Between Private and Public:
The Artist in Flux

By:

Ashley Guindon

BFA, The University of Western Ontario, 2008

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Abstract

This thesis essay explores my growth as an artist over the course of the MAA, Visual Arts Stream. Initially, I investigate a conventional private studio practice that explores ritual (Bataille), subjectivity (Baudrillard), defamiliarization (Viktor Schlovsky) and the act of looking (Mark Lewis). Later, it documents a shifting towards a practice that is collaborative, participatory, or otherwise open to others and that borrows techniques and tropes from community art (Betsy Damon, Suzanne Lacy), social practice (Anthony Schrag, Claire Bishop) and dialogical practice (Grant Kester, Stephen Willats).

The thesis art work explored in the essay includes various video projects from the first year of the MAA which demonstrate my explorations of ritual and subjectivity (*Waver Dither Falter, Water Oil Wine, Benny).* I also explore an ongoing series of projects from the second year of my MAA, which incorporate participation and collaboration with others as a means of experimenting with the possibilities of an open practice (*The We Sessions).* Though all the works result in immersive video installations around the subject of ritual, the process changes in the latter work. Specifically, *The We Sessions*, combined with the research essay, question the implications of these changes from historical, artistic, and critical viewpoints, both for myself and also for the art-world at large.

Dedication

To my grandmother, Joyce Morgan, who would have been an artist if she had been born 50 years later. I will do it for you...

...and to Cameron Cartiere, who introduced me to Narnia!

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Introduction: A New Landscape, or "Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost"

Like most interdisciplinary artists, my practice often takes me into unfamiliar territories. When my work begins to shift toward the unfamiliar, two distinct parts of my personality appear in stark contrast. There is the conditioned side of me that needs to know all the rules, is not allowed to make mistakes, and is often afraid of the unknown; this side of me feels like the unknown is a mine field and, despite the beautiful landscape and beckoning hills and valleys, it is afraid to move. Then there is the side of me that is content to be ever-changing, ever-searching, that is excited by uncertainty and confusion because they mean there is more to be discovered; this side of me is willing to brave the mine field to get to the new world beyond.

Throughout all the changes, I gravitate towards a specific interest: I am intrigued by social structures and the rituals and rules that govern them. I am endlessly curious about the formation of my own and others' subjectivities. The form that my work takes is allowed to shift. I have utilized drawing, painting, installation, and video. Throughout the course of my two-year MAA, I have been exposed to new ways of working that I had not considered before, namely public art and all the nuanced forms that exist under this wide umbrella (social practice, relational aesthetics, dialogical practice, public sculpture, community art, art activism, etc). This essay is an exploration of my developing interest in these areas, particularly public practice, and how these ideas have influenced my practice over the course of the degree.

My thesis work is a reflection of an artist in flux. I will begin by introducing my studio practice, which incorporates many mediums in pursuit of an overarching thematic: the exploration of social rituals. I will outline how these interests brought me to this program and still follow me, and have in fact directed me, into public practice. Secondly, I will explore the influence of my research assistantship during my MAA, in which I worked on a public art research project. My experiences in this field have introduced me to the afore mentioned new landscape of possibilities. Thirdly, I will discuss the potential artistic and ethical problems that are embedded

in this landscape--the minefield of potential downfalls--and explore some tools for proceeding. Finally, I will outline my thesis exhibition, post-MAA goals, and the artistic philosophies that will guide me in the future.

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Terms

Public Practice:

The term “Public Art” is often used to refer to a wide range of work. Many artists, theorists, schools of thought, philosophies, and methodologies exist under the public art umbrella. These can include relational aesthetics, social practice, participatory art, art activism, community art, dialogical aesthetics, and autonomous works created by a single artist and placed in the public realm.

Artists who work in these fields are often cited as public artists. In this essay, I want to differentiate between artists whose private studio practice produces work that *exists* in the public (eg. a public sculpture) and artists who work *with* the public to some degree to produce work.

For the purposes of this essay, the term “Public Practice” will refer to practices that involve others as a necessary part of the process of creation or creative production of the final work.

Ritual:

The term ritual has many connotations. It can be as specific as the performance of a religious ceremony, or as general as a procedure that is regularly followed.

The rituals I am interested in are social rituals, performed with two or more individuals on a regular basis and in a prescribed way. Most importantly, I am intrigued by social rituals that have an impact on the formation of our subjectivities. Dance clubs, church services, weddings, sports events, concerts, gallery openings, family dinners--these are all instances in which we tend to act in a certain way and take part in ritualistic actions.

For the purposes of this essay, the term “Ritual” will refer to these types of rituals--those performed in groups and that have a profound impact on the subjectivities of their participants.

Preface

Circa 1999

Tapping toes. Clapping hands. Repetitive sounds. Really, what is here is not all that special, yet these people do these things day after day, week after week, year after year, and generation after generation--sometimes with very little variation.

It has to be more than habit, though. Sometimes if I look at the faces of these people, I see yearning; if I listen I can hear hope and desperation. Some of them laugh, some cry. They all hug and shout. They all sing along, but not just to the words of the song--to the underlying, endless beat beneath all of this moving around.

I am young and I know nothing beyond this. I can feel the lump forming in my throat while it all moves around me. I un-focus my eyes, look down, and locate the pinpoint of light that no one else noticed...

Chapter I: The Ritual as Subject

Over and Over: Why Ritual and the Act of Looking?

The first chapter of my thesis outlines the themes and concerns that have followed me throughout my practice and have propelled me from medium to medium. My work before my MAA focused on an exploration of social rituals through multi-media, including installation, drawing, painting, video, and sculpture. In terms of subject matter, I have been concerned with my past experiences with social, group rituals that, in my experience, required a passive, compliant participant (such as services at my childhood Evangelical church or the repetitive actions of the dance clubs I frequented in my early twenties).

Most of my pre-MAA works were about sharing my experiences and asking others for their interpretation. An example is *Title Me* (2009), a series of portraits, presented in ornate frames and hung in salon-style. Each work is small--less than two feet squared--and intimate. Each depicts people in extreme states of emotion. The faces are closely cropped, the backgrounds a hazy wash. The poses and expressions came from my own experiences of Evangelical church services where people sang, danced, shook, and laughed or cried uncontrollably. When I first showed these paintings to others, I noticed that they were often re-interpreted because the backgrounds are ambiguous--were the people inside or outside? in pain or ecstasy? laughing or crying? Instead of limiting the paintings to my own interpretation, I asked my viewers to title the works based on their reading of what was happening in the picture. Some associated the expressions with negative memories, while others found the faces funny. Some were excited to interpret the pictures, while others were uncomfortable because they were not told what the work was about.

Fig. 1: Ashley Guindon, *Title Me: Detail,* 2009. acrylic on canvas, found frame, 5’’x6’’.

In this project, and in others, it was the viewer's response that intrigued me just as much as my own artistic explorations.

