in business. Get your fucking ass up and work. It seems like nobody wants to work these days. You have to. That's so true. You have to surround yourself with people that wanna work, have a good work environment where everyone loves what they do because you have one life, no toxic work environments and show up and do the work.[13]

Okay? So take that for what you will. I love the Kardashians and, thank you, Kiera.

Which is to say, I want to have this be a moment of levity and just think about us working together and uniting in this kind of proletarian way.

I have been on strike before at York [University], so I know what that's like to be on those sorts of lines, those sorts of front lines. I'm just glad that we have this time to wake up together.

I think that maybe we're in the same bed. I hope that we are, that we're all in bed together. And here is what I think: I think it's just a list of things because I just don't know what to say, but they're things that I always think about. They're like action words and they help me organize my thoughts into actions because all I can do is do my little bit.

So, exist in another world. Leave, come back. Stop making art. Make new friends. Keep your good friends. Don't listen to what people tell you what to do. Break rules. Exist outside the bubble. Burn things down. Refuse. Say no. Quit. Make something new. Change. Stop thinking

that institutions owe you anything. Be aware. See the world. Do your thing. Organize. Collaborate. Stand up. Have a vision. If you are in a position of power, be generous with your time, your money, your support. Break down the walls.

In this moment of reckoning, we can be whatever, we can do whatever.

[applause]

[Kiera Boult:

Thank you. I knew this was gonna—I knew that yours was gonna be my favourite, but did I predict a Kardashian quote? No, I didn't. But thank you, cause they are integral to tonight.

[laughter]

Alright, I just wanna say one thing. When you mentioned, Charlene, that we're all in bed together—and I wanted to ask our elders, our leaders, remember like when you all used to sleep together, and like the community was incestuous? Do you think that there was, maybe it was easier to organize when people were fucking?

It just feels like we're all not sleeping together anymore.

[laughter]

That laugh sounds true.

[laughter]

Is that a problem? Okay, I got a nod—so… get together, people!

Kiera Boult:

Alright. Up next we have Vicky Moufawad-Paul.

[applause]

Vicky Moufawad-Paul (Artist & Curator):

It is heartening to see everybody here together.

Having been born into this, literally during the Civil War in Lebanon—my father is Lebanese and my mom is Palestinian—this time around I am totally depleted and I often feel I have absolutely nothing to say. I'm going to try to say something.

Solidarity across communities is the only way that we can keep going. It's amazing to see many of you here from across different struggles and across different communities.

I am reminded of the song *"Where Are the Millions?"* ("Wein El Malayeen?") sung by a multiethnic group from Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon and written by a Libyan poet. *"Where Are the Millions?"* is about the First Intifada in Palestine—and Julia Boutros, the Lebanese singer has continued to sing it—and it has been widely associated with her. The song is about the struggle for Palestine and asking "where are the millions" of supporters?

At the time, the question was, where are the millions of Arabs and the other Arab nations who would stand in solidarity with us? Why aren't they standing up for Palestine? And, of course, the answer is complex, but part of it is that silence and paralysis is created by the terrible military and economic might of the colonizer and of the oppressive systems that encircle us and also encircle many communities in the world, and certainly, of course, indigenous communities here.

When I listen to that song now, I feel a renewed kind of enthusiasm for *"Where Are the Millions?"* The call from the song is being answered by justice loving people from all over the world. It is not simply Arabs that respond to the call because we are and have always been anti-essentialist in our resistance. It is the duty of all justice loving people to respond, and our solidarity is in excess of what the military machine or any of these colonial machines can understand.

This time around, the hollowness of universal human rights, international law, democracy, all of that is so glaring. But it's not just glaring to me, thankfully, and not just glaring to Palestinians and to Arabs, but to many, many people. And that's a testament to all of you being here.

I want to mention that I'm working with a collective of people organizing the *Gaza Biennale*, the Toronto Edition. The *Gaza Biennale* features over 50 artists. It was put together in April, 2024,

and it is going to be in Toronto in November of 2025. Gallery TPW and A Space Gallery are the main sites for the exhibition. We won't have 50 artists, but we will have as many as we possibly can. It's impossible to get artwork out of Gaza right now. Yet we will show Gazan artists those from the Gazan diaspora.

I was going to read a poem, "Silence for Gaza" by Mahmoud Darwish from 1973. Unfortunately, things are very much the same, even in 1973 when he wrote the poem.

Thank you.

Kiera Boult:

Beautiful, thank you Vicky.

Just in case—it sounds like the *Gaza Biennale* will definitely need an installer, and we know a person.

Question: did you have anything to do with the *Toronto Biennale* installation? Okay—great. So hire this person.

[laughter]

I'm kidding. Just a little. I mean, come on! It was a little rough in some places. Alright now that's not what we're supposed to be talking about but—Sameer, yours was fine. Okay, don't worry. It could, I mean, I would've liked more pageantry with the structure, but that's fine. Nobody was looking at that. They were looking at those glorious, beautiful breads.

Kiera Boult:

What did you say?

Sameer Farooq (from audience):

I had to bring my own drill.

Kiera Boult (host / moderator):

Are you—? This is what I'm talking about! Listen, this is not the fight tonight. The fight tonight is not that, but my god, a man this beautiful shouldn't have to drill!

[laughter]

Meagan. Remember the name.

Kiera Boult:

Speaking of beautiful men—John, you make activism so sexy.

[laughter]

Everybody. John mother fucking Greyson. (Sorry for swearing.) John Greyson.

[applause]

John Greyson (Filmmaker):

Thank you, Kiera. And, remembering back 40 years ago when all of us were sleeping together, we also were at war with the Ontario Censor Board.

The Censor Board claimed, at that time, jurisdiction over any image that was shown, any film or video that was shown in the province, demanding prior censorship—whether it was a new video by Andy Paterson or Richard Fung, or whether it was a documentary about farm workers. And so, groups like A Space, The Funnel, Canadian Images were heroically fighting the Censor Board in the courts.

But that was incredibly debilitating. It was what working within the system, trying to work within the terms of the system, became something that just—I think, perpetuated that fear of, or that experience of feeling silenced, feeling terrified about who's gonna get charged next, who's gonna face charges next.

And so, a bunch of us, 40 years ago, initiated what was started as *Six Days Against the Censor Board* and ended up becoming *11 Days Against the Censor Board*, a province-wide civil disobedience action where we collectively broke the law. I think there was something like 30 or 40 arts organizations in 10 cities across the province, each of us showing whatever we chose to show.

And that was the, like, that autonomy of curating, curating what each group wanted to show and making that decision themselves was central to the premise of it. And the principle of it was, if we all break the law, then no one's gonna get arrested.

And it was a complete victory, not a single charge. And, in fact, we ended up getting rid of the Censor Board. It was the collective actions. It was the court cases equally along with civil disobedience.

Flash forward 30 years: Queer Cinema For Palestine started a boycott of Tel Aviv Gay Lesbian Festival— a boycottable festival, identified by PACBI [Palestinian Campaign for the Academic

and Cultural Boycott of Israel]. And so, starting 10 years ago, we started to do a global campaign trying to convince artists to either not submit or to withdraw from Tel Aviv Film Festival.

So, I'd get assigned Bruce LaBruce. And I'd be calling Bruce LaBruce, trying to convince Bruce. And it was an uphill battle. The arguments were familiar in terms of, "Oh, it's a queer festival. How can it be boycottable?" Et cetera, et cetera.

But one of the things that came out of that experience—we had a lot of success. Every year, 10 or 15 filmmakers would withdraw. And it was, it was incredibly powerful seeing the courage of those filmmakers give, you know, at cost, choosing to withdraw, choosing to fight back against genocide, apartheid—and using that festival as a target.

But we also had that same experience of—withdrawal can often feel counterintuitive to artists. It can feel like a different sort of silencing—withdrawing your work, taking your work away from an audience.

And so, Queer Cinema For Palestine, five years ago, launched a counter-move, which was not just about withdrawing, but also a counter festival inspired by—one of the inspirations was the model of *Six Days of Resistance*—cities around the world programming work in solidarity with Palestine, queers speaking out in solidarity with Palestine.

And so, we're in the process right now of initiating our third edition. Call for submission next week. So, if you've got a video, you can find us online Queer Cinema for Palestine, and the festival's gonna be in June, all through pride month, doing a targeted solidarity action, a global solidarity action with Palestine.

Thanks.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Thank you so much.

Also, like, thank you for calling in the history of censorship.

I feel like, before we got to this moment, my generation really used the word "censorship" a bit too loosey-goosey, and—that's the thing with things like censorship, and fascism, it's really fun to like call just about everything that, until, like, you're really slapped with it.

And I'm working at Vtape. The history of fighting against censorship is so present, and the like trauma of being censored in the way your generation was, like—you know. So thank you for reminding us of that work and that history is all researchable and discoverable, I wanna say.

You can come to Vtape, and we have a thing called the Censorship Files. But all the people that did this work are still here, and something that we should go back to, just to remind ourselves of the work that's already been done.

Kiera Boult:

Oh my god, I keep forgetting my stupid schedule. It's you. Okay. What's your name? Chantal?

Everybody, Chantal.

[applause]

Chantal Hassard (Curator & Carousel Collective):

They planned this. I'm talking about censorship.

[laughter]

So my name is Chantal Hassard and I'm speaking as part of Carousel Collective—what I'm discussing is an exhibition that we curated in Aurora, at the Aurora Cultural Censor—*Centre*—

[laughter]

—oops—*Centre*, which was censored due to references for Palestine.

