LOOKING AT *WORD FINDING,* A PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH PROJECT ABOUT PARTICIPATORY AND DIALOGICAL ART PROCESSES

By

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Abstract –

The art-based thesis project, *Word Finding,* is currently being produced through dialogue and conversation. Beginning with a community process and finally being realized in an art context, *Word Finding* asks larger questions about authorship and public discourse. This work and others described here challenge the reliance on fixed authorship in the way Foucault imagined a future marked by distributed authorship. In *Word Finding* authorship is continually distributed amongst the work's participants and audience. This project builds on my earlier art practice where I investigated the way words spoken within a social context produced instability of meaning –how they were interpreted, retold and translated between people. To contextualize this project and my practice in general, I present case studies that provide a variety of models for dialogical art strategies. Linda Duvall and Kutluğ Ataman have produced artworks in which the respatialization of unscripted talking in aesthetic contexts enables a level of audience engagement. Methodologies surrounding dialogical and participatory art forms are discussed here with respect to key texts by Mikhail Bakhtin, Grant Kester, Claire Bishop and others. As an art project, *Word Finding* investigates the integration of community-based dialogue and aesthetic use of dialogue within art contexts.

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1   Introduction

In 1969, Michel Foucault speculated that the future would bring a change to the idea of authorship.

> I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one that will no longer be the author, but will have to be determined or, perhaps experienced. (953)

In the future, Foucault speculated, readers would recognize that it was the discourse surrounding the work, rather than the solitary author, that had produced the meanings. The readers' involvement in that discourse would produce questions and critical possibilities:

> What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (953)

More than forty years later, those questions are not at all futuristic. In current artworks and exhibition projects there is a prevalence of discourse, dialogues, and conversations that open up the art to an unpredictable and talkative public. In these projects, authorship is distributed through interactions –among the artist collaborators, the artists and participants, or the work and an actively involved audience. Often audiences and key individuals are invited to be a part of public dialogues or community talks about issues surrounding the art. A kind of public discourse is also encouraged in artworks where the artist has materialized speech or dialogue as a formal element. In these works

the need to translate and sometimes complete what is a said is a way of literally involving the audience in authoring, or in some cases, assuming a subject position.

My thesis project, *Word Finding,* is an art project that is produced through dialogues and conversations. Beginning with a community dialogue process and finally realized in an art context, *Word Finding* asks larger questions about authorship and authority of public discourse. In finding a critical context for this dialogical work, this project draws from a growing discourse on discourse. Grant Kester's 2004 book, *Conversation Pieces,* aimed to set out a critical model for evaluating the use of long conversations and dialogues in community-engaged art projects. My work considers Kester's text alongside more inclusive reviews of participatory and social art practices by Claire Bishop (2006) and others. By materializing dialogue in art, there is a level of refusal of the social and political monologues that might otherwise suppress the talking in public. Mikhail Bahktin's understanding of the function of dialogue in literature, and its ability to subvert official monological meanings, provides a grounding theory in my own thinking about dialogical aesthetics.

In this thesis document, I present case studies from two artists who have influenced my work. Linda Duvall and Kutluğ Ataman have produced artworks in which form, content, and reception are dependent on unscripted talking. Through a reliance on unscripted talking, their artworks perform Foucault's multiplying author-function in a variety of ways. In particular, they respatialize informal and community-based dialogue in art contexts in a way that subverts official dialogue and engages audiences. So too in my current work, I strive to develop an understanding of distributed authorship alongside larger questions about the formal or aesthetic use of participation and dialogue within art.

2   Glossary of terms

Conversation – Although not directly evident in the *Word Finding* installation, the overall thesis project relies heavily on conversation as a production strategy or method. As with many of the projects used to illustrate theoretical frameworks for community-based art forms in Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces*, the scope of this project developed through conversations between the artist and participants that happened in a workshop setting over an extended time period. It was through that process that decisions over the meanings conveyed and the techniques to be used were discussed and planned. This text recognizes recent publications that particularize the ways that conversation, when it is represented in art forms, reveal the possibilities for disruption and refusal within ordinary conversation (see chapter 4). In the *Word Finding* installation, the disruption caused by the speakers' reconsideration and refinement of what is said reveals that the process ordinary conversation was an inherent and productive method in this work.