Fig. 2: Ashley Guindon, *Title Me,* 2009. acrylic on canvas, found frame, dimensions variable

I continued with my interest in social rituals and the viewer's response to them when I arrived at Emily Carr. During this time, I approached the ritual almost scientifically by breaking it down into components such as gestures and repetitive movements. For example, in the video installation *Waver Dither Falter* (2011), I use close-ups of reflections, shadows, and silhouettes to represent a night at a dance club. The video is not immediately readable--it needs to be looked at slowly. The images are brief and fleeting, and action moves in and out of the picture plane. Their are whole forms and abstracted ones, and it is not easy to identify what is perceived. Over time, viewers may make out the reflections off of a belt buckle, the silhouette of a moving figure, or the blinking of a disco light. My process of reduction and deconstruction is a symbolic gesture of explaining that which, I know, is ultimately unexplainable. This way of looking and deconstructing what was happening was also my defense mechanism as a child. I would not say, however, that an exploration of a ritual (in this case, the repetitive actions of the dance club) is the end goal of my work--it is the subject that is being looked at.

The goal of these works is, ultimately, an exploration of the act of looking. I create a viewing experience that attempts to draw out the mind's process of perceiving and interpreting by impeding the mind's automatic labeling function. In the final installation of *Waver Dither Falter,* the viewer enters a dark room. On the floor are six abstract, body-sized white objects, made of a folded, thin paper. Each blinks rhythmically with coloured lights: blue, red, pink, yellow, green.

As the viewer moves through the room, he/she finds that the source of the lights comes from the dance club video clips which appear on the sides of the objects, projected from within. The viewer must move around the objects, bending and stooping to see the videos. In this way the viewer is actively, physically engaged with the piece, and, hopefully, not passively observing, as it is this active engagement that is the goal of the work. The viewer's mind and body are put into a temporal relationship with the subject (the dance club), which cannot be discovered without taking the time to do so.

Fig. 3: Ashley Guindon, *Waver Dither Falter,* 2011. SD video, paper, glue, dimensions variable.

Artists Jun Pak and Louise Noguchi use similar techniques in their work to draw out the amount of time that it takes to perceive and interpret the piece. In Pak's installation *Walkthrough* (2009), the artist fragments a video projection with small round mirrors, shooting the image around the room and letting the viewer piece the image together. In Noguchi's *Three Scenes* (2009), the viewer stoops to view the work through peepholes in the gallery wall. Both works require the viewer to physically position themselves in relation to the material. The strategy of promoting an active looking--one that slows the mind's processes of perception from an automatic to a gradual one--encourages the viewer to consider the subject in a conscious, aware manner. The artists

invite the viewer into a relationship with the art object that gives the viewer an active role in the piece.

My reason for focussing on rituals such as Evangelical churches and dance clubs is to engage in critiquing these rituals and their influence upon subjectivity as well as to set the stage for a moment of active looking for the viewer. I choose these rituals because I am familiar with them and am intrigued by them, but also because they present a challenge. My goal is to create a nuanced viewing experience, and there is the possibility that pre-conceived notions and strong opinions about the rituals presented can impede this experience. For example, the found video appropriated in *Water Oil Wine* (2012) depicts an adult baptism in which two men lower a woman into a trough of water. In the Evangelical church, the baptism represents the "death" of the woman's old, sinful life and her "rebirth" as a Christian. For some viewers, this ritual represents hope, new life, and celebration. For others, it is violent and upsetting.

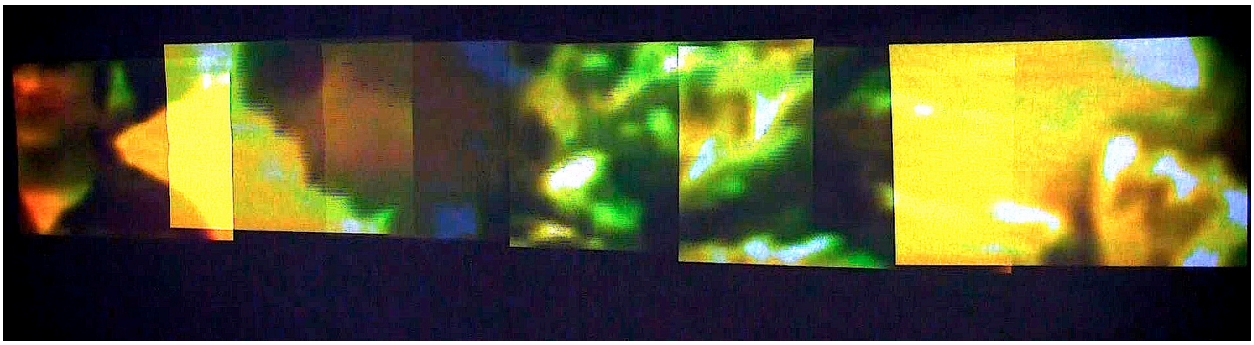

Fig. 4: Ashley Guindon, *Water, Oil, Wine,* 2012. SD video, paper, dimensions variable.

The varying opinions on social rituals such as these are often strong, immediate, and based on subjective experience. This is understandable, as some rituals connect with humans on a fundamental and visceral level. In *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,* Georges Bataille explores how rituals and religious symbols represent and replace the human instinct for violence, death, and sex. He argues that humanity uses rituals to approach sex and death in order to remove themselves from them and to be "unconscious" of them: "(i)n principle, *consciously* humanity

'recoils in horror before death'" but "the banal prerequisite" for approaching death "is his unconsciousness of the cause and effects of his actions" (24). This analysis is a close reflection of my experiences of ritual--both in the church and the dance club, where one of the points of the rituals is not to think but just to turn oneself over to something else (eg. God, alcohol, music, emotions, sexual urges, etc). Of course, both Bataille and I are talking about particular western forms of hegemonic ritual. Certainly there are forms of ritual that do not match Bataille's description. But for those that do, what is to be done? If ritual is an unconscious act as Bataille suggests, how then can one become conscious of it? Bataille gives us a hint: "it was essential for Hegel to *gain consciousness* of ... the horror of death--by upholding and by looking the work of death right in the face" (24). How can I look ritual "right in the face"? How can I encourage an act of looking that is non-judgmental and aware? I do this by drawing out the act of looking, by creating space between the moment of perception and the mind's automatic labeling process--by exploring the ritual, as Bataille suggests, in order to "gain consciousness" of it.

In my installations, there is an attempt to influence the process in the viewer's mind. In the installation of *Waver Dither Falter,* the viewer must move around the paper objects to view the videos and decipher the dance-club footage. Similarly, in the final iteration of *Water Oil Wine,* the found baptism video is broken up into six segments. Each is rear projected and overlapped in a long row on a floating screen, filling the viewer's horizon. The video is slowed down, the fragmented, distorted woman is lowered into the water and raised up over and over. The overlapped projections are almost painterly, and the overall effect is hypnotic. The baptism is distorted by the pixellation and saturation of the found video. The viewer never sees the whole image at once but can piece the gestures together over time, drawing from the rising and falling of the figures and the brief moments of clarity as hints of the subject matter appear and disappear --a hand, a face, an arm. This work is executed in such a way as to allow the viewer the opportunity to look carefully, and for a long period of time, at an image that could easily be dismissed with a preconceived judgment by some. Certainly, it is impossible to control the viewer's thought process, but the aesthetic choices may serve as encouragement to look in more

than one way. Suspended in the aesthetic and emotive qualities of the work, the viewer has the option to consider it slowly and, perhaps, consider the subject of ritual slowly as well.