So, the show was based on an open-call zine called *Expressions of Critical Thought*. The first [holds up zine], it literally says "Free Palestine", on the top. Anyways— [laughs]

So, the exhibition included work by Alberto Castillo, Renaissance, Vridhhi Chaudhry, Emerald Repard-Denniston, Hala Alsalman, and myself. Like our first zine, the exhibition was framed around how critical thinking empowers us to question, interpret, evaluate, and make judgments about what we read, hear, say, or write. By approaching topics of migration, systemic oppression, the looting of cultural heritage, the collective unconscious, and the denial of death during a human-caused ecocide, the artworks exposed, unseen, social tensions, simmering under everyday life.

The underlying essence of the exhibition and the zine was to collect, build in common, and bring together fragmented expressions of critical thought to highlight their inherent intersectionality.

We hope that viewers would be moved by the colours rendering the revolts visible, the words traversing the struggles to emancipate, and the lines reclaimed from what separates us to what brings us together.

A participatory painting I initiated, called the *Exquisite Corpse Project,* was painted by thousands of people at many spaces, including Carousel Collective raves, and the People's Circle For Palestine. The project aims at capturing a self-portrait of the collective unconscious, and the

invitation to paint in this day and age—naturally leads to calls for free Palestine, pictures of watermelons, Palestinian flags, phrases like “land back”. Hala Alsalman’s work, *They Stole Our Eyes, But We Still See* map the provenance of ancient Sumerian and Babylonian, and Assyrian eye inlays from statues illegally looted from the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad, during the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. She traced the eyes from their site of creation through black-market collectors to museum collections and Kijiji.

The map she included was amended by the artist to put “Israel” in brackets and “Palestine” written in marker underneath in an expression of solidarity. And to highlight the fact that Palestine was not initially on the map.

The day after the very public ribbon-cutting and the grand opening of the building, and I mean, like, very public—because we were the first exhibition after a $51 million renovation project, and like, a building with a library and a theatre and everything—it was big—[in] York region. Doug Ford was there.

We were invited specifically to showcase a new generation of contemporary curation in the space. However, the exhibition was closed due to accusations of antisemitism from the Zionist community on social media, in local news, and at the funding level. The complaints on social media came from someone with a cover photo representing Mossad, the Israeli National Intelligence Agency, as a Black Panther armed with an assault rifle running through barbed wire, the shape of a Star of David, with a caption saying, “Seen through the dark”.

Their local news outlets ran headlines with their comments, calling the exhibition a disgusting display of antisemitism, and B’nai B’rith was mentioned at the organizational level. It was clear that the Aurora Cultural Centre was not prepared to receive this kind of criticism and immediately closed the show, which was supposed to be two months long.

We have consulted with a few lawyers and have yet to find a viable legal recourse, but are considering self-filing with the Human Rights Tribunal, as the freedom of expression was clearly violated.

The censorship was covered in *The Globe and Mail* and *Hyperallergic*. A spokesperson from the centre told *Hyperallergic* that, though they engage in an independent, objective, and balanced assessment of the exhibit, they found no harmful intent or content—yet the show was closed indefinitely.

The dream for a free Palestine comes through in the *Exquisite Corpse,* as an essential expression of the collective unconscious. The limitation of that expression in the face of an ongoing

genocide reflects a fascist ideology that undermines democratic values and artistic freedoms of expression, which must be resisted.

We're looking for avenues to restage the show, and I'm thinking a lot about Chantelle Mouffe's writing on agonism in the arts and her assertion that critical practices—(this part's important—agonism on the arts)—her assertion that critical artistic practices are subverting dominant hegemony in an "agonistic" model of society.[14] Agonism is a social and political theory that views conflicting ideas as a natural part of the political process and considers art as a means of visualising that which is repressed and destroyed by the consensus of post-political democracy.

In our divisive political climate, it is essential for artists and our institutions to maintain space for agonism and critical discourse.

I appreciate the work all of you are doing here today, feel free to talk with me about this.

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Well done.

Kiera Boult:

Up next we have Mira [Mitra] F.

[applause]

Mitra F. (Artist & Curator / Stop Art Washing):

Hi everyone, my name is Mitra. I am a curator and cultural worker. In my day job, I work with Mayworks Festival of Working People & The Arts—a labour arts festival producing and presenting projects that seek to further our struggles for better working and living conditions. In my independent practice, much of my work takes focus on border imperialism and border abolition.

I'll be speaking, hopefully very briefly, about some of the work we've been doing at Artists Against Artwashing (a.k.a. Stop Artwashing), a small organizing group contending with colonial violence, and the ways in which that violence is enacted by our funding structures and also oftentimes concealed by arts.

I want to start by making it very clear that Canada has not yet implemented a two-way arms embargo on Israel.

The motion passed in parliament was foremost symbolic, and there has been no material action to stop Canadian weapons from flowing to Israel, including through loopholes to the United States. With or without a ceasefire, these weapons are used to maintain a military occupation, to fuel settler-colonial expansion, and to indiscriminately kill Palestinians.

We also see the normalization of Israel's genocidal project in the Canadian media—Israelis are so-called "citizens" not colonizers, despite, every single day, encroaching further and further onto Indigenous lands and allowing the killing of Palestinians to happen in the name of settler safety.

So, at the policy level, we have a government that has not taken material action to stop sending weapons to Israel, despite all our emails and protests. And, in the media, Zionism and its settler colonial nature continue to be granted a very deadly legitimacy.

But we in the arts have an opportunity to refuse lending our labour to this legitimacy by cutting ties with complicit funders and complicit collaborations. Many in this room have been mobilizing for arts organizations to commit to the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. And we should all consider this not only as a material way to weaken Israel's attempts at rebranding genocide—it's also a powerful way of signalling to the state where we stand as an industry.

I want to close by reading some very rough notes that I took from a conversation between Samera Esmeir and Fred Moten at *The Anti-Zionist Idea* conference in November 2024 [Toronto].[15] Their discussion led to questions around the entanglement of liberalism and liberation—something that feels particularly relevant to the arts, especially when the language of liberation is oftentimes wielded while maintaining lifeworlds that allow liberalism to go on, oftentimes unchecked:

> *...Something about abdicating responsibility on to those who are willing to, or must bear it.*
>
> *We know who lives, we know who dies. We know who is, or who is not in the process of being figured and produced as destructible. We know who lives, we know who dies.*
>
> *...Something about genocidal nature—to the extent that can be spoken, is the intention: We will kill every one of you, even if we can't kill all of you. Liberalism, then, is—its supplements—the form this takes by way of occupation and modalities of colonial administration. This is where and when grasping at forms of apartheid, like the two-state solution becomes so deadly in its ability to stabilize the omnipresent destruction of the Imperial War machine and neutralize our relationship to it.*
>
> *...Something about how solidarity must then be a moving from expressing to practicing. And a commitment and willingness to practice it where we're at.*

Kiera Boult:

Beautiful. Well done.

Kiera Boult:

All right, up next we have Mapping Power.

[applause]

Mapping Power (Artist Collective):

We are a group of artists and culture workers mapping power and influence within Toronto's arts sector, with a focus on how anti-Palestinian racism, and support for Israeli Zionism, affect artists' freedom of expression. For over a year, we've examined the structures of arts philanthropy and governance in Toronto. Our goal is to uncover and narrativize instances where influential donors, funders, or board members have censored pro-Palestine and anti-genocide voices while maintaining direct ties to so-called "charities" that financially support Zionism. We are also tracking when these influential figures in the arts make financial investments through which they themselves benefit monetarily.

The influence of wealth on cultural institutions in Canada is clear. While all sectors in this country depend on philanthropy and donor support, their undue power and influence pose a significant threat to the autonomy of public arts organizations and, in turn, the work and livelihoods of artists.

In 2023, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) dismissed curator Wanda Nanibush under pressure from a pro-Israel arts group, while the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) censored Arab and Palestinian artists that had been invited to exhibit their work—both targets of these disciplinary actions had taken a principled stand against the normalization of colonial violence in Palestine. Both institutions have high-level donors and board members affiliated with charitable family foundations who have made significant donations to organizations like the Jewish National Fund—which had its charitable status revoked by the CRA [Canada Revenue Agency] in 2024 for financially supporting the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], as it is illegal to fund a foreign military.

The McMichael Gallery also currently has donors who support and fundraise with/for Zionist charities. These same donors have demonstrated financial ties—through investment firms with holdings in financial institutions—to weapons manufacturers and the defence technology sector. These are just three of the many major arts organizations in Toronto that receive funding from donors that contribute to Zionist charities.

We have created documents on 14 Toronto arts institutions, tracking which donors, family foundations, board members, and sponsors who have demonstrated financial ties to organizations that support Zionism. Our work is rooted in calls by BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] and PACBI for direct action in refusing financial or cultural affiliation with the Israeli state. We plan on working with public-facing partner organizations to disseminate this information in 2025.

Ultimately, the intention of this project is to provide information to local artists, and arts workers, and those coming in from other territories, who wish to make educated decisions about engaging with our institutions. We also intend to be a resource for other activist groups who seek information on Zionist arts and culture funding for their own campaigns. Though all our source information is publicly accessible, sharing resources saves time and labour.

Too often, arts organizations don't dare bite the hand that feeds, believing that, if they don't capitulate or self-censor, some other sector within the non-profit apparatus will gladly take its place. But philanthropy allows donors to launder their reputations, at a tax-deductible rate, through the cultural capital associated with *our* institutions specifically. Arts organizations can be strategic in leveraging their power, and have an ethical responsibility to vet their donors before accepting their money. Artists are uniquely positioned, with public facing reputations and projects, to speak truth to power. If we choose not to play ball with arts institutions in times like these, they cannot exist.

