

Michelle Jacques and Janna Graham

Aestheticizing Relationships or ...

Which Comes First, the Relational or the Aesthetics?

Michelle Jacques So almost as though we planned it, we're actually going to approach what we say in a much more personal way than the theoretical bent of the abstract that we provided, so Rosemary will get her wish to hear how we came to curatorial practice. And I guess really what we're talking about and why Janna and I are speaking together is... we're talking about our relationship at the AGO over the past... four, five years?

Janna Graham Six.

Michelle Jacques Six years. And this conference has been a kind of interesting impetus for us to start thinking about what that relationship means, because really it's just been sort of two people working in a big bad institution, finding each other and hanging on to each other for dear life and not really thinking too much about why we do what we do, or theorizing about it, so this is sort of the first chapter in that theorization, which we feel is particularly important now, given that Janna is abandoning me in a few weeks. *[laughter]*

So we're both going to tell you about how we ended up curating at the AGO. And admittedly, I came to curatorial practice in a completely accidental way. I was actually well into a psychology degree with plans on being a behavioural therapist when I decided that working in a museum might be a nice, stress-free job. That's what I was looking for in life. I pictured myself sitting in a nice office reading art magazines, and transferred into the art history programme at Queen's, so I do have really a sort of traditional art history background, because in the late '80s, art history at Queen's was taught by men who wore tweed jack-

ets with elbow patches.

So after studying art history at Queen's, I came here, to York, and did an MA in art history, and it's taken me more than a decade to realize that that next step was actually a good thing, and that actually set me on the path that I ended up on, because despite the fact that the programme at York had its issues, the one really good thing about it, particularly at the time that I was there, was that there was a concerted effort to make the MA and MFA programmes intersect, so it was here that I started building relationships with artists, and it was that experience that I took with me to the AGO, and after a few stints in historical departments, ended up working in contemporary, where I could really pursue that interest.

I did find it challenging to pursue that at the AGO, because it is a museum that does historical programming as well as contemporary programming, so to sort of address the question of the object and its continuing relevance, we work with a lot of people who are object-obsessed. There's no doubt about that. And I mean—Janna will go into this in more detail—but the curatorial department at the AGO still sort of functions as the keepers of the collection.

That is its main focus, its main concern, and I think because of my deeper interest in relationships with artists, I've found myself from an early stage in the curatorial department leaning towards my colleagues in education to find collaborators. And interestingly, we're at a moment where a lot of that intersection that happened between curatorial and education in kind of a clandestine way is finally becoming formalized and it's becoming institutional... vision, I guess.

Janna Graham Thanks, Michelle. So I came to museum practice—and I'm

just calling it museum practice because I work in a museum, and there is, as Michelle has outlined for you, an education department in which I do things that might be called “curatorial” in some circumstances, but at the AGO they wouldn’t be called that. They’re firmly planted in education, which is fine. I came to my engagement with the museum with a past in contemporary and community-based artistic production that started during a geography degree (I also went to Queen’s). In particular what I was working on at the time of entering the museum was the relationships between people, desire, and places, and, in particular again, the way in which human desires and relationships to place established through their use often contravene the designed and often hegemonically designed architectures of those places. So in planning terms, those contraventions are called “lines of desire”, and when I entered the AGO, I was thinking, “Okay, where can I find or create these lines of desire?”, pathways that surpass and exceed.

So, with a geography degree—I had an art degree as well, by then—but with the geography degree I understood immediately the geography of the gallery, and the corresponding fashion codes indicated a particular set of ideologies. The director works on the fourth floor, the curators on the third, the accountants and computer people on the second. The masses are on the first, or street level. In the basement are the educators and other service departments, and in the sub-basement, the people who clean the building.

So mapped out before me was a particular sense of where my role was located within the institutional imagination. Being the educator of the basement—or the educator in the basement, with the books and the slides is not an altogether terrible thing. My first job in the Education Department was an internship in

which I was to order a set of slides and educational archives, a kind of ghost town left behind when a previous director declared, “We’re going digital!” (Needless to say, ten years on this process is just beginning.) Lost in these archives, I realized that the job descriptions and the way that people function in this institution was really similar to the way the slides were organized: the taxonomies and very clearly coded kinds of separations were at play. Education was here connoted as that of the translation to “the people”. However, this taxonomy and the proximity to “the people” for me (and many of the radical gallery educators that had come before) to be excellent terrain for sheer mischief, a kind of reverse engineering.