Dialogue – The entire *Word Finding* project can be seen as the dissemination phase of a community initiative that involved the participants in a facilitated dialogue about elder financial abuse. Structured to enable a sense of ownership of the content, the community dialogue process aimed to empower the participants to publically disseminate meanings about the impact of elder financial abuse. As an artist outside of this dialogue but reliant on it as the source the material to be disseminated, I used the *Word Finding* project to consider how community dialogue, as a form of discourse, authors public meanings. As with the ordinary conversation that was used to develop the work, the community dialogue is one of the core production strategies for this work even though it is not directly represented in the *Word Finding* installation. This text considers early dialogical aesthetic theories in terms of how the cultural representation of various forms of speech acts are dependent on intertextuality and intersubjectivity to produce subversive meanings (see chapter 4).

As a representation of a community dialogue, from which meanings evolved through discussion, transmission and video editing, the *Word Finding* installation produces in public words that are finally delivered by individual speakers to individual listeners within a gallery setting. In this respatializing of the community dialogue, the artwork deliberately distributes its authorship amongst the participants, the artist and the audience as an unstable and evolving cultural form.

Public speech – This project is built on the participants' sense of duty to speak out publically on an issue for which they have specific or *situated knowledge*, as described by Donna Haraway. Through the conversations, workshops, scripting, rehearsing and video-making methods their specific knowledge was further revealed and its public dissemination was rehearsed. As with the crafting of judgment that Foucault described as necessary for *fearless speech*, this video project enabled some of the refinement that enabled the participants to speak fearlessly and publically about the vulnerability of elders in current Canadian contexts.

3 *Word Finding* and other methods

This research inquiry describes the *things* that artists' produce—the video installations as well as non-object based artworks—as methods. *Word Finding* is research, and currently work-in-progress, involving community-based video production and a gallery installation. I describe it here in the context of my previous works, recent studio experiments, and the case studies of other artists.

3.1 *Word Finding*

There are two manifestations of the overall *Word Finding* thesis project: *How to Spot a Wolf – Recognizing and Preventing Elder Financial Abuse,* a public service video that is collaboratively produced with the group, Elder Financial Abuse Dialogue (North Shore Neighbourhood House), and *Word Finding,* a video installation suitable for either gallery installation or a curated public space. Central to both components of the project are the relationships of the participants, artist and audience to public speech. The words that are conveyed to the audience through the videos were initially part of a community dialogue process. The video installation reveals how the texts that are uttered by the women have been re-scripted through their development of public presentations and through the making of these videos. With these processes, the participants needed to negotiate the perceived authenticity of the texts that had been generated in an open community-based process and the way they would need to alter them in order to circulate the meanings in public. In the resulting video installation, authorship of the meanings is finally shared: by the participants who originally found and formed the words, the artist who edits and fragments the words, and the audience who works to decipher and translate displayed utterances.

Word Finding began with an invitation for me to collaborate on a video production with a group of women who had completed the Elder Abuse Awareness Dialogue Project. A key feature of

the dialogue process that had brought the women together was its participant-driven content development. The dialogue process was delivered by Finding Home™, a community consultation service that was founded and is directed by Jessie Sutherland. The explicit purpose of Sutherland's dialogue process is to promote community development through the integration of local resources and participant-led discussions. Through peer discussions, participants gain awareness and generate solutions to particular problems from their shared experiences (appendix A). The process highlights the importance of avoiding social isolation during aging as a strategy for resolving or preventing common problems like financial abuse. Elder Abuse Awareness Dialogue Project is designed to enable a core group of seniors to develop the awareness, insights, and skills needed to transmit critical information about senior financial abuse into larger communities. Indeed, the four participants that I am working with each have professional backgrounds in the areas of banking, nursing, social work, and management of women's shelters and seniors' care homes. They have shared first hand experience of financial abuse within families and the larger public from their professional as well as personal experience.