Many of us, artists and arts workers, are embedded within power structures that not only fail to challenge Canada's complicity in the genocide of Palestinians, but, directly support it. As much as there is an argument to be made for completely abandoning these structures, many arts workers make the difficult choice to work within them. They deserve our support as they navigate these institutions while risking censorship and reprisal.

We invite any info, even anonymously, on the following:

- Stories of censorship, related to the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the colonial occupation of Palestine, that you've witnessed within arts institutions in Toronto.
- Info about arts institutions, foundations, board members, or donors that support or enable Zionism connected to Toronto.
- Collaborations with other anti-Zionist projects in the city of Toronto and beyond.

We can be reached at mp.core@proton.me.

Kiera Boult:

Alright, we have one more speaker until it's time for dinner—Emma Steen.

[applause]

Emma Steen (Writer & Curator):

Hi, I'm Emma. I would like the audio record to state that it is too cold for me to take my layers off, but I wore a slay top. So for the generations listening to this, I did come with the intention of looking really "hot", so keep that in mind, please. I would like to talk about polite society and bad words. I would like to take this opportunity for us to all consider, in our heads, bad words and how they do not fit in polite society.

Polite society has failed us. It has crumbled under its own pretenses, and has let us fend for ourselves. But polite society really has never existed. It's just a vague suggestion used to hinder hard conversations in quiet, loud voices.

Polite society has ushered in impoliteness by holding the door open for so long that trying to tell apart impoliteness from politeness has ceased to make sense and the definition seems like a waste of time altogether. So, why are we trying?

Polite society is afraid of bad words. Bad words like the ones that make your uncle get mad at the dinner table, or your friend's boyfriend go on a five-minute rant to you about why you don't actually understand your own political stance. Bad words can be scary words like fascism, but they can also be words like revolution, divestment, abolition, anarchy, justice, and liberation.

How do we bring, then, bad words into polite society—into our workplaces, our dinner tables, our libraries, our cafés?

Here's an example I'm gonna give to you:

> "Hello boss slash manager. I hope you are enjoying this wonderful nine-to-five workday we are having.

[laughter]

> Did you know that, in Canada, a labour rights movement took place between January and June in 1872, that started in Hamilton, Ontario, which demanded the nine-hour workday be implemented as a right for labourers?

> It quickly spread to Toronto, Montréal, and as far east as Halifax. It was the first time Canadian labour organized what might be considered the beginnings of a unified protest movement, and led to our union-based workplace with overtime as built into our contracts. Anyways, back to Teams I go. Haha. But not for a minute past five."

[laughter]

But that was an easy one.

Here's another:

> "Hello brother-in-law.

[laughter]

> I do find it very interesting that we both distrust the government, though my distrust has less to do with raw milk, and more about misinformation, funding cuts, and the growing popularity of Nazi-salute-summoning being on my Instagram all the time."

Maybe that one was too personal. Anyways, I believe the time for politeness has come to an end. In fact, it has been ended. And I welcome all of us to find ways to challenge and push back,daily and consistently, in all spaces, especially those deemed too precious for hard conversations and bad words.

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Alright, it's time to take a break. We're gonna break for 35 minutes. Can someone tell me what time it is right now? It's five on the dot?

I'll see you back at 5:35 [PM]. There's pizza. Have the children eaten yet? Okay, hold up, pause. Shall we make sure the children eat first? Okay. All right. They are our future. I think the children should get first dibs at eating. And I'm a childless woman, but all right.

Kiera Boult:

All right. I would like to bring up the beautiful Joy to read a statement from someone that could not be here with us tonight.

(I—I know. Well, I know we're waiting for people to take their seats. I think you're good to come. I think—I think this is—this is as obedient as this crowd gets.)

Good. They're good. You're a beautiful crowd. I'm just kidding. First rule of MC-ing is: don't belittle the crowd.

[laughter]

Joy Xiang

You can break the rules! Thank you Kiera, for everything. So I'm reading this on behalf of Christina Oyawale who could not be here. They are an artist, an arts worker, formerly of Trinity Square Video currently doing their thing, their MFA in Winnipeg. So this is from them.

Christina Oyawale (Artist)

> Something I have been thinking about for the last two years is how we need to be more willing to implicate ourselves, we need to be less fearful of repercussions. By that, I mean not separating the political from the artistic. While we contemplate the loss of funding or exhibitions, we watch people lose their lives to poverty, greed, ethnic cleansing, and Christofascism.
>
> What is our purpose as artists? How can we use creativity as a catalyst to disrupt? Is there a potential for art to be used as rhetoric? I believe, deep down, these are conversations we are having internally, but there is no good in questioning our morality if it does not engage community.
>
> Art and the communities we cultivate have never been safe, especially for those on the margins, racially and socio-economically. Getting the show or the Sobey, or the profile in *C Magazine* or *Border Crossings* was never the goal. The goal was to create a space that reflected the outside world. Contemporary art has lived within a protective bubble for far too long and now is the moment it desperately needs to burst.
>
> I know some may argue that not everyone has to be an "activist"which I agree, but I do believe we have become far too obsessed with aesthetics of the self. Disabled, queer, Black, and Indigenous communities have been doing a lot of the emotional and physical labour of coalition-building throughout history; it is time for everyone else to follow suit.

This isn't a call-out, rather a call-in; the time is now or never. We don't have much time left.

Finally, as artists, practitioners, academics, students we have a responsibility to contribute to our communities in a meaningful manner that breathes light into people's lives. The fascists are currently winning at politics, they will never win at culture. We have the advantage, and what we do with it is the most important part of our existence. I write this as a rallying call, to implicate every time we wished we could've done "more"—I write this as a reminder that despite the 16 months of brutality and loss, Palestinians marched back to what remained of their homes and ate breakfast amidst the rubble. The spirit of the Palestinian people has taught me that there is always more work to be done.

To end this little yap session, I will be the most cliché marxist in the room. and say: "first as tragedy, second as farce." History once repeated itself as a tragedy, but, as we march along the current times, make no mistake, all of this has been calculated to happen for decades. Our actions will define what we have left. Farce is the act of people recycling ideas, art that fears implications of one's political affiliation. Don't contribute to the farce. Be creative, be weird, be hellbent on making sure this space is good enough for everyone. Raise hell for the humanities and arts programmes intentionally being cut at universities, raise hell about unlawful deportations on stolen land, and raise hell every single time you create something. That is the most important thing.

Thank you!

Kiera Boult:

Oh, that was so beautiful to hear from Christina.

I will like to just say this—out of drag-ish, if you will. But like, the things that happened at Trinity Square Video—not that that's what Christina's piece was about—but it's, like, impossible for me to hear their beautiful, heroic words and a call to action and not feel bad, as a community organizer.

I'm not a, I'm definitely not a community organizer. I was about to say: my failure to support friends that went through that Trinity Square Video mess. And I have to say, that was one of those really heartbreaking situations where dealing with the own crumbling structure of a thing that I was—I feel really guilty for not being able to be there.

Anyways, it's really—thank you for everybody who did step up or try. And I'm sorry, I'm sorry for the Trinity Square Video people for not being there when you all really fucking needed us. We let you down or I, well, we let you down, cause it's messed up.

But, I love you all. And thank you for your work. Anyways. A moment of that. Anyways.

Okay, moving on, because don't worry—it's not all doom and gloom, as Christina told us.

Let's raise some hell.

Kiera Boult:

And boy, are we about to raise some hell—with my personal favourite person, Andrew James Paterson.

[applause]

Get up here! Oh, and I will not be timing you, which feels like a mistake.

[laughter]

Andrew James Paterson (Artist):

"EMILIA-AMALIA. Open Hearing text." That's my headline.

The arts sector—what is that?

Fine arts, media arts, performing arts, performance art—is that a commodity?

What is a commodity? Who is a commodity?

Artists of the state. Artists against the state. Citizens of the state, while against the state: is that an oxymoron, or just an eternal contradiction?

The art community. The arts community. The arts community and the larger community. What is the larger community? How about society?

There is *so* such a thing as society.

The artist had a mission. The artist had permission. The artist had commission. Public and private—are these two words antonyms or synonyms?

Is the privately funded more public than the publicly funded?

Is the grant-supported protected from the public?

Are the public and the markets anonymous?

Public money demands accountability.

That sculpture, painting, photo, video, performance, or concerto is obliged to be visible to Joe, or Jane, or Mohammed Taxpayer.

Are engagement and entertainment—antonyms or synonyms? Can they be parallel?

Is entrepreneurial strictly capitalist? Society here is nothing if not monetary.

And, of course, there is political art. Is it actually effective? Is it seriously provocative, or is it reassuring?

Does it play to beyond the choir? Is the choir harmonious or dissonant?

Can someone be critical of nationalism without being a Musky-Trump sycophant?

Can the word accessible please refer to physical accessibility—at least as much as to populist, or bean-counter, accessibility?

Yeah. That's it. Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

One of my favourite AJP quotes is: "Whose community?"

[laughter]

What? Wait, say it louder?

Andrew James Paterson (from audience):

[heard in the background] Whose *fucking* community?

Kiera Boult:

"Whose f-ing Community?"

A reminder that, like, that word isn't as simple as we like to use.

Kiera Boult:

Up next…okay, oh wow. Up next we have Michele Pearson Clarke!

Michèle Pearson Clarke (Artist):

Hi, everybody. I didn't write anything down. I've been trying to figure out what I was gonna say.

The energy in this room is so mixed. There is joy, there is solidarity. There is also, for me, a tremendous amount of sadness and grief. And, I think—I guess I just wanna choose my time to name and acknowledge. I think most of you know that's the focus of my practice.