My interest in this subject is easy to understand. My experiences with ritual have had a profound impact on my personal and artistic life. My experiences have shaped and shaken me, and I feel compelled to explore them. I am trying to share my way of looking at ritual with the viewer. I see ritual as both a limiting, unconscious force and as a beautiful, awe-inspiring, multi-faceted human phenomenon. We can and should explore and critique it, though we are not likely to ever fully explain it. To highlight this many-sided thing, I am implementing techniques and attitudes that have been used by artists throughout modern and contemporary art. In the following section, I will outline these techniques and begin to question their implications in regard to my relationship with my viewer.

The Moment of Perception: Why Defamiliarization?

One constant throughout my practice has been an interest in my relationship with my viewer and her/his subjective experience of my work. In the previous section I outlined why exploring ritual has been the focus in my practice. In this section I want to explore more specifically what artistic techniques I employ, what their desired effect on the viewer is, and what they say about an artist/ viewer relationship.

For some artists, and certainly for me in my studio practice, influencing the process of perception, the mind's automatic interpretation of what we see, the impulse to name, is the hope for the work, and the slowing-down of the perceiving process is the end-goal. Jean Baudrillard states:

> By representing things to ourselves, by naming them and conceptualizing them, human beings call them into existence and at the same time hasten their doom...(a thing) no doubt exists in its greatest intensity only before it was named...The moment a thing is named, the moment representation and concepts take hold of it, is the moment when it begins to lose its energy-- with the risk that it will become a truth or impose itself as ideology. (11-12)

Baudrillard's claim that something exists in its strongest sense "before it was named" points to the apprehension and excitement that comes from uncertainty. By slowing down the moment of perception, I emphasize this emphatic moment. My use of slowing down, or controlling the temporal flow of the work, has three aims. Firstly, it serves as an aesthetic technique. Secondly, it is emotionally evocative. Finally, it points to my artistic philosophy on artist/viewer relations: instead of delivering the content of the work to a viewer who is meant to be passive, I hope to use strategies that will activate viewers both physically and intellectually.

My method for producing this effect can be described by the technique *ostranenie*, or de-familiarization, a Russian Formalist term that almost perfectly describes what I do (Schlovsky). It is an artistic technique in which something is made unfamiliar, or less immediately readable, in an effort to prolong the process of perception, which, according to Schlovsky, is an aesthetic end in itself. Schlovsky writes:

> (P)erception becomes habitual...automatic...the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged...its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception on the object--*it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.* (279-280)

Schlovsky is not particularly talking about visual art in this case, but his description of this technique closely resembles the artistic techniques that I and many other artists use. Artist Bill Viola's work is perhaps the most obvious and profound example. Pieces such as *The Greeting* (1996) accentuate the usually-overlooked aspects of a moment and draw attention to details that we might miss. In my practice, this concept is perhaps best described with my artist's book *Benny* (2011), which appropriates a found image of American televangelist Benny Hinn at a mass church service. The book is smaller than the hand, similar in size to a tract or pamphlet. By making the image into a book, I am putting the viewing pace and control literally into the

Fig. 5: Ashley Guindon, *Benny: Detail,* 2011. artist's book, 2''x4''.

hands of the viewer. Inside the book, the viewer sees pixelated colours and shapes. Slowly the figures begin to emerge. The viewer sees a shoe, a hand, a suit and tie. But why are the figures lying on the ground? What is happening here? Through the abstraction of the images, through the de-familiarization of the subject matter, the content emerges more slowly than with a clearly rendered image, occasionally slipping into an abstraction of the colours and shapes that form themselves into figures and then fall away to pixels again. In this way I abstract and distill ritual as a means of closely reading a subject that may otherwise evoke an automatic and usually strong response in the viewer.

Fig. 6: Ashley Guindon, *Benny: Detail,* 2011. artist's book, 2''x4''.

Other artist's use this technique as well. Mark Lewis' snail-like pans and fades literally slow the viewers perception down. The mind hastens to read the image, but it often takes the full duration of the work (usually around four minutes) to grasp all that is there. In Sharon Lockhart's *Podworka* (2009), the action in the film moves in and out of the camera's field of vision. The viewer is tantalized by what might be happening off-screen and must build an understanding of the work using the available sound, shadows, and brief glimpses of action. In the work of these artists as well as my own, visual language is harnessed as a means of producing a change in the way we normally process reality--a change that involves, and in fact requires, the viewer, for it is their mind's process that concerns me. The abstraction of the images and the slow pace of the video allow the viewer to insert their imagination and personal experiences into the work. The viewer is given autonomy. This tactic is in opposition to the conditioned thinking that was forced upon me in my ritual experiences. I want a different experience for my viewer: one that is hopefully aware and conscious.

The discovery of the term *ostranenie* during this past year was invaluable for me because it helped me to specifically articulate what I had been creating in my work for some time.

Defamiliarization is a process by which one's own perspective and subjectivity enters a new territory that is beyond its articulation. This is a moment that I wanted to create, both for myself and, hopefully, for my viewer. Moreover, my study of this term led me to consider the history of artistic techniques within art and the implications of their use in regards to the relationship between artist and viewer. My discoveries have thrown into relief my own attitudes about my viewer, as implied by my studio practice.

In his *Conversation Pieces,* Grant Kester outlines the conventional relationship between artist and viewer in the time of the modern and post-modern artist: one that is hierarchical and, using Kester's terminology, "orthopedic", in that it assumes that there is a flaw or fault in the viewer that needs to be addressed by the artist (35). Historically, the modern artist was concerned with shaking and confronting the masses, not simply placating and entertaining them. Kester gives us this example from Bertold Brecht:

> Stage plays…encourage the audience to suspend disbelief and passively absorb...Revolutionary theater, in contrast, leads viewers to actively question the meanings represented onstage and to extend that critical attitude to the values they encounter in daily political life...(the viewer is) no longer allowed to submit to an experience uncritically...what is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling (*Conversation,* 83-84).

For Brecht, the artist is concerned with activating the viewer, usually incorporating a shock to the system. As Walter Benjamin states, "(o)bjects must be 'snatched from the false context of the historical continuum' so that we 'confront them with surprise and shock'" (Kester, *Conversation,* 84). Kester claims that the use of these techniques implies that the artist knows best and that the viewer must receive his instruction. Kester points out that noted theorists of the day, such as Lyotard, dismiss "all forms of discursive interaction." He elaborates:

> Art, for Lyotard, is a semiotic zero-sum game: the artist 'wins' when the viewer is deprived of as much of the framework of shared discourse as possible and left epistemologically bereft...There is no recognition that it might be possible to redefine the relationship between artist and viewer...in a process of open-ended dialogical interaction that is itself the 'work' of art (*Conversation,* 87).