It’s interesting, the history of the educator within museums. There is this idea of the educator warring with the curator that comes up, often at conferences, and it’s an interesting contradiction that sits at the core of many museum origin stories. For a brief stint I worked as an educator at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and their origin story was really interesting, because the art gallery was founded by a husband and wife, and the husband was Canon Barnett, and he was, a “man of the people”, self-defined, and he believed that there should be a great contemporary art gallery in London’s East End to elevate the souls of the poor people in the neighbourhood (and possibly their class position), and there’s all kinds of language around that. His wife was a mover and shaker in modern art, and wanted to make sure that the “best of the best” was on the walls, so there was a team effort but also a kind of contradiction, because what the people wanted and of course what was in vogue at the time weren’t always the same.

At the AGO the story is a little bit different because, as many people know, the AGO was kind of brought to life by members

of the Group of Seven, and amongst them was the educator and artist Arthur Lismer, and in the '20s he founded arts education and really a kind of arts education that wasn't so much like Canon Barnett's version.

He was interested in what we might now call humanitarian ideas—but he was very interested in enacting the gallery as a community space, a social space, a space for art-making, so early pictures of the AGO in the '20s have children's art next to permanent collection works. It's a very mixed-use kind of space. From here, you can really chart the history of different moments at the AGO where education had a very strong role to play, when it was very empowered, and other moments when, you know, it was down to the basement. But in a traditional notion or cataloguing description of the educator—the other side of Suzanne's description of the curator last night—there would be words like “children” and then in brackets “happy children”, “interpreter”, “clown”, “wealthy wife”, “cardigan sweater”. Those are the kinds of stereotypical notions of what an educator does.

So I guess, just to finish, how I came to work with Michelle—and other curators, incidentally, because I've found great colleagues in the curatorial department, not overall, but certainly individuals—I and others in education were very interested in how the gallery might be a space to prototype experiential and conceptual alternatives to the world that we live in. And knowing that those spaces in society are harder and harder to find as public spaces become privatized, museum spaces become privatized, that looking for moments of disjuncture with the kind of homogenizing narrative of capitalism, that gallery spaces can be some of those spaces where interventions can be performed and prototypes can be developed. There's a kind

of optimism there, and I think that Michelle and I share that optimism, that we might be able to do something that has an aesthetic consequence but also has some kind of social consequence in the world, so...

So we like working together. We're also friends, and I think it's important to say that, because, you know, friendships seem to be the basis of so many practices, of these kind of relational practices, but practices within contemporary art in general, and I think that's what marks that terrain as something really full of potential and excitement. It's not just about the roles we play. It's about the people we connect with and that's pretty exciting.

Michelle Jacques So within the literature around this symposium, we are talking about the artist and the audience and the curator and the relationships between those roles, and before we go on, we just wanted to sort of emphasize how complicated that equation gets at a place like the AGO, because, I mean, the artist is often supplanted by the collector or the dealer, who is often the person that has the relationship with the curator at a museum like the AGO, and the audience is so many times removed from the curator, because our first relationship is often with the marketer or the fundraiser, and only then, once the money is raised and the exhibition or the art is promoted, is the educator brought into the equation, and then finally the audience is on the other side of the educator, in the typical production line at the AGO.

Janna Graham You know, when we were thinking about this, we were reading an article by Declan McGonigle that appeared in FUSE, where he talks about that model really privileging signature culture, that whether it's the signature of the artist or the collector or the curator, as in a lot of cases at the AGO, everything

is built around that. He says—he posits against this “signature culture”, the kind of participatory art forms and principles of viewing that have existed for him since medieval times, precedents for the “relational projects” that have happened in the last twenty or thirty years. For him this relationality lies in the kind of agency that artists have imagined the viewer having throughout history, and he charts out those opportunities for participation, even in traditional paintings or in manuscripts. Anyway, we won’t go into this too much, but what he says is that in the signature-culture paradigm the educators come in and are engaged in what he calls “compensatory exercises”, so the object—which is always already finished and up on the wall—is there, it’s full of meaning, and the educator comes along and tries to inspire the people, whether they like it or not. I have a colleague who is often asked to perform in this way, must appear in a kind of clownlike outfit to make the art interesting for people There is that kind of sense that you have to go to those lengths for people to get excited about some of the things on the wall and that configuration seems really strange, especially in a public institution.