I think we still—most of us—find it very, very challenging to talk about grief, to name it, and to acknowledge it.

I think everything that we've been talking about today, everything that we've been going through as a community—there's so much loss. There's so much grief, in terms of politics, values, friendships, opportunities, jobs.

Some of us have had to sacrifice our principles. A lot of us have been reduced, made small. And there's just, I feel that so much in this room, underneath all of the laughter, which we need as well. And I think none of the action, none of the rallying, none of that is possible if we don't name it, and acknowledge it, and hold space for each other's grief.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Thank you, Michèle.

Kiera Boult:

All right. Well—Dot. I'm expecting a good show.

[laughter]

Dot Tuer, everybody!

Dot Tuer (Writer & Curator):

For those of you who don't know me, I come from many years of participating in artist-run cultures in Toronto. For the past several decades, I've also spent part of my life in Argentina, where I think a lot and write about grief and the consequences of the military dictatorship (1976—1983) that disappeared 30,000 people. Since the libertarian chainsaw-wielding Javier Milei was elected President of Argentina several years ago, the *fascism* of the past dictatorship and the ultra-right regime of the present have converged. I now live in a country where there are no more human rights. No more cultural funding. No more labour ministry, or ministries of women and diversity. The assault on the state is brutal and unrelenting, with the North and the South united through Elon Musk and Milei sharing a bro chainsaw moment.

With that as context, I want to begin by acknowledging the dark times in which we live. In the words of Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur to the United Nations Human Rights Council, I quote:

> What the new U.S. administration is doing is very clear and strategic. It's called psychological overwhelming—hitting us every day with extra-large doses of baffling rhetoric and erratic politics that serve to control the script, distracting and disorienting us, normalizing the absurd, all the while disrupting global stability and consolidating U.S. control.[16]

I want to continue by responding to my everyday sense of being overwhelmed—psychologically and politically—by asking some questions that expand on those of the open call: to ask questions of how we can resist and reach beyond dark times.

What does it mean to demand?
What does it mean to dream?
Can we do both at the same time?

How important is desire?
How important is collective action?
Can we collectively desire what is to be the future?
What do we collectively desire in building something together?

How do we collectively *demand* the future?
How do we envision not just what *remains possible*, but a future of what *must* be?
Who is this *we*?

How do we hold on to belief?
Belief in art as more than its material sum.
Belief in art to bring people together, not to divide.
Belief in art as the embodiment of a spiritual world *and* of political struggle.
Belief in art as that which anchors us to the earth—and that which imagines a world beyond Musk's vain and imperial ambitions to conquer space.
Belief in art to change the world we live in.

How do we hold on to our dreams?
How do we hold on to dreaming?
How do we hold on to hope?
How do we gather and honour each other with generosity and care?
How do we create spaces where we can gather together and honour each other with generosity and care?

Can we create these spaces within institutions, which under the weight of neoliberal accountability suffocate everything that is poetic and generative?

Do we create these spaces outside of institutions?
Is today's space one of those spaces?

Can we, do we, must we collectively stand together—to dream of and demand a future at a time—to quote Leanne Betasamosake Simpson—of "acute racial and economic inequality,"[17]—to dream of and demand a future at a time when genocidal violence and fascism are upon us.

Kiera Boult:

Well done my friend, if I may.

Kiera Boult:

All right, here we go. Next is Yan Zhou.

[applause]

Yan Zhou (Scholar & Curator):

Good afternoon! It is so wonderful to be here with you all. I am honoured to participate in this gathering and sharing event. I'm excited to make new friends and find my community today.

I am a scholar and independent curator. In recent years, I developed a growing interest in community-building, socially engaged art, anarchism, and autonomous art communities. Last summer, I travelled to mainland China and Hong Kong. As some of you may have noticed, the bubbles and myth of the success of contemporary Chinese art have vanished. The art market has shrunk since 2019, after political suppression and prosecution, the pandemic, and the disappearance of speculative money. However, surprisingly, I found that autonomous, independent, networked, solidarity-art communities have mushroomed in China and Hong Kong, despite surface-level pessimism and bleakness. In other Asian, Latin American, and Global South countries, where art systems are weak, and society is often under authoritarian rule, grassroots communities are spreading and thriving. They act in close connection with communities and society, addressing urgent social, political, cultural, and historical issues, and often build international solidarity networks. I think we can be inspired and learn from their practices to change our art ecology and society.

In a recent interview discussing America's Hidden Civil War and the future of our world, Ray Dalio thinks we might have already been in a world controlled by totalitarianism, or in an anarchical world manipulated by oligarchy and technology. But he sees hope in building communities, because "the highest determinant of happiness is community".[18] I agree—we cannot rely on political parties or the state to invigorate our society. We need to build our communities.

Over 50 years ago, Canadian artists, who wanted to have opportunities to present their experimental work and communicate their ideas, established artist-run centres across the country. The model of these artist-initiated and artist-managed institutions serves the public and the artists. Initially, these centres were more active, open, and connected, engaging critical discussions more seriously.

Why do these matter? Without the autonomy and independence of art communities, we compete for limited opportunities and a morsel share of resources and support from institutions, complying with hierarchical selecting and judging criteria set by institutions and the state's cultural policy. Not everyone has an equal opportunity to do things—we are slaves of the system.

Chained within this system, we rarely work directly with people and communities in our society. We are alienated from each other, disconnected from our communities, and society, weakening society and making our work less relevant to the daily lives and struggles of our communities.

So, what I am proposing today is to diversify our art ecology.

We need to create many autonomous, independent, and community-based art groups and networks.

We need to create art spaces and events where everyone can participate, including emerging artists, students, amateurs, and neighbours.

We need to develop a micro, mutual-aid, reciprocal, gift art economy.

We need to stay connected in solidarity, locally, nationally, and internationally.

We need to invent new ways of communal life and communication.

We need to be aware of the constraints of social media platforms and existing communication channels, which isolate us into small circles of acquaintances.

What can we do?

We can use, repurpose, and occupy any space, personal or public—like living rooms, kitchens, libraries, cafeterias, parks, and playgrounds, for creative gatherings, and not necessarily in a formal artistic way.

We can organize fun activities like games, parties, carnivals, performances, readings, cooking, dancing, and singing as part of our collective daily life, to actively engage people and communities, encouraging critical reflections and direct social participation.

We can experiment with pay-as-you-wish, gift-giving, and affordable art-production sales to self-support and support each other.

We need to reorient our work to community involvement and socially engaged practices, not centred solely on artwork production for the art world, but to find ways to truly engage and mobilize communities, ensuring our work is meaningful and helpful to our communities.

Kiera Boult:

Up next we have—but thank you for that. That was beautiful. I'm so sorry to have had to [makes throat-cutting gesture sound].

Kiera Boult:

Up next we have Karina Iskandarsjah.

[applause]

Karina Iskandarsjah (Artist / Stop Art Washing):

Hello. [laughs]

My name is Karina Iskandarsjah. I'm an independent artist and curator, living and working in Toronto since 2015. Thank you for hosting this space and inviting me to speak, and it's been really nice to hear everyone's words. I got emotional listening to my ex-colleague Christina talk through Joy. That was really great—thank you.

I'm part of Stop Art Washing, or Artists Against Art Washing, which is a growing network of support for actions by art and culture workers responding to the increased and blatant censorship of pro-Palestinian voices in our sector.

Today, I want to talk specifically about our current awareness and divestment campaign about the Azrieli Foundation. As you may have already heard, the Azrieli Foundation is the charitable counterpart to the Azrieli Group, which is Israel's largest real-estate company. Both were founded by David Azrieli, a real-estate developer who served in the Israeli army during the 1948 *Nakba*.

The Azrieli Group's assets include shares in Bank Leumi, who are guilty of violating international law by financing illegal settlements and extracting natural resources in Palestine. The Azrieli Foundation funds many arts and culture organizations in Canada, including the Toronto Arts Foundation [TAF].

The Azrieli Foundation describes itself as strictly apolitical, which is simply untrue—because they fund multiple Zionist organizations and make annual donations of about $25,000 to HonestReporting Canada, which is a pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian media lobbying group.

At the end of last year, Artists Against Art Washing collected over 250 signatures, urging the Toronto Arts Foundation to cut ties with the Azrieli Foundation. On January 31st, three members from our group were invited to speak with TAF director and CEO Kelly Langgard, as well as two staff members, at their downtown office. We spoke about how the Azrieli Foundation's economic activities are in direct contradiction to the TAF's equity framework and commitment to UNDRIP—the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—principles. We also shared examples of censorship and discrimination against art workers at cultural institutions funded by the Azrieli Foundation.

And we were told that the TAF will not be divesting from the Azrieli Foundation, and that TAF claims the funding they receive from the Azrieli Foundation goes solely toward the Breakthrough Artist Award.

So, I'd actually like to call everyone here to action—to help us let Kelly and the TAF board know that art and culture workers care about this issue.

We've made and brought small zines. I wanted to bring one up here, but they've got big QR codes, and that'll take you straight to a Google Form where you can sign up for our mailing list and also find a template with all the e-mails of the TAF board members.

And, if you, or anyone have sent nominations to TAF's upcoming Breakthrough Artist Award, I would urge you to consider revoking those nominations—and let TAF know that it's due to their funding from the Azrieli Foundation.

I'm not good at inspirational speeches about dreaming of a better world. If I were, maybe Trinity Square Video would still be accessible to us all. But I do know it's important for us to remain unified and work together, despite all of our differences and to find more ethical sources of funding for our creative community.

So, thank you for listening.