I will delve into Kester's dialogical aesthetics in later sections, summarizing his diagnosis of the orthopedic artist/viewer relationship, in which "the viewer's implicitly flawed modes of cognition or perception will be adjusted or improved via exposure to the work of art", as well as his prescription for "antidiscursivity" (35) (*Conversation,* 87). For now, it is enough to note that my relationship with the viewer is sharply questioned by the realization that the artistic techniques that I use--so in keeping with the history of modern and post-modern philosophy and art--could imply a hierarchical attitude towards my viewer. As Kester might say, it would appear that I think of the viewer as "an inherently flawed subject whose perceptual apparatus requires correction" (*Conversation,* 87-88). Of course, this is Kester's opinion, and he tends to discount some modern and contemporary art practices that do not adhere to this tradition. He also implies that an artist whose goal is to share his/her ideas with the viewer automatically has a hierarchical attitude. One could argue that this is a socially accepted attitude about art. In my own experience I have found that many viewers become uncomfortable if I will not tell them what the work is about and instead leave it up to them (eg. *Title Me).* Regardless of the problems inherent in his arguments, Kester goes a long way towards highlighting the ethical and artistic implications of the artist/viewer relationship.

This first chapter of my thesis has explored the main themes and aesthetic concerns in my practice both before and during my MAA, specifically my interest in ritual and the artist/viewer relationship. In Chapter II, I will be discussing a significant shift in my practice.

Chapter II: Opening Up

This chapter will explore the ways in which my practice has been challenged and changed through my recent experiences with public art and why the methodologies of public practice especially lend themselves to my continued exploration of ritual. This shift was a direct result of my MAA summer internship with chART: Public Art Marpole, a long-term public art research project headed by Dr. Cameron Cartiere. My summer internship involved my production of a participatory art project, as well as acting as project manager for other artists. In preparation for my participation in chART, I threw myself into researching the many possibilities for an artist outside of the studio: public art, social practice, community art, art activism, etc. I also researched the prominent theorists and critics of these various forms of public practice, from Nicholas Bourriaud to Grant Kester.

What struck me most while doing this research was how much I identified with some of the theories and philosophies that were being presented and how much my goals and dreams for art matched those of the artists and theorists I was studying. This identification makes perfect sense to me. My experiences of rituals have been very specific and so I have always been interested in creating works that would allow for dialogue and the input of others. Upon discovering a way of working that incorporates dialogue at its very core, I was excited and felt that I had to pursue it. Public practice most often includes empathy and listening in its main goals, and this way of working will allow me to look at more than just my own experience of ritual. It will allow me to access other subjective experiences beyond my own perspectives.

The following section explores some of the values and philosophies that were introduced to my practice as a result of my research into public art.

The We Sessions: What's the Difference?

The We Sessions are my first step in the direction of opening up my practice to others. *Jenny, Ashley, Luke* is the first of these projects. Like Stephen Willats' *Bredford Towers,* the sessions begin with a question: *what are the social rituals that have had an impact on you?* I start by asking a small group of people to participate with me, usually two or three people. First, I discuss ritual with each individual participant, either through phone, email, or in person, and we talk about the rituals that have shaped our lives. Then we go online to find a video that resembles or can stand in for each individual's ritual. Next, the two or three participants meet as a group to look at the collection of found videos and share our stories. I take notes from these sessions and use them as inspiration to create a final video piece, using the found videos as raw material.

The change in process between *The We Sessions* and the work I was making previously has produced a subtle shift in the final work. For example, *Benny* (May 2012)*,* was made by myself in the studio and is presented in its finished state as a video installation. The room is dark and silent. The projected image covers one wall. The viewer sees a huge crowd of people, facing away from the viewer and towards a group of suited men on a raised platform. The image is highly pixellated and blurred--we get the impressions of heads, shoulders, and arms as opposed to fully rendered forms. Up close, the image almost disappears into light and colour. Only from a distance do the figures emerge. The work appears to be a still at first, until the viewer notices the pixels pulsing and vibrating and moving slightly--the crowd is swaying and morphing. For over a minute the video pulses, and movements thrum in rhythmic, four-count motions. Then the man on the stage swings his arm out and down in a gesture that is violent even in slow-motion. As if on command, the group on the stage falls backwards. The pulsing of the video signal slow their descent, turning the movement from a stumbling into an almost graceful, choreographed move. The crowd surges towards them, hands outstretched. All of this has taken two-and-a-half minutes to happen--a moment spread thin. In *Benny,* the subject, though pixellated and saturated, is quickly deciphered, and the view is a far-back view, almost as if we are standing above the crowd. It is an imperial, removed view. With no sound to distract, the viewer is left with his/her thoughts to fill in his own commentary for the piece.

Fig. 7: Ashley Guindon, *Benny,* 2012. video still.

Meanwhile, *The We Sessions: Jenny, Ashley, Luke* (December, 2012) was made with the participation of others, but like *Benny* is made into a large-scale projected installation in its final form. The viewer is dwarfed by the size of the projection and the cacophony of sound that fills the room. It is a rhythmic, ethereal, celestial thrumming punctuated by shouts and laughter and interrupted by the crackling and whirring of old technology. The video image is blurry and pixelated, lines run through it, the brights are too bright, and the darks too dark. All of this suggests low-fidelity, old footage as its source material. The colours are saturated and rich. The figures appear, disappear and overlap, all in slow motion--a woman rocking back and forth with laughter, girls singing and dancing in unison, people sitting around a table, a woman singing into a microphone, disembodied hands making various gestures. The repeated gestures, the voices--they all indicate a ritual of some kind. The quality of the image and the clothing on the figures indicate a memory of the past. In *The We Sessions: Jenny Ashley Luke,* the subjects take longer to decipher, and the sound, gestures and rhythmic pacing are hypnotic. The work involves close-ups, and tight cropping. One might say it is a more intimate, detailed view of the ritual--an ephemeral, empathetic, holistic way of looking.

Fig. 8: Ashley Guindon, *The We Sessions: Jenny, Ashley, Luke, detail,* 2012. SD video, dimensions variable.

It could be argued that the difference within the works as described above--the more removed view of *Benny* and the more intimate feel of *Jenny Ashley Luke,* is reflective of a change in my attitude towards the subject matter. Up until now I have had a very scientific, removed view of the rituals I was looking at. I broke them down into their components and attempted to hold them at arms-length (such as in *Benny)*. I invited the viewer to explain them for me because I could not explain them myself. The approach in *The We Sessions: Jenny, Ashley, Luke,* indicates more of a comfort with the subject matter on my part, a more empathetic and accepting position manifested in the less removed, more intimate style of execution. I feel that this is because of the process of their making: through a storytelling session with friends. The work is a sharing of my experience of the sessions. Through these sessions I was able to see my story, and that of others, through eyes that were not mine.

Listen Up: What's in a Question?

I started *The We Sessions* with two goals in mind. The first was the rather selfish personal goal of getting to know the people in my life in a new and deeper way. The second artistic goal, however, was to open my practice up to others through dialogue. Finally, I would take these experiences back into the studio with me; because of this the video works end up being aesthetically similar to my other works.