Michelle Jacques I think Janna and I, in all of our projects, are trying to think about the multiplicity of the people who come to the AGO and who are trying to engage.

Janna Graham I think one of the challenges of thinking about that multiplicity in terms of the way the museum functions with this kind of signature culture, where everything is harnessed around marketing the object and then selling it eventually to the consumers, is that instead of understanding this multitude or this multiplicity of identities, that there’s this desire to predict behaviour and to know everything about the visitor without ever anyone in the gallery really speaking to anybody. So there’s a really

incredibly detailed armature in place in the marketing department, where we engage countless market research firms to come and talk to our visitors, and there are charts—you know, “factors influencing decisions to come to the AGO, most important factors”, on and on, endless graphs and charts—and this litany of kind of social scientific and market research data that we use to try and fix and predict this kind of multiplicity and then to project who the audience will be, what kinds of things will they like. And that’s one of the dangers of this “visitor experience is paramount”, is that on the one side we’re trying to engage in projects which we’ll talk about in a second, that do provide experience—really interesting experiences and open-ended experiences—where the other people within the institution sometimes use that language as a way of fixing something that they see as unruly and wild, which is this imagined audience, these crazy people who come in, who we aim to please What could they possibly like? And because people don’t spend a lot of time actually talking to visitors or understanding—or even just engaging in conversations—I think that the audience can be anything, and the audience-as-anything-object, often. The way that we see the objects in our collection, we kind of turn that on to the audience, as if we could study them and know everything about them, taxonomies them, when the great thing about public institutions is you can’t, and that people are eclectic, and the more eclectically they use the spaces, the better.

Michelle Jacques We’re going to run through some of the projects that we worked on individually before talking about a project that you’ll see tonight, which is a collaboration. The first project that I did at the AGO was an exhibition with Sally McKay, which was... it was a very purposeful choice, to put somebody who had never shown in a museum, who didn’t really create collectible objects,

but who created an installation that was basically a critique of collecting. The project in the corner was a sort of fabricated history of a collector who was attempting to get all the Fisher-Price phones in the world, and the other thing that completely threw the institution for a loop was that we turned the installation into a mini Art Metropole where people could buy Sally's multiples by leaving money in a drop box.

Sally, at the time—and this was 1998, I think—did a zine workshop for teens, which was one of the earliest teen-focused projects that we did at the AGO, and became the impetus for a lot of further activity.

Janna Graham

I'll talk about some of the further activity. In 1999, we developed a project for youth in which they could come into the gallery and design and create projects—curatorial projects, events, discussions, whatever—so I'm just going to breeze through some slides. In 1999 in Toronto, it was an interesting moment to be launching a youth programme, because the mayor and the chief of police had declared a war on graffiti and immediately that night arrested five teenagers who were spraying on underpasses, and there was, major—I mean, we've seen this in every city, probably everywhere, of the kind of demonization of so-called gang activity ...so a group of more than five teenagers is a gang, and they're immediately broken apart.

The kids were really politicized and decided to do a series of events. One was a big festival of urban culture, which ended up going on for three years, and they used that as an advocacy tool and brought in their parents and teachers and as many people as they could find. They brought in hip-hop broadcasters who were playing into stereotypes, they felt, and put them on

the hot seat, did a lot of really interesting projects, including a skateboard ballet, which they choreographed with Terence Dick and dancer Zoja Smutny, and they did that in the AGO as well as at a shopping mall—two places where skateboarders are often kicked off the front steps.