[applause]

Sorry. One more plug—I'm tabling over there. We're also selling zines to fundraise for two emerging artists who are living in Gaza, who are in the midst of rebuilding their lives after displacement. So please stop by, and we can also answer any questions about Azrieli.

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Fabulous. That's just right in the corner over there. The food and drinks were free. You might as well buy a zine.

Oh, and the entertainment—if you shall call tonight "entertainment".

Kiera Boult:

Alright, up next we have Collective Collective.

Collective Collective (Artist Collective):

Collective Collective is a project between eight racialized-majority art collectives: BAM, Durable Good, Gendai, Guidance Council, Rice Water, Whippersnapper, MICE and Younger than Beyoncé. Our collaboration is a response to the systemic racism, exploitative conditions, and lack of sustainability in the arts.

Collective Collective came together as part of a programme initiated by Gendai in 2019, *MA MBA: Mastering the Art of Misguided Business Administration*.[19] This was a series of co-learning sessions for a self-organized cohort of BIPOC-majority collectives to reimagine the way colonial, neoliberal, ableist, and white-dominant cultural organizations are structured and operated. Since then, we have been working as an artist supercollective that reorients the now-institutionalized movement of institutional critique into collective practice.

In 2023, Gendai co-wrote a piece in *C Magazine* called "We Should Talk: Obvious Truths About Working in the Arts".[20] We are now in the midst of a three-year project to test out collaborative organizational and curatorial practices that centre values of collectivity, solidarity, and mutual aid through inter-collective resource and labour sharing.

Collective Collective is a study and a proposition for models of organizational governance that centre collaborative, non-hierarchical ways of working. It is a dream, a rehearsal for a post-apocalypse, a re-embodiment of all the ways resistance has and continues to happen. We look to collectives and movement-organizing work, to learn not only about how we can dismantle or divest from our colonial institutions, but about living and being together.

Some of our projects we and our collaborators are working on include:

- Running casual drop-ins for BIPOC collectives to share stories, gossip, and solicit advice from each other in order to focus on developing friendship, investing in each other, and mapping collective knowledge.
- Workshops to envision accountable co-living and co-working options for artists, such as community land trusts, artist housing co-ops, and childcare co-ops.
- Transforming the results of a seven-month intensive workshop series for emerging artists/collectives into community engaged public art projects through a horizontal mentorship programme.
- Collecting employment and exhibition contracts anonymously to share in participatory workshops and an online database, so that freelancers can negotiate better labour terms

Over the last two years, we have been meeting monthly to ask ourselves how we want to work together, how to open up the process, how to overcome the paralyzing sense of urgency, how to redefine growth from numbers to wellbeing, and how to care for artists more than art objects.

We are here because we are looking for aunties—if you've been around and you know some tricks please tell us what's up. If you have contracts you want to share in the database, let us know. We are still, and always, looking for gossip.

Kiera Boult:

If you're looking for gossip, you came to the right place, my friends. Oh—and under time, by the way. Congratulations. That's how it's done. A three-way, under time.

All right.

[laughter]

So I—oh, you really liked that back there?

Kiera Boult:

All right, up next—I am so delighted to introduce you, Mr. Scott Miller Berry. So, instead of a break, I give you Scott Miller Berry.

I heard your "oh," but it's for Scott. And I have made the decision that we don't really need a break. We're just gonna keep going through. I hope you don't mind.

Is that okay? Well, actually, let's just get consensus.

How does everyone feel? Do you want a break, or do you wanna be here all night?

[laughter]

That's what I thought. All right, Scott.

Scott Miller Berry (Filmmaker & Film Programmer):

So you're blaming me for no break?

Kiera Boult:

No, first off, it's not Scott's fault.

[laughter]

It's Dot's fault for giving me the finger.

Scott Miller Berry:

Hello. Thank you for having me. I'm really humbled and flattered to be in this magical room.

Let's start with a poem, shall we?

> In the dark times,
> will there also be singing?
> Yes, there will also be singing.
> About the dark times.

That's called *Motto to the Svendborger Poems,* from Bertolt Brecht, 1939.[21]

This event feels like a beautiful concert: singing and listening about the dark times. My first hat tip to Indu Vashist, who shared that poem at a SAVAC [South Asian Visual Arts Centre] event last week. Thanks to all the organizers.

Ok 4 minutes, or 3 and a half now. I agonized about which preoccupation, which passion, which problem du jour to talk about.

I'm Scott. I've been a cultural worker in this place since 2001.

The first thing I thought about was having a screening and talk that censored Palestine, having a screening and talk (I'll get to that) that centred Palestine, censored and cancelled last October at my day job, seemed like the right thing—but I'm not allowed to talk about it. Because, you know, what could be better than censoring and canceling an event than further censoring any discussion about the *actual* censorship?

But, anyway, let's talk about labour again, and inequities, and a couple of proposals.

I'm trying to be precise in my old age, which is hard for a Pisces. But we're gonna get—I'm gonna throw out some numbers.

In 2005, I applied to be the Executive Director at the *Images Festival*. The position was advertised with a salary of $36,000–$40,000. I was hired at $36,000, with an annual budget of around $420,000. My final year as director, 10 years later, the ED salary was at $59,000, with a budget of around $600,000. The board of directors hired my successor at more than $10,000 less than that salary. Same position. Same budget. Same responsibilities. Same expectations. And it's very important to add that she is a racialized woman. And I wrote, "sigh".

My current salary at Workman Arts, an arts and mental-health non-profit and charity, is $71,000. And the Executive Director's salary is almost double that amount. The next closest salary to mine is mid-50s. The current annual budget is $1.3 million dollars.

Cultural workers and artists have long worked hard over many, many decades—we heard about this from—my new nickname is KarlFac (for Karl Beveridge)—to establish fee schedules for all kinds of presentations, commissions, exhibitions, talks: CARFAC, IMAA, ACAAQ, etcetera. Oh, Jesus. Your film is 16 minutes and showing at a festival? Their budget is X? We have a public schedule that tells everybody involved what the minimum fee should be.

My proposal is this: let's develop a salary schedule, similar to an artist-fee schedule, with a goal of leveling inequities and save everybody a lot of time.

You're a coordinator at this gallery. Their budget's $400,000. You're applying to be a coordinator at that arts organization, similar budget. Your salary scale will be known, as long as it's a similar position.

And if this sounds like a union scale or an artist's union—that's also not a new idea.

[applause]

And so be it.

All job postings could be linked to this schedule. Can we also please make salary disclosures required as part of all job postings, already?

My second proposal: after 10 years, a cultural worker must circulate to another organization or another sector. One part of the problem with cultural workers being underpaid in this place is that we figure out how to survive on less than a living wage and then we keep salaries low and "acceptable."

I owe my second hat tip to JP Kelly, who tabled that idea at the MANO [Media Arts Network of Ontario] conference in 2013.

What comes around, goes around. Free Palestine. Love you all.

[gavel bangs]

Thank you.

Kiera Boult:

I only let you run long, cause you were talking real scoop.

[laughter]

That's right. Because, for some reason, really naming how little or how much we all make is *so* dirty. It's the *dirtiest* thing we could do, honestly. Like—we will happily, happily call out anti-Blackness in our non-for-profit sector jobs or, you know, whatever those people are who are in charge of us.

But, oh, heaven forbid—we'll never out how much we make! Or how much other people make. I make $39,000.

Unnamed Audience Member:

Whoah!

Kiera Boult :

Thank you! Thank you. And I think that's like—we need transparency around those things. Like, it's so silly. Like, I shouldn't have to have three glasses of wine before you tell me how much you make, Scott.

[laughter]

I'm kidding. You gave it freely. And I did, too. Anyways, thank you for that. And very controversial— ten years? You have to go? I mean, you know, I work at Vtape. We've all been there for 50 years.

[laughter]

So, how dare you. But very controversial. And I think—fair. I'm—you know, I'm open—I'm open to these suggestions. I just wanna say—my "time," if you will, is ticking.

Kiera Boult:

Alright, up next we have Darcy Keleen. Killian [Killeen].

[applause]

Darcy Killeen (Executive Director, Contact Photo Festival):

Thank you. I feel like a bit of a selfish loser delivering this message I have. It's been such a powerful day, but you're stuck with me.

Lori [Laura Grier], our first speaker, I hope you don't mind me stealing something from you, but, when you said, "I'm not well," that's kinda the way I feel. I think this was a bit of a call for help. So, that's my message coming.

I'm here to quickly discuss the financial and funding challenges arts organizations in Toronto are facing today, and the present situation facing *Contact*—I'm from the *Contact Photography Festival*. From my experience, we're facing very challenging times, with many funders leaving the cultural space entirely.

Canadian arts organizations have long relied on big companies to be their title sponsors and principal funders. *TIFF* [Toronto International Film Festival] had Bell, *Luminato* had L'Oréal, *Jazz Festivals* had TD, and *Contact* had Scotiabank.

Going back 15 years, *Contact* was funded a third by sponsors, a third by government grants, a third by revenues generated internally—mostly by registration fees from artists. As sponsorship grew, the festival decided to stop charging artists registration fees and make the festival entirely free to them.

This led to the funding model being 50% sponsorship, 40% grants, and 10% money that we generated.

Sponsorship continued to increase. It allowed *Contact* to grow beyond its grassroots, artist-organized beginnings, and commission new bodies of photographic works from artists, develop a citywide public-art programme, increase staffing, increase artist and curatorial fees tenfold, facilitate grant opportunities, and fund partnerships with local and international institutions to showcase photography throughout the city and the world.

Then, just recently, a massive change in the funding world occurred. Title sponsorship ended, and general sponsorship seems to be completely gone. The shift—to the shift to sponsoring cause-based organizations and sports organizations has occurred.