Grant Kester, relates this quote from Gemma Corradi Fiumara*:* "'we have little familiarity with what it means to listen'"; Kester explains this quote, saying that "we must begin to acknowledge the long-suppressed role of listening as a creative practice" (Kester, *Conversation,* 107). This idea reminds me of Nato Thompson's "art of *not* speaking but hearing" (26). *The We Sessions* are an attempt to make listening part of my artistic process, even though the aesthetic choices remain the same. To do this, I must create an open space in which dialogue and creativity can happen outside of the usual avenues. Kester describes a project by artist group WochenKlauser called *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women* (1994), in which city officials and local prostitutes were sent on boat rides, during which they would discuss a solution for the homeless women. Kester explains that the boat rides allowed participants to speak more freely and a concrete solution was arrived at--a group home for the women. The project, simply by being outside of the norm, created "an open space where individuals (could) break free from preexisting roles and obligations, reacting and interacting in new and unforeseeable ways" (Kester, *Conversation,* 6). It is this sort of open platform that I wanted for *The We Sessions.* Though I do not compare my project's outcome to that of WochenKlauser, I do feel I created a place where we could talk about things we otherwise would not.

In *Jenny Ashley Luke,* I found that I learned so much more about my friends than I had known. In the end, we all felt that our presuppositions about each other had been challenged, and that we had more in common than we thought. These experiences influenced the work (though they did not greatly alter my aesthetic choices). This is similar to the results of Stephen Willat's piece *Brentford Towers* (1985), which is a prime example of dialogical practice for Kester. In this work, Willats used co-creation methods to engage with the residents of a tower block in West London, gathering their stories and gaining a better understanding of their relationship to their surroundings. The end result was displayed at the towers as a means of helping the residents get to know more about their community. Kester describes this work as one "in which the artist's own presuppositions are potentially challenged by the viewer's response through a process of direct collaboration and feedback...both Willats and his collaborators (were) able to transform their consciousness of the world through a dialogical encounter" (Kester, *Conversation,* 92).

When I came away from the sessions to make my final video, the act of creation was no longer just about me--it was about our collective experiences and shared memories, an exploration of our commonalities and differences. It was as Kester describes: I was an artist "defined in terms of openness, of listening...and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator" (Kester, *Conversation,* 110). Though my level of vulnerability was not that high--I still maintained creative agency, both by posing the initial question and creating the final product--the sessions were still a necessary part of the process, as they provided me with my source material. This interdependence on others was new for me--even just having to organize a meeting instead of working to my own schedule and having to articulate my perceptions of ritual to others was more than I was doing before. Making these small changes was challenging yet essential for me. This thesis work is not an attempt to completely alter my practice. It is merely a questioning of what could happen if I made some changes, if I leaned in the direction of public practice, and so far the effects have produced great personal and artistic growth.

It is important to note here that I am not claiming to have become a social practice artist through *The We Sessions.* What I have done is to take a step in that direction. I have not opened up my practice completely, but there is a crack. The effects of this crack are not immediately perceivable for the viewer of the work; in fact they may be completely invisible. But the effects on my practice have had a huge impact on me as an artist and a person.

The next section questions what could happen if I continue in this direction. Is it possible for me to have an impact on more than just myself? Is that what I want my work to eventually do?

1 + 1 = 3: What Can Art Do?

By moving outside of conventional modes of creation, the artist has the potential to have a great impact on others. Certainly, the public practice I have been witnessing with chART: Public Art Marpole has proven this. For example, I worked as a project manager for artist Anthony Schrag. Schrag's project involved using street benches as sites for "Bench Conversations" and he

organized community members--business owners, politicians, city planners, Musqueam storytellers, etc--to sit on the benches and have conversations with passersby. During these conversations, a man who owned a jewelry store and the man who had lived behind the store for thirty years met for the first time. It is moments like these that chART will be building on in our long-term, five-year project. I am curious to see if enough of these profound moments can cause lasting change and growth in the area.

Obviously, the idea of art making radical changes to the world is naively optimistic at first glance, and reads as a war-cry for social activism. Certainly, there has been a hesitancy within the arts to align art and activism. There have been, in fact, "deeply rooted ideological biases whereby 'art' and 'activism' are set in hegemonic opposition" (Felshin, 85). Noted critics such as Bishop and Bourriaud have a "deep suspicion" for "art practices which surrender some autonomy to collaborators and which involve the artist directly in the....machinations of political resistance" (Kester, 33). The pervasive suspicion of art-as-activism can easily prevent the artist from claiming to make social change.

I want to suggest that art in itself is not necessarily a world-changer, but that, in general, an artist, trained to think like an artist, can potentially do things in the name of art that might not happen otherwise. Nato Thompson suggests in his essay "Art in Public":

> (T)he arts have become an instructive space to gain valuable skill sets in the techniques of performativity, representation, aesthetics, and the creation of affect. These skill sets are not secondary to the landscape of political production but, in fact, necessary for its manifestation. (Thompson, 22)

This quote points to the particular professional

Fig. 9: Anthony Schrag, *Bench Conversations,* 2012.

abilities of the artist as a "necessary" tool for political change. An excellent example of this is Betsy Damon, who works with Keepers of the Waters. Her project started as a collaboration with the village of Cheng Du in the Sichuan province of China. Damon worked with local artists to create temporary yet impactful performance pieces around the highly polluted river that flows through the town. The project was so successful that she was invited by the Chinese government to design a *Living Water Garden* (1998)*,* a water park, green space, and environmental education centre--the rivers that flow through the parks are heavily polluted, but through a natural filtration system, the water becomes visibly cleaner as it flows through the park. This project is an example of public art that started as collaboration, participation, and interaction with the public and then unfolded over the long term into something with even more impact and educational merit. The most important thing for me to note is that Damon did not do this alone in her studio. Kester explains that "complex social and political issues...cannot by adequately addressed simply by fabricating physical objects...but require polyvalent responses that operate on multiple levels of public interaction" (*Conversations,* 102). The kind of radical change that Damon's project produces was the avant-garde modernist's wish. For me, this means that the avant-garde artist--the free-thinker opposed to the hegemony--is still possible. How can an artist be revolutionary? Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev suggests this possibility:

> How can this be different? Through the emancipation of perception of the individual, of people. The liberation of the senses and of perception is at the basis of any revolution. There can be no political revolution without a singular revolution: that of the phenomenology of experience. (32)

Here, Bakargiev points to the revolutionary power of the individual's "perception." What better way to encourage social change than to give people autonomy and, ultimately, the responsibility to "formulate their problems themselves, and to determine (how) they can receive a...solution" (Deleuze, 470).

It is these sorts of practices that stimulate my imagination and encourage me to move in this direction. That being said, it is important for me to remember that any project that incorporates collaboration with the public cannot automatically claim to be a public practice and a producer of social change. Kester uses Francis Alys' *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) as an example. In

this piece, Alys orchestrated 500 volunteers to move a sand dune in Peru over by a few inches. Alys indicated that the participants had some authorship in the work, but Kester argues:

> Alys's generous renunciation of singular authorial possession...is complicated by two factors. First, the action performed by the participants was predetermined and choreographed...Second, it is precisely in the circulation of the event-as-image before a 'global audience'...that he is able to accrue the symbolic capital necessary to enhance his career as an artist. Thus, his willingness to surrender authorship...entails no particular sacrifice of his authorial autonomy or prestige. I'm less interested in the ethical issues that this gesture might raise....than in its implications for our understanding of collaboration as a form of artistic production. (74-75)

Like Kester, I will not get into the ethical issues at stake here for now, but will focus on the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely surrender artistic authority, and one must be careful in claiming to do so. In my current *We Sessions,* I am certainly not outright surrendering my authority. These are "challenges that artists accustomed to a textual mode of production face when they seek to embed their practice more fully in a given social context through (collaboration)" (Kester 75). While my current work falls far short of producing social change (besides the hoped-for emotional impact on the participants and viewer), I am using my identity as an artist and the idea of "art" to make something happen that would not have otherwise. Perhaps my work after this MAA will be able to have a more wide-reaching effect, or perhaps not. It is enough, for now, to have taken a step in that direction.