So they ended up curating a whole series of projects and then a few years later created this project that was—kind of the impetus for this was a workshop with Rebecca Belmore, and they invited Rebecca to come and work with them, and then they ended up working with a local artist, Kathy Walker, to produce an event that was around activism and the lack of free space in the city, so they called it *Free Space: Art Acts Out*. It was a performance project that involved them walking into the streets, handing out T-shirts, inviting people to write on the T-shirts. They installed the T-shirts in Walker Court, at the AGO, as an installation, and then produced an open-mic kind of event, and the highlight of that was the appearance of the Radical Cheerleaders, who are a group of cheerleaders who show up at a lot of activist events in the city.

Michelle Jacques This is the studio of a young Toronto artist named Swintak, and the studio was actually one of the galleries at the AGO. She moved in there for a month with all of her junk, and from it comprised a wallwork which is still up. You can see it tonight.

This was sort of a test version of something that we've gone on to do with Luis, which is to sort of create a participatory space that brings the creative activity of the artists into the gallery space, so for a month, Swintak was creating her work and interacting with the public. And Janna's going to talk about another project that Swintak did with us.

Janna Graham So before, even before she did this wallwork project, we en-

gaged Swintak to do a performance workshop and project with, again, the youth in our programme invited her to come, and a funder had given us some money to go to New York to see Christo's *Gates* with some teenagers, which were not that interesting for most of the kids. They just didn't really like the piece. But they liked New York, and liked Swintak a lot, so they ended up doing a project called *The Living Room Project*, and created a composite living room of a number of people they interviewed in the city of Toronto, and took it on the road to a number of spots. They called themselves ... formed a collective called the Upholstery Militia, and they still exist today. They just did a project at Sears, an intervention, and this is them at city hall in Toronto.

I just wanted to say, before, this idea of the gallery as a living space and a living room kind of keeps coming up, but to a certain extent I think it was, for me, really brought home with this project called *Audge's Place* that we created in 2003, I believe, in response to Richard Hill's installation of the first object, early Aboriginal object, that was purchased for the AGO's collection. But this was a theatre group called Debajehmujig who actually built a house, or the set of a home, in the gallery, and served corn soup and invited people to cross the threshold and to come into the space to work against racist stereotypes among tourists and Toronto residents. They performed improvised performances and had the audience do the same thing, and for me, this was a real point of rupture within the institution, where this idea of creating a living space was proposed. Many of our more traditional visitors had a lot of trouble with the idea of an active space, a participatory space taking the place of an object-orientated museum, but many of the people who don't come regularly really found it to be quite amazing, so it was an interesting kind of test case for us.

Michelle Jacques Just going to introduce Luis's piece, which you'll see tonight, because it's part of a series which is the culmination of the work that Janna and I have been doing together. It's called *Open Gallery*, and it was actually a response to the fact that one of our curatorial colleagues proposed having a residency, an artist residency, in the gallery during the renovation, and while the idea proposed that the space would be given over to the artist, and if they wanted quiet time they could just close the door and keep the public out, we decided to turn that around completely, and call it *Open Gallery*, and create a situation where we worked with artists who wanted to engage the public, and who were thinking about what it meant to interact socially in a public space like a museum, and given all of Luis's activity as an artist, as a curator, writer, activist, that explores that very issue about what it means to interact socially in a public space, we thought he'd be the perfect person to initiate the series, so I'm glad that he'll be able to speak to you tonight.

Another thing that we said we were going to do in our abstract was propose possibilities, and just... Luis thinks a lot about the history of funk, and funk, of course, is a musical movement that started in the 1970s, and essentially took the place of otherness occupied by African-Americans, and turned it into a message of togetherness and hope and possibility of the future, and I think one of the proposals that we've been playing around with—we'll see if it can really happen—is, we want George Clinton and Funkadelic Parliament to play at the reopening of the AGO in 2008. I also think that George Clinton is the greatest performance artist that's ever lived, but he's been written out of the history of performance art because he's got too much rhythm.

We're supposed to have some music right now that would close

things out, but technology's not with us, so we'll just pledge allegiance to the funk and hope you'll do it with us.

Michelle Jacques

& Janna Graham We pledge allegiance to the funk, the whole funk, and nothing but the funk.

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