This led to many organizations cutting back drastically, and even folding.

Contact losing funding has been extremely difficult, and led to a 65% reduction in our budgets. These reductions have severely impacted the organization, and led to a very unfortunate restructuring plan implemented by myself and our board of directors.

Drastic cuts were made, including significant reductions in artist fees, curatorial fees, programming, educational programmes, our annual catalogue, advertising, PR, public arts, contributions to exhibition partners, salary decreases to staff, and, most difficultly, reductions in staffing.

These changes in funding also came at a time when artists and art workers, through boycotts and protests, were and are demanding more of their institutional funding sources.

Navigating these two realities at once was extremely challenging, but also a very valuable learning experience—and an opportunity to be in dialogue with community members directly about the future of the festival and its funding.

We're in dialogue with community members directly, such as No Arms in the Arts and Artists Against Art Washing, and Mitra, who spoke earlier, has been an incredible resource to the festival, and I thank you so much.

The path forward looks like a difficult and challenging one. I think sponsorship will not come back for a long time. Government grants seem to be stagnant. And donors seem to be leaving and supporting causes closer to their individual circumstances. Even with these difficult changes, we are so grateful to the hundreds of partners and artists who are—who have organized our lens-based exhibitions for the 2025 Festival.

Over 30 years, *Contact* has supported thousands of artists and will continue to do so to the best of our ability. Our festival would not exist without them.

We invite you to connect with us, so that we can continue to be a leader in the photography and arts community. It is a dark time, but we hope that this great city will not lose focus on the importance of arts and culture, and invest in our organizations for the vibrancy of our society.

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

It is true. If we are losing funding, and if we're gonna have to get cleaner money, then I think we should also just accept a three-day work week.

We should have already. But, like, if we must downsize—can we have a three-day work week? You do not need access to me five days a week, I can assure you! We could just do this one day. I'll deal with you all at once.

[laughter]

Kiera Boult:

All right. I wanna say—our dear friend Amanda Boulos, we think is sick. So, pouring one out for her. Hopefully not the—carry that—anyways, you know what's going on—that horrible thing.

Anyways, up next—the flu thing. That—okay, anyways, doesn't matter.

Up next is Dana Prieto.

Dana Prieto (Artist / SHEEEPschool):

Hi. I'm Dana. And I'm an artist and educator, and I've been around for a little more than 10 years in Toronto. On and off, a few odd and irreverent years.

I'm now counting that I have been *schooled* within educational—I mean, extracted—I mean, educational institutions for the past thirty-fucking-seven years.

The last time I was released, I got time out, and I was fully engulfed, first by the pandemic, and then by becoming a parent to this magically sweet and fantastically-haired, intelligent human over there who absolutely changed my life.

And then, a planetary and intimate cosmic whirlwind, dropping deep and nonstop in the last two years, which literally broke my heart in a million pieces. So I've been *chill*. And lately, still out.

I have been gathering myself in the company of others, picking any lingering shreds of communal intelligence and hope, from and beyond these un-politely plummeting institutions, and went on to build SHEEEPschool.

Not really a sheep, not really a school—a non-school, schoolish collective entrusted to building and expanding experimental forms of learning, thinking, and making with others.

Since last year—we've been around for one year-ish—since last year-ish we've held space to programme in collaboration with some brilliant creatives—many of you are here—doing groundwork, tracking kinship, weaving solidarity, guiding plastics and distractions, working on dreaming, housing affordability, and sustainability with Younger Than Beyoncé and other not-so-Younger Than Beyoncé. Constantly looking for ways to feed ourselves, at the same time, and to feed other educators along the way.

I am not sure now if I've been ever out, or how, or when—or if I've truly been in. But, in either case, I am broken-heartedly interested in practicing forms of solidarity, of building and learning otherwise. And I know that we—SHEEEPschool—*we* would be very excited to learn, to be able

to sleep, to think with you, with probably most of you, in this path. So, I look forward to keep listening and chatting.

And I want to invite you—if I have time, or in this little bit of time, in this one minute, to remember one artist, or educator, elder, mentor, auntie who has deeply nourished you and your work, either here or not Earthbound. And I want you to imagine what it would mean for you to come here with them next time—or if you can imagine that they are here, and have always been here already with us.

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Well done.

Kiera Boult:

Alright, up next we have Anna, Anna Rafa [Ananna Rafa], and Ammar Barholly [Ammar Bowaihl].

Ananna Rafa (Artist):

Hey, I'm Ananna.

Ammar Bowaihl (Artist):

And I'm Ammar Bowaihl.

Ananna Rafa (Artist):

I have to pee. So we're gonna go really quickly.

[laughter]

Ammar Bowaihl (Artist):

All right.

Last year, I found out that actually—it's actually hard to think while being financially stressed. [laughs] What a surprise. [laughs] The stress can't be explained: lots of bills, expectations from family, and also ambitions that are not met with no actions. It all builds up until you forget how things used to be.

I will give you some of the symptoms. My personal symptoms. I'm home alone all the time, barely talking or texting, and listening to lots of podcasts. I never thought I would feel this way after school. But it's all right. Things are in control right now. And I'm out here in public, speaking about it.

Making money through the arts—it's hard. But it's much harder when you're isolated. I don't remember how it started or why I found myself alone. One of my mentors recommended therapy. Kept checking in. And it was—and this is how I slowly recovered from my self-deprecating mind and perspective. It wasn't that hard. I needed someone to tell me it's gonna be okay, and help me reset.

When you're involved in a community, or sharing the journey with friends rooting for you, it's much harder to fall back to the darkness. These are the connections that can save us. I urge you to check in on your peers, mentor in your free time, provide a space for learning and growing together, as artists, as friends, and as a community that cares for one another.

Ananna Rafa (Artist):

Art school was the first time we experienced what it meant to be othered—to feel that we did not deserve to be there, to feel that the work we made, our histories, our cultures were suddenly misunderstood, to feel that, then, it was a waste of time.

And yet, we would not have known that both of us felt similar ways, had we not had conversations that seemed to be taboo.

And why should we not speak out against systems that divide us?
About institutions with the sole purpose of financial gain?
About ways of pedagogy that no longer work?

These conversations need to be had—conversations among friends, family, students, colleagues:
About historic truths.
About the art world that no longer serves us.
About what the art world has the potential to be and who can call themselves an artist.

It is radical enough to continue to live in this world as an artist, and to continue to tell ourselves that we deserve to be an artist. And it is definitely radical to tell other people—like ourselves—that you, too, can be an artist.

Art-making can be messy. It can be volatile. And it needs to be touched by the strengths and sorrows of our world. We are the dreamers of today, because somewhere along the way, we have seen dreaming is possible for people like us. It is our responsibility to pass on the knowledge of what it means to dream, to others who yet cannot imagine other worlds possible.

Thank you.

[applause]

Ammar Bowaihl:

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

Thank you.

I assume—student? Like, recent—degrees graduates? I—right? Right.

Imagine doing that with a full bladder. Which is a reminder—it's being recorded. We don't need to pee ourselves. It's not rude to get up and pee. I joke with the gavel, but if you have to pee, I will wait for you. No one needs to pee their pants. Okay? We've gone through enough. You don't need to publicly pee yourself up here on this stage. I just want to remind everybody of that.

All right, how are we doing?

[applause]

I understand it's been four—is that—are those open? Are those new bottles?

Gabrielle Moser (from the audience):

These are new bottles.

[laughter]

Kiera Boult:

There [are] new bottles of wine. Thank you. Like four hours of sitting and listening to, like, not the easiest of things. I know me. I'm a good time, but—

[laughter]

It was a *joke.* But thank you all, everybody, for staying focused, staying here. The children—thank you. Wow. I—you know, I would definitely use my kid as an excuse to go home early. But *Potomac* [*The Real Housewives of Potomac*, TV show] isn't even that good this season. So what's there to even watch? [laughs]

Come to my town hall. We're talking Bravo, baby. All right, up next—say it louder!

Andrew James Paterson (from audience):

The Academy Awards are on tonight.

Kiera Boult:

The Academy Awards are on tonight for "—those who give a shit—" is what Andrew James Paterson said. I forgot.

Kiera Boult:

Alright. Up next is Alicia Shanka—Shanky [Alycia Shanika].

Also—a moment for this coat! I've been coveting it all night.

Alycia Shanika (Artist & Urban Planner):

Hello. First, I want to say thanks to everyone for holding space. It's great to hear about everyone's collective organizing work.

My name's Alycia. I am an urban and cultural planner, an artist, and a community builder. The work that I've been doing is related to the connections between these worlds and better system design. We operate within this system where our precarity—and how we work—is determined by the systems in which we operate.

And we're experiencing labor challenges. We're experiencing governance challenges. We're experiencing financial challenges across the board in our sector. And we're experiencing space challenges.

And as an urban planner, my practice is connected to the land and to the spaces in which we operate. And this is the focus of my research as well.

I recently published a book/magazine called *Future Diasporas* that was really built by a collective of artists who are all incredible. It was a four-year project that grew as part of my grad studies thesis. Through interview-style conversations in 21-22, these artists shared insight with me—shared knowledge with me—about their experiences in navigating space, navigating their identities, and place within the city. They also shared stories about displacement and ancestral cultural practices, like Palestinian artist Jana Ghalayini, who shares how building a home is connected to textile weaving practices in Palestine.

The stories were too important not to share, so I worked to develop the stories into a beautiful, 160-page magazine where the artists' artwork is highlighted. The publication is called *Future Diasporas: Culture, Art, Identity, Space and Toronto's Unaffordable Urban Landscape*.[22] (You can find it at Issues Magazine Shop, Art Metropole, the Spacing Store, Another Story Bookshop, or futurediasporas.ca.)