This chapter has explored the value of opening up a private practice to others through public practice. The next chapter will explore the potential problems and pitfalls that can occur when an artist moves into this different territory. For the purposes of this thesis work, it was essential for me to study the history of public practice and its nuanced forms. I can use my research as I move forward, choosing what will work for me, avoiding any ethical pitfalls, and learning from the experiences of others.

Chapter III The Public Practice

As stated previously, my involvement in chART: Public Art Marpole and the research that accompanied it have had a great impact on me. I have an affinity with the artists and researchers that I have been studying, but I also recognize the difficulties of working in this area.

This chapter will outline the various modes of artistic identity as demonstrated by theorists and artists who work in public practice, as well as point out the ethical and artistic concerns around this type of practice. These concerns are relevant to me because *The We Sessions* have been and will continue to be made with participants. As I enter this new territory, it is essential that I learn the lay of the land.

Who's Out There: What Happens Outside the Studio?

Since the 1990s, art that involves the public has become increasingly prevalent. Linda Frye Burnham reflects:

> In this atmosphere in the early '90's we began to notice that more and more socially committed artists were changing the context of their work...They believed that an arbitrary separation of art world and real world had make them less effective as artists, and caused them to call into question their commitment to the public. This new sensibility didn't necessarily reject the art world, but rather viewed it as one of many contexts in which art could exist. (xxiii)

Burnham is pointing to a "new" artist who did not adhere to the "separation of art world and real world". I want to suggest that there has never been a separation between the art world and the real world, only an imagined one. As Kester puts it, "there is no art practice that avoids all forms of co-option, compromise, or complicity" (2). No artist creates in a bubble. We have studio assistants, families, and friends, we pay taxes, live in apartment buildings, use public transit, or otherwise engage with our communities in some way, and those experiences cannot help but make their way into our art. With this in mind, perhaps we can see that there is no impermeable wall between art and life. Nato Thompson states, "(w)e need to recognize art as a form of experimental activity overlapping with the world (45). If this is so, perhaps it is not necessary for

me to define my practice as *either* a public practice *or* a private practice. Thompson explains that, "(j)ust as video, painting and clay are types of forms, people coming together possess forms as well.

Fig. 10: Meaghen Buckley and Ashley Guindon, *Show Me How,* 2012.

In his seminal text, *Relational Aesthetics,* Nicholas Bourriaud states:

> (T)he possibility of *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. (14)

Bourriaud points to artists who feel similar to how Liam Gillick did when he said: "My work is like the light in the fridge, it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door" (Freiling 35-36). The important difference here is not in the art itself but in the attitude of the artist making it. Contemporary artists such as Anthony Schrag, Sayed Alavi, Candy Chang, and Harrel Fletcher are examples of artists who often incorporate other people as an essential element in their practices. The extent to which these artists open their practices varies from artist to artist as well as from piece to piece. For example, Maurizio Cattelan's work is often cited in reference to relational aesthetics, yet some of his works are decidedly autonomous. It is interesting for me to note that most artists do not position themselves as purely studio or public artists: they also

create conventional work for curated exhibitions or biennial's. It is not, therefore, a switch from one to the other that is represented by these artists, but a shifting in-between. To engage with others does not mean an abandonment of autonomous art-making.

The Fear: How To Protect Art?

I have experienced apprehension associated with opening up my private studio practice. My research has indicated three main problems that are pointed out by theorists and critics. In this section I hope to discuss these concerns and supply potential solutions for them.

Firstly, there is the fear that my autonomy as the artist is threatened by the introduction of participants. Kester says that this fear "stems in part from the (modern) belief that only a single monodic consciousness (epitomized by the figure of the radical artist or theorist) can originate a form of revolutionary insight" (138). An equalization of artist's and viewers' autonomy goes against the traditional modernist attitude (as discussed earlier). Theorist and critic Hans Ulrich Obrist discusses this tradition, explaining that the modern artist was always positioned in opposition to something else: "from the start, the modern was advocated, defended, set forth as a position among others" (Obrist). Obrist and Jan Verwoert both describe the modern artist's role as an authoritative one, but both also question this role's validity in contemporary art. Verwoert asks, "...by virtue of what authority...someone could legitimately hope to act or speak on behalf of others". Verwoert challenges the expertise of the artist here. If the artist no longer plays the role of genius, boss, or authority, what role can she/he play in contemporary art? Does the artist have a purpose?

In Kester's dialogical model, the artist engages in a "meaningful loss of intentionality" (115). This is a scary thought for an artist, but Kester assures us that "mindful surrender of agency and intentionality is not marked as a failure or abandonment (of the prerogatives of authorship or the specificity of 'art'), but as a process that is active, generative, and creative" (Kester, 115). It is this point that excites me and indicates some next-steps for *The We Sessions.* If I continue to let go of some of my autonomy, what are the possibilities? Will I be abandoning the practice I have

worked so hard to build? Or will I be opening up the practice with a "generative" process? Kester tries to calm the fears of those who may worry that an opening up of a practice to others will result in a loss of individual autonomy. For him, the artist is actively pursuing a deeper expression of autonomy through "the act of opening oneself to a specific context or situation" and engagement in a practice that is "anticipatory or open" (Kester, 152). Suzi Gablik explains that this is necessary for some artists, saying:

> (A)utonomous art had its moment. It was good for freeing us from certain things...but now, we've got rid of those old limitations, and this freedom of isolated and purist autonomy can itself become a limitation. (Gablik, 265)

Gablik is suggesting that expanding the horizons of art is necessary. This means a blurring of boundaries between artist and other but also points to encouraging the parallels and overlaps between disciplines and modes of cultural production (Kester, 14). In the end, it is about art's ability to function as a driving force to make things happen. If the artist can move beyond traditional boundaries, what are the possibilities? What can "art better serve than the things it has been serving throughout our lifetimes?" (Gablik, 200-01). I do not wish to suggest that autonomous art does not have any merit. I merely want to know what other possibilities are available. For me, the ability to let go of my authority and make necessary the input of others offers me access to other ways of thinking that I do not have as a lone individual. This does not mean that my subjectivity is not enough, it simply means that I acknowledge that it is one among many. Kester puts it this way:

> (W)e are led to see ourselves from the other's point of view and are thus...able to be more critical and self-aware about our own opinions. This self-critical awareness can lead, in turn, to a capacity to see our views, and our identities, as contingent and subject to creative transformation. (*Conversations,* 110)

Similarly, Bourriaud might say: "'Subjectivity can only be defined...by the presence of a second subjectivity'" (Kester, 31).