And with the insight and knowledge these incredible artists shared, I was able to come up with some recommendations around these challenges that then helped inform the City's culture plan, which came out a couple of months back.

And while those recommendations are a start, they're not enough. We're seeing so many challenges impacting people here, and we need movement.

And I think that it's more than just precarity. I think what we're seeing is that *our culture isn't valued*. Our cultures aren't valued in the way they should be—and it's artistic practices, it's the places we come from. It's the places that determine who we are as people.

It's who we are as people, really.

And I think that for us to be seen as people, we need to imagine these futures. And not just imagine them, not just dream them, but *act* them.

One of the artists, Hima [Batavia], who was a featured contributor in *Future Diasporas* shared some incredible insight. And there's this beautiful poem that she speaks to. I can't remember it off the top of my head fully, but she speaks to the minute that you start envisioning what you want to see—by holding space, by being here today—you are living and seeing the future.

So if you want to imagine and dream what the future looks like, start living it. Start embodying it. Start embodying the future you want to see, and come together as people.

To understand how the future could look, we have to better understand what infrastructure exists in the present to best utilize or change it. So my team at Collective Futures is building an important network and system mapping project to identify, categorize, and visualize a centralized inventory of cultural infrastructure. So far, this has included mapping the people, organizations, spaces, policies, funds, and other resources at various levels in the sector, and making connections across them.

(This *Mapping Cultural Infrastructure* inventory will be an interactive community-led tool for artists, cultural workers, organizations, and institutions, highlighting critical gaps and prioritizing solutions to improve access and equity within the cultural ecosystem. I'm looking to grow my team of collaborators at *Collective Futures* and access resources to help bring this tool to life.)

Chat with me or reach out at alycia@collectivefutures.ca if you'd like to help or share resources.

I'm also working on this really amazing network mapping project that is going to basically make connections around our people, places, policies, systems, and how they operate—anyway, talk to me later!

Kiera Boult:

All right. We are—thank you for that—that was beautiful.

I mean, how do you top urban planning? You know? You think being an arts administrator is bleak. [laughs] At least Andrew James Paterson visits me on Fridays.

[laughter]

Well, you used to. But I haven't seen you in a few Fridays. Oh, okay. Never mind. No one visits me on a Friday anymore—

Anyways, so we have three more people. But what this means is that I'm going to become a very mean mistress. That means—no. If you are over, I am *slapping* the gavel with pride, with joy, with pleasure. All right? Glad we're all on this.

And I don't—I'm not worried about being mean. I was worried about being mean slapping it on you. That's why I'm saying this now.

I'm not scared.

Kiera Boult:

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[*Statement has been removed at the speaker's request*.]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kiera Boult:

[*Portion of discussion omitted due to redacted content*.]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kiera Boult:

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kiera Boult:

Can I say this? Can I say this? Because I think like, a conversation— a conversation about how censorship has impacted our community, I thought of like a joke that I was like, “It’s in poor taste, and no one will laugh,” but I was like, a lot of us, if we weren’t censored, we were just gonna get cancelled anyway. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kiera Boult:

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kiera Boult:

Oh, okay. Anyways—But I do—like, but I do think that this is like, maybe I—maybe I summoned this.

Anyways, I—you're—I—the next person—I'm gonna look up the name and then I'm gonna say it, cause it's fine. And by the way, like, we all make mistakes, and like, our privilege gets in the way of us doing the right thing.

Like, by all means, if you've met—to meet me is to know that like, my privilege gets in my way of doing the right thing all of the time. And that is like a human way of being.

But like, sitting in this room and everybody pushing and gesturing to like, "There needs to be some sustainability for cultural workers via—maybe it's a union. Maybe it's like something else." The fact that like, there are artists among us that like, probably experience the privileges of being unionized. Are you unionized at U of T [University of Toronto]? Probably—right? I don't know, actually.

Anyways, I keep looking at you and you're like, "Sis, stay away from me."

[laughter]

Anyways—I just wanna say, I think there are things that we should not forget and be outraged about. And one of them is being on a board and being a union-buster about it. But I think there was nuance there, I'm sure. And, you know, all of the PR things I'm supposed to say.

Kiera Boult:

Anyways. Okay, up next we have Zach Goldkind. Yes!

[applause]

Zachary Goldkind (Filmmaker & Programmer):

Hello, everyone. It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak to, and listen alongside, all present here today.

My name is Zachary Goldkind and I'm a 27-year-old experimental narrative filmmaker, as well as a programmer and burgeoning, hopeful, likely still quite naive—scholar. I also appreciate the role I have held as a teacher.

In obvious firsts, it's deeply important to collect around this forum together. The threats of austerity and shifts into libertarian economics, both presently within and encroaching upon our contemporary cultural industry and independent spheres, is of utmost seriousness.

It's clear that the reliance on local institutional bulwark, established in the city since the 70s, late 60s, has come undone, for the most part. These platforms are either unable to mitigate the conservative policy of liberal hegemony, or contend with their own contradictions as it becomes more explicit with the inherent relationship between art and politics—is one that also requires assured and emphatic underscoring.

Art and its politics, as well as the politics of art—its creation, its exhibition—need-come-first as we face an ethos of deregulation and fascistically propagandized education.

I come speaking to you as an artist and teacher whose work is my pedagogy, and whose pedagogy guides my work. If there is anything I believe that art might provide to generations, both young and old, it's that rejuvenation of political praxis through the discourses of art.

I was a Zionist until not too long ago—2019. And it was the curiosity that cultivated through a combination of art as catalyst and education as continuity, where my entire world—its political faculties, the core values I've held across my existence—changed for, I can only say, the extreme better. From Zionism to anti-Zionism, it is built through artistic and historical education.

It's at this time where I might articulate my vision for an ideal future: one built of localized economies, and driven by the co-ops that have remained the beating heart of marginalized practice.

But this vision is one for an entire country's shift, and we currently do not have the political strength to accomplish this.

So, I might only take on the Marxist idealisms of futurity, where what we can build is something that others maintain afterwards—a level of access to art that is also access to a political education, where transparency is provided for regarding the systems we are all forced to manoeuvre through: against consumption and towards collective action.

It must not only be at school where we might gain access to organized pedagogies, but in the exhibition and dissemination of art. As artists, we stand for something. We demand better of the opportunism and careerism that has negated the centrality of political camaraderie across borders.

We must responsibly and reflexively speak for those here, for those who are not, while speaking for us as well. That requires organization, programme-building, and the maintenance of praxis across the creation and exhibition of our art and their insights.

We must do more than screen films and host panels, put on performances, and engage in talkback sessions. In my opinion, it is our duty to instigate the radicalization of those who come to seek engagement in art—those who show even a millimetre of curiosity.

As Paulo Freire said, "Radicalization, nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative"[23]—and what better description is there of an artist? What can we build for ourselves—to bring that beyond ourselves?

Thank you.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

All right—we have a closer, if you will. We have Fan Wu and Aliya Pabani. They were gifted an eight-minute slot as a *duo*. Must be nice. Smells like favouritism.

What's it like to be God's favourite? Eight minutes. Poor Dot's begging for five seconds.

[laughter]

This one back here is saying, "Please, 30 more seconds." Meanwhile, you two have eight minutes. All is fair, though. Anyways—[laughs] anyways—I introduce your closers—and then there'll be—(and then I start—before you clap.)

So they're going to do their eight-minute thing. No longer, I promise you. Eight minutes. That's it. And then, our fabulous hosts and facilitators are gonna come up and send us out.

All right? All right.

[applause]

Fan Wu (Performer & Writer):

I think we made a mistake in asking for more time. I wanna first credit Aliya—not to be embarrassing—with helping to transform me from a Bruce LaBruce faggot—that's a—like a hedonist esthete—towards becoming a John Greyson faggot, which is a hedonist esthete with a political consciousness.

[laughter]

So, Aliya is part of the team that is helping me become who I always needed to become.

And, on that front, I wanted to ask you—we've heard a lot today about definitions of words. We've heard a lot of questions in the abstract realm of the symbolic—of questions that you can language around for a long, long time. But you and I have talked a lot about how activism answers those questions through practice, and I wondered if you could speak more to—how activism intervenes on the endless circulation of language.

Aliya Pabani (Artist):

Thank you. I just wanted to maybe—I really appreciate people sharing their experiences. And I think that a comrade Michael DeForge, who isn't here (who's really great), talked about how his political education comes mainly from case studies, like reading a lot about the histories of the

struggle. And it's a very tangible way you can kind of compare your context without having to go through centuries of—not centuries, but centuries of theory—a millennia of theory.

But I think that—I guess to answer that, I would say, maybe I could just talk about my experience being a political, or what I would consider to be a political artist or cultural worker, and then how sort of things shifted for me getting involved in organizing. And I think that there is a way in which one can get very caught in concepts.

And I think that, especially in a moment like right now, where a lot of people have mentioned the conditions we're living under, you don't see a lot of power for the things, behind the things that we collectively have identified that we care about. You don't see those examples. You don't feel it.

I don't know if people saw that film about Khrushchev and the jazz—like that soundtrack [laughs]—*Soundtrack for a Coup d'État*? But I think the thing that was so striking to me and made me feel so mournful is that—it was a moment of power being distributed across nation-states more. It was a more contested, I guess, time.

And so I guess I really do feel once I got into organizing and through ESN [Encampment Support Network] Parkdale, and more recently through No Arms in the Arts, I think I was really struck by the fact that there was something in the acting together and the—over a longer period of time, and actually seeing the process of change, and actually noticing the value our work has. Not as the value our individual art has, but actually like–that we collectively make work that has value and that has power.