The second concern around the opening-up of a practice is the one often posed by art critics: is public practice a relevant form of art, and how can this work be critiqued? Relational aesthetics, for example, has been criticized by theorists such as Claire Bishop, who points out problems

inherent in this work. She argues that relational art is difficult to critique because its aims about what the viewer is meant to gain from the work are often unclear (Bishop, *Antagonism* 52). Also unclear are the standards to which relational art can be measured, since it does not fit into a medium-specific form and therefore cannot be judged in relation to its fellows (Bishop, *Antagonism* 64). Bishop warns that relational artists are often guilty of "(e)mphasizing process rather than end result, and basing their judgements on ethical criteria (about how and whom they work with) rather than on the character of their artistic outcomes" (Thompson, 38). This leads us to a means of critiquing relational art that is very different from the aesthetic critique of modernism: instead it is a political, moral, and ethical critique. (Bishop, *Antagonism* 77). The bottom line is that relational aesthetics and other forms of public practice have "lacked a shared critical language and comprehensive historic documentation" (Thompson, 8). These facts pose a difficulty for critics, certainly, but pose a potentially greater challenge for the artist. For me, the prospect of opening my work to others is problematizing the way I have been taught to make and consider art. My education and experience in a private studio practice does not fully equip me to critique what I am trying to do.

What is needed, it may seem, is a new way of critiquing art, one that focusses on process not end-result. Nato Thompson suggests that "(f)ocusing on methodologies is also an attempt to shift the conversation away from the arts' typical lens of analysis: aesthetics" (Thompson, 22). Grant Kester backs up this point, stating that public practices "often challenge the traditional perception of the work of art as an event or object authored beforehand and subsequently presented to the audience" (3). The artist whose process involves others is working outside of tradition, therefore her/his options for creating and modes of criticism are only beginning to be defined.

The final concern I am facing with this in-between space is that my desired relationship with the public (viewer or participant) is no longer the traditional modern one and is therefore complicated, precisely because I am still employing conventional methods of execution and presentation. What are the ethical and moral concerns of being an artist who works with participants, co-creators, or the public? Since it is not rooted in standards of research like the

social sciences are, there is a possibility for public practice to be ethically murky. For example, Gillain Wearing has been criticized for her work *Drunk* (2000), in which she asked drunkards in her neighborhood to appear in her work in exchange for alcohol. This is ethically suspect to be sure, but is an extreme example. Grant Kester explains that there is always danger in collaboration, saying that the word cooperative has connotations of forced labour and the word cooperation implies a submission to an authority (2). Theorist Chantal Mouffe points out a major dilemma, asking whether an artist can still be critical if he/she becomes "a necessary part of capitalist production" (1). Mouffe declares that public spaces are always "hegemonically structured," that the artist must always be aware that "society is always politically instituted," and that the public realm "is never a neutral one" (2). Bishop voices this concern as well, saying that most artists who turn to social practice bemoan the fact that "capitalism produces passive subjects with very little agency or empowerment...the community arts movement (finds) itself subject to manipulation--and eventually instrumentalization--by the state" (Thompson, 35, 38). These and other concerns highlight the difficulty of making art outside of the private studio: how can the artist treat participants or collaborators ethically and still create work that is socially, politically, and artistically critical? I struggle with fears that I could do more harm than good, despite my best intentions, or that I might have to compromise the quality of my work for the sake of others.

The only way to combat this fear is to proceed with awareness, sensitivity, and an open mind. After all, art has always had a tremendous ability to challenge both social and artistic conventions. For me, this is because art can have tremendous power to bring people together. Artist and theorist Suzanne Lacy explains:

> Art is a potential link across differences. It can be constructed as a link between people, communities, even countries...Art is a relatively neutral notion in many cultures, making it unthreatening as a meeting ground... (163)

Art provides an open space for a type of interaction that might not be possible otherwise: a "genuine interpersonal human relationship" (Thompson, 21). The artist's impact on a community can be huge, but his/her impact on the conventions of artistic production are also vastly important. This type of art offers a different type of communication: "(i)solated artists must focus

on speaking, while groups of people coming together must focus on listening--the art of *not* speaking but hearing" (Thompson, 26). Public practice often incorporates and reiterates the importance of a more holistic, empathetic, feminist approach, one that I feel is not isolated within this discipline and can translate into other types of practices as well. Suzanne Lacy explains:

> (O)ne of the major contributions of feminist thought in the past two decades is that individual experience has profound social implications...To make oneself a conduit for expression of a whole social group can be an act of profound empathy...This empathy is a service that artists offer the world. (Lacy, 176)

Empathy and listening as an art practice are quite different from the traditional modern and post-modern notions of the artist as "the lone genius struggling against society," a notion that has arguably "deprived art of its astonishing potential to build community through empathic social interaction. (Gablik, 17). Suzi Gablick is pointing here to "participatory and dialogical practices (that) step outside the frame of reference and invite others into the process" (17). It is the mention of "dialogical practices" that I want to elaborate on next. For me, a dialogical model, as presented by Grant Kester, represents a unique working philosophy for the production and evaluation of social practice. Though I do not intend to claim his position as my own, it is important to delve into his philosophies as they provide an alternative to more conventional models of art production, criticism, and artist/viewer relationship.

Let's Talk: What About Dialogical Practice?

It can be argued that, in a dialogue, "everyone is, or can be, an artist...And then, if they feel moved to create something more out of it, fine" (Gablik, 50). This claim is taken further in Grant Kester's 2004 text *Conversation Pieces* and its follow-up work, *The One and the Many* (2011), which both focus on the concept of dialogical aesthetics. In this section, I will outline Kester's analysis of the traditional, modern mode of art-making, explain the difference of a dialogical practice, and outline how these theories can offer me guidance in my next ventures.

To evaluate the relationship between artist and viewer, Kester begins with the relationship that was created by the movements of modernism and postmodernism. Kester tells us that what

he calls the “hierarchical” or “orthopedic” model developed at a time when the artist-as-lone-genius was a necessary role to be played within an era marked by political and social upheaval. Kester explains:

> (T)he cycle of contestation and reconsolidation in the political sphere is paralleled in the history of modernism itself, as formerly transgressive modes of artistic practice achieve canonical status, only to be unsettled in their turn by a subsequent transgression for which they function as the necessarily refined counterpoint. As a result, the 'work' of modern art can be understood...as an ongoing struggle to identify, and then displace, normative conventions (Kester, 7).

In Kester’s assessment, the artist’s role in modern art was to destabilize that which has been previously accepted by society and/or by art discourse. The artist challenges what is already there and produces an alternative. This implies that the artist has an insight or genius to be imparted to the public, thus the relationship to the viewer is an orthopedic one, based on the artist’s superior understanding of society and culture and the public’s lack thereof. Kester explains that “this orthopedic orientation preserves the idea that the artist is a superior being, able to penetrate veils of mystification that otherwise confuse and disorient the hapless modern subject” (Kester *Conversation*, 88) This philosophical position created a relationship with the viewer that was “necessarily distanced and custodial”; the viewer “can only ever be acted *upon* by the artist” (Kester, 54). This puts the viewer in the passive position of receiving the genius of the artist. The viewer is “an inherently flawed subject whose perceptual apparatus requires correction” (Kester, *Conversation,* 87-88) According to Kester, this genius often came in the form of a shock or flash of insight. These artists were interested in re-educating the masses in hopes of preparing them for a real social change (59).

Kester’s description of an orthopedic model of art making is perhaps heavy-handed. Certainly, there are modern artists who did not create these kinds of relationships with their viewers (eg. Duchamp), and there are contemporary artists who are referred to as public practice artists and are still very orthopedic in their treatment of the public (eg. Cattelan, Wearing). I feel that this model is one among many, and is a common model for artists of all descriptions. Furthermore, the orthopedic model described here is not vilified by Kester. He is simply observing what was a “necessary condition” in the development of modern art (11). Avant-garde modernism required a

constant challenging of existing theories and thoughts, as well as an artistic subject that withdrew into itself (Kester, 20). What Kester is suggesting is that this model is even now often seen as the only viable mode of artistic production. Kester outlines several examples, such as artist groups Juneau Projects, WochenKlauser, and London Fieldworks. These groups, he explains, approach art making with a "pragmatic openness to site and situation, a willingness to engage with specific cultures and communities in a creative and improvisational manner, a concern with non-hierarchical and participatory process, and a critical and self-reflexive relationship to practice itself" (Kester,125). It is this change in attitude that is most important to Kester and most interesting to me. This change throws conventional art practice into perspective, but "the greatest potential for transforming and re-energizing artistic practice is often realized precisely at those points where its established identity is most seriously at risk" (Kester, 7).

Kester points to a change in art creation and criticism, but it is important to note that he is careful to suggest dialogical aesthetics as "a model" of art-making, not *the* model (11). In this way, Kester departs from the modern tendency to indicate that *this* model trumps *that* model, instead placing it as one among many. Still, he does state his high hopes for dialogical practices: that they may "offer a different articulating of a capacity that I take to be central to the constitution of modern art more generally: the ability of aesthetic experience to transform our perceptions of difference and to open a space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions" (Kester, 11). These are high hopes indeed, but with the philosophical changes that Kester is suggesting, they may be acheivable.

When I was researching Kester, I was struck by his philosophies and how closely they resembled my own admittedly idealistic wishes for my practice. In a dialogical model, the creation of a work of art opens up to include others and "conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself" (Kester, *Conversation,* 8). These artists "conceive of the relationship between the viewer and the work of art...as a decentering, a movement outside self (and self-interest) through dialogue extended over time" (Kester, *Conversation,* 84-85). A dialogical practice allows for a challenging of the artist's presuppositions and judgements, thus strengthening the artist's ability

to form relationships with his/her participants (Kester, *Conversation,* 92). The idea of using art as a means of creating relationships is very attractive, and my future *The We Sessions* will take this goal as their guiding force by incorporating dialogue as a necessary part of the process of making.

Fig. 11: Anthony Schrag, *Bench Conversations,* 2012.

This chapter has outlined my research into public practice, all of which was a necessary part of my movement towards making art with others. Despite the apprehension I feel about opening up my practice, It is something I know I must try. Perhaps I will never make the sort of dialogical work that Kester supports, and maybe I will never be able to claim that I am a public practice artist. But as long as I continue to delve into this new-found method of creating, to pursue the blank space on my map, the journey will be worth it.

Conclusion

The We Sessions: What's Next?

In the last few months of my thesis work, I have been continuing to produce *The We Sessions,* using my thesis essay research as a guide. Having considered the potential pitfalls of moving in this direction, I have been able to proceed with awareness and an open mind. The result has been more sessions and more video works around the subject of social rituals, similar in process and style to *Jenny, Ashley, Luke.* In particular, I have finished *Renald, Tracy, Ashley* and *Adam, Anna, Michelle, Ashley.*

I have made several discoveries as I have continued with *The We Sessions*. Firstly, I have noticed just how inspiring and essential the participatory process of creating the works is for me. The discussions that happen in the sessions have impacted my creation in the studio--I am now using my notes from the sessions to influence the tone and message of the piece. There is almost always a moment in the sessions where some thought or observation resonates with the whole group, and usually that moment becomes the major influence for me in my studio. For example, in *Adam, Anna, Michelle, Ashley,* the group spoke at length about how our participation in social rituals is often unconscious--we do it automatically, without thinking, because it is expected of us. This observation inspired me to look carefully at the source videos and seek out the individuals who are not really paying attention and do not act as they are supposed to--the man in the crowd at a soccer game who is staring into space and does not jump up and cheer with the rest of the group, the young woman at the dance club who is not dancing but is looking back over her shoulder at the camera. I isolated and gave emphasis to these moments in the final piece because of their relationship to the group's discussion.

In installing these works in a gallery setting, I am also discovering that the titling of the work has become very important to the viewing of the piece and will speak to my intention. So far, I have been titling the sessions based on my experiences, using the names of the participants to differentiate the sessions. I have discovered that this is confusing to viewers: the title does not

explain where the names come from, and the viewer does not know what a *We Session* is. For me, explaining the process by which the work was made is not essential to the viewing of the work, so a didactic is not necessary. Instead, in the gallery installation, I will choose other titles: for example, *Adam, Anna, Michelle, Ashley,* may be titled in the gallery as *Here But Not Here,* based upon the dialogue described above. The participants will be credited, of course, to acknowledge their invaluable contribution to the project, but the exact process of their contribution will not be explained to the gallery viewer.

Finally, I have made a personal discovery as I have continued *The We Sessions*: I am more excited by the dialogue that happens in the sessions than by working on the videos alone in my studio. This fact is simply pushing me further towards a public practice in the future. My hope is that, in later iterations of *The We Sessions,* I will be able to experiment with letting go of my autonomy as an artist and increasing the authorship of the participant. The work that these techniques will produce remains to be seen.

Over and Over: What is Ritual as Practice?

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
Where there is sadness, joy
O Divine Master grant that I may
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love
For it is in giving that we receive
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned

It is in dying that we are born into eternal life.

--Prayer of St. Francis

The opening up of my practice is a reflection of a personal spiritual journey. I wish to let go of my control and accept the fact that I cannot do everything on my own. This brings me back to ritual. A ritual is a set of actions, performed for their symbolic value, usually in a group. What is art, if not actions performed to represent an idea? What do we do in a gallery, if not often act and speak in a pre-prescribed way? Interactions with art have been ritualized by collective agreement, and understanding this gives the artist the option of challenging the ritual or using the ritual to produce a certain effect. My question is whether I can use the ritualistic context of an art event to create a space, almost like a vacuum: what would rush to fill the void? Like WochenKlausur or Betsy Damon, will the created space produce a major social or political shift? Will it be a minor change within a community? Or will it simply allow the development and enrichment of a relationship between two people? I do not think it is necessary to qualify one over the other.

My wish is to provide the opportunity for a compassionate recognition of my own and others' subjectivity. Art that invites the other in provides a "gift of participation," one that "will not fix things once and for all"...but is "meant as a way of life that is constantly and actively keeping the tribe in balance" (Burnham, 49). What is ritual (stripped of the hidden agendas of individuals) meant to provide humanity, if not this? For me, making art with others provides a different type of ritual, one that brings people together on to consciously consider social and political territory. Within that territory, who knows what the possibilities are? I do not take the naively optimistic position that art will save the world, but I know that the recognition of another subjectivity is beautiful and transformative and it is necessary to acknowledge it, from the personal to the global level, in order to evolve.

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