And I think that—I guess I would just argue that it's really important to try to learn by doing.

And I think that's been some of the most transformational work—political work—in my life. And I think people really need to see that. People really need to see things changing to understand how they can theoretically change.

Fan Wu:

And one of the things that changed, through the work of No Arms in the Arts and Writers Against the War on Gaza—which we were involved in— that gave me so much hope for actual political action, is that Scotiabank's Elbit Systems reduced its share in Elbit Systems (which is an Israeli arms manufacturer) from $500 million to $180 million through repeated pressure on different organizations that sponsor, are sponsored by Scotiabank, rather.

So, let's give it up for those activists.

[applause]

That's a huge victory. It's quite unheard of. And now, let's give a round of vomiting sounds for Scotiabank because, not—[imitates vomiting noise] They're—it's shameful.

But one really important moment in my training as an activist—and also one of the most impactful theatrical experiences was interrupting a lunch held by Scotiabank in the Canadian Club. At this lunch, all the food was round. It was like round mashed potatoes, round asparagus, and like a little round chicken as though the roundness, the platonic roundness of the food could make up for the blandness of the food. It was quite this like, it's very white trick of flavor.

And then, so we pretended to be boyfriends—me and these other activists—we pretended to be lovers at this table with a bunch of legal bureaucrats or whoever is involved in Scotiabank. And when we stood up to interrupt the lunch, the looks on their faces were so delicious. It was the most important participatory aesthetic experience of my life.

So, I urge all of you: to take your fucking theatre outside of the art world and right into the dirty laps of the rich.

[applause and cheering]

That's because—it's just pleasurable to do so. But we've been talking about the aesthetics of politics for a long time, and I wondered if you have any stories to tell or thoughts on that—with your—

Aliya Pabani:

No, you start us up. Well, what do you think about it?

Fan Wu:

Well, we were talking about how people fetishize form sometimes, and people want to break form, but then the event is still not good, or the gathering is still not good. And I wondered if you had seen examples of that, or if there are ways to just have a conventional form but filled with really good political content, things like that—?

Aliya Pabani:

I mean, I guess I think that the things that have worked for building this campaign—and I will say, a lot of the people who have been a part of this campaign, in ways, are in this space—and I do think that it's not about creating the perfect form for politics to happen.

We know how to relate to each other in a very simple way, and to find the common things that we're concerned about, and the things that, I guess—the common concern that is shared across enough people that that makes it winnable. And, I think that that has been a lot of what this campaign has been about, is moving, is building a form around the context. So it was like, okay: There's a lot of different kinds of organized groups. There's some friends who hang out. And then there's some—we're like revolutionary Marxists in the arts—who you know, we're the revolutionary front, we're almost armed or whatever.

And we were like: How do we bring them together under one very concrete goal? So, it was the form of the campaign was sort of like: how do we make the goal really concrete and map it out so it's easy for people to understand how their group—ad hoc group or whatever organization—can plug into it?

But we don't over-dictate how people make decisions, how they do their work, how they bring that demand to their context. And, I think that it's been very creative in a way. And, I think, it's also just—it builds. People talk about solidarity, but solidarity is a feeling that comes from the communal tending of the space, of like a struggle, of a goal. I don't know, I just have so much just love and respect for people in a new way, seeing the way that they…

[timer goes off]

Fan Wu:

Anyone subscribe to *The Globe and Mail* or the *National Post*?

[laughter]

Anyone?

[gavel bangs in background]

Kiera Boult:

I also gave you an extra 11 seconds.

Fan Wu:

Oh, that's great.

[laughter]

Okay. We didn't need that final crowd participation thing—

[gavel bangs]

Thanks Kiera.

[applause]

Kiera Boult:

I was obviously itching to do that.

Alright. It's been a blast here. Here you are our generous, gracious, beautiful hosts.

Annie MacDonell:

Can we give it up for Kiera?

[applause]

Keeping it *live*, keeping it *real*, keeping it *fun*. [applause continues]

Closing

Annie MacDonell:

I'm just gonna introduce—Luis Jacob couldn't be here tonight. He's in Victoria doing other important work. But, he's been really formative to the organization of this event and he's always inspirational to me as a member of our community. So, he's written a beautiful poem for us, and Joy's gonna read it.

Luis Jacob (read by Joy Xiang):

A mask now slipping.
A veil briefly lifted.
The shit that hits a fan.

Shut up. Move along.
Nothing to see, go home.
A spell that is sung and spoken.

The old, he said, will die.
The young will soon forget.
A shadow that has no feet.

What remainz comes to a head
Whistles blow, fireflies glow
the dust that does not settle.

Closing Remarks

Zinnia Naqvi:

Thank you all for coming.

This has been really incredible and moving, and we hope that more conversations, and organizing, activism, moving, dreaming, scheming, happens out of this. And I just wanna also shout out Annie MacDonell, who's been doing research about Open Hearing for the past couple years and who was actually the spark that made us all decide to make it happen here in Toronto. And then we'll see what happens from here. Thank you all for attending.

Thanks to Cafeteria, and [a] *huge* thank you to Kiera—incredible host with the most!

[applause]

Joy Xiang:

And thank you, Karina. Please go see the Stop Arming the Arts zines over there.

Gabrielle Moser:

We wanna thank also Mercer Union who helped support this event and *C Magazine* is a co-partner in this event.

This is also was meant to be kind of a starting point—[it] was to get everybody in the room and to talk to each other. So, EMILIA-AMALIA is gonna be in collaboration with Mercer Union over the summer, thinking about what comes next.

But this is also an open invitation following the Open Hearing for other people to keep organizing things like this. We're hoping this is the first in a series of some things that can build from here.

If you want to be in touch with us—please get in touch with us—and I hope people got a chance to talk to and meet and connect with one another. I think we all felt like we were talking in closed rooms and we were trying to have an event that let us talk to each other a little bit tonight.

Thank you all for being here.

[applause]

Endnotes

1. The original Open Hearing took place in April 1969, not 1968 as stated by the speaker. See: “Art Workers Coalition Timeline,” MoMA Archives; Primary Information, https://primaryinformation.org/product/art-workers-coalition-open-hearing/
2. Audra Simpson is a Mohawk anthropologist whose work critiques settler colonialism and the politics of recognition. While the phrase “privilege and the self-reflexive settler” does not appear verbatim in her published works, the themes of settler privilege and reflexivity are addressed in her broader critique of recognition and settler colonial logics. See: Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
3. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and writer, explores relational wellness and collective care in: *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), https://www.upress.umn.edu/9781517903879/as-we-have-always-done/
4. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), Introduction. This quotation appears where Simpson defines *kobade* as intergenerational connections that sustain co-resistance through love, reciprocity, and the generative refusal of colonial recognition.
5. Nisrin Elamin discusses Sudan’s counterrevolutionary war in academic talks and articles. See: Elamin, Abbas, and Elnaiem, “In Sudan, the People’s Revolution Versus the Elite’s Counterrevolution,” *Hammer & Hope*, 2024, https://hammerandhope.org/article/sudan-revolution. See also: “Nisrin Elamin on Sudan’s Revolution,” YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vghdDomv5N8
6. *Status of the Artist Act*, Canada Industrial Relations Board, https://www.cirb-ccri.gc.ca/eic/site/047.nsf/eng/h_00017.html
7. Grace Lee Boggs, interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, April 2, 2010.
8. Maya Mackrandilal, “Radical Looking: Newly Seeing Art With My Baby,” *Momus*, May 3, 2024, https://momus.ca/radical-looking-newly-seeing-art-with-my-baby/
9. Amy Fung, *Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being* (Toronto: Book*hug Press, 2019).
10. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard, *Rehearsals for Living* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2022), https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/675719/rehearsals-for-living-by-robyn-maynard-and-leanne-betasamosake-simpson/9781039000650/excerpt
11. Grace Lee Boggs, interview on *Democracy Now!* (see note 7).
12. John Körmeling’s *Mobile Fun* was presented at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, summer 2004. See: https://www.auto123.com/en/news/take-a-spin-in-a-9-2x-this-summer/44052/?page=2

13. Kim Kardashian, interview by *Variety*, March 2022. YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XX2izzshRmI
14. Chantal Mouffe, "Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space," PDF, https://ps.wdka.nl/digitalcraft/images/8/86/Art_and_Democracy_-_Chantal_Mouffe.pdf
15. Samera Esmeir and Fred Moten, "Itineraries of Anti-Zionism," panel at *The Anti-Zionist Idea: History, Theory, & Politics*, University of Toronto, November 8, 2024.
16. Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur, post on X (formerly Twitter), March 25, 2025.
17. Simpson and Maynard, *Rehearsals for Living* (see note 10).
18. Ray Dalio, interview with Tucker Carlson, *The Tucker Carlson Show*, full transcript.
19. Gendai, *MA MBA: Mastering the Art of Misguided Business Administration* (2019), https://gendai.club/ma-mba/
20. Gendai, "We Should Talk: Obvious Truths About Working in the Arts," *C Magazine*, Issue 155 (2023), https://cmagazine.com/issues/155/labour
21. Bertolt Brecht, "Motto," in *Svendborger Gedichte* [*Svendborger Poems*], 1939. Translation from *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913–1956*, edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Methuen, 1976).
22. *Future Diasporas: Culture, Art, Identity, Space and Toronto's Unaffordable Urban Landscape*, curated by Alycia Shanika (Toronto, 2022), https://artmetropole.com/shop/16139
23. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

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