When I met with this group in October 2010, they were familiar with each other and had been working to develop a public presentation on the financial abuse content generated through the dialogue process. The women had received coaching from a Toastmasters International volunteer, and they were preparing to make their first presentations for peers and seniors' services providers at local community centres. They were enthusiastic to take on a video project because they saw a need to have presentation materials that were not dependent on written texts.[1] Early in the process of making a video together, the four participants and the other partners (Finding Home™ and the North Shore Neighbourhood House Seniors Programs) made it clear that the content needed to be

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[1] As part of the Elder Abuse Awareness Dialogue Project flyers and graphic recording panels were produced to sum up the meanings that were generated from the group (appendix B). Although no funding was initially

true to the material generated by the participants of the dialogues. This included Farsi-speaking participants who had generated information about the experiences of seniors from Iran but who did not have time to attend the video workshop meetings.[2]

Whereas the participants were clear about their desire to produce an informational video, my early motivation to participate was complicated. To start, I was eager to participate in a non-institutional collaboration outside of the art school context. As a proponent of participatory art projects, I was willing to take on the responsibility of directing a community-media project. I was also interested in responding to the collective dialogue process whereby these individuals had developed a sense of agency as public spokespeople. In previous works I had initiated dialogues and conversations as open or performative elements in artworks. In this project, however, I was forced to question how could I make art about a dialogue in a situation where my distance from the process was distinct.

Rather than seeing my distance from the dialogue as an impediment, I approached it as an opportunity to analyze my critical involvement. The distance allowed me to foreground a growing concern about the politics of representation and formal strategies that I might employ in my dialogue-based work. This distance from the content offered me the chance to make a work that asked new questions of the discourse surrounding community-based art production and dialogical forms. If I represented a dialogue for which I had little coherence, how would I, and the audience, participate in the distribution of its meanings? How would my art production translate the authority of the elderly participants' voices within an art context?

At the initial meetings, I described how, as an artist, I had a keen interest in their dialogue process and its impact on them. I outlined my experience in community video production and my

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[2] At the point of writing this text, the partners have plans to translate the education portion of the video into Farsi. They are also pursuing additional funding to extend the video process to the Farsi-speaking participants at a time when they are available.

ability to access production resources at Emily Carr University.[3] Although the primary interest of the participants and partners was to produce a public education video to use in their public presentations, the participants recognized that I was an artist-researcher with an interest in the process. They frequently asked if my scholastic needs were being met. From their recognition and acceptance of my position as both an outsider and a student researcher, I was confident that this was a situation in which I could make an artwork that was reflective of the process for an art audience. After several meetings in which we discussed the possible intersection of art and the community video production, I proposed that we undertake two productions that used similar footage but had different aims and audiences. This division of the project seemed to respond to the interests of all of the participants and partners. The final agreement was discussed and circulated in the form of a consent contract. Given the risk to them of their representation in my artwork, I offered the participants an option for full withdrawal of participation and footage up to the final edit of both works. This reflected discussions where each of the four women had expressed feelings of insecurity about their image on screen, despite their strong desire to be the speaking subjects in the video. The consent agreement also offered the participants and partners full distribution rights for the educational video. For the video installation, however, I maintained the primary distribution rights, with the provision for the participants to receive notice of all the public screenings for five years. This agreement was accepted by all of the participants, as well as the community partners, and the Emily Carr University Research Ethics Board.

Early in the process I offered community-based media production strategies like media literacy and consumer-level video production and distribution skills, but these were not of interest

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[3] In 2009 I had produced two short documentaries for community organizations: "Burnaby Art Gallery presents Evelyn Roth, Bear Ice" (8:00) and "Means of Production Artists' Raw Resource Collective" (17:00). I had also made short theatrical videos in a school-based artist project with Lori Weidenhammer (2009) and I had produced gallery-based video installations (*PlasmaTV* in CondoBOOM, Theatre Centre, Toronto, 2006 and in Not Home, Cityspace, North Vancouver, 2008; *Flowers for Joyce* in Serious Women don't do flowers, Seymour Gallery, 2008).

to this group. Instead, the group wanted to develop a tightly scripted video that would enhance the public presentation that they were developing. The participants had a shared desire to produce a video that would display their competence as speakers, while highlighting their indignation, personal vulnerability, and compassion in the face of their experiences. Positioned at a distance from the content, I took on the responsibility of facilitating this production, which at the time of writing is in progress.

Fig. 1: Lois Klassen and Elder Financial Abuse Dialogue group, *Word Finding*, 2011. Photos: Ahmad Konash and Celia Goodwin-Cobb.

The group's discussions about ways to deliver the content through the use of educational video, within the skills and resources available, have determined many of the formal decisions for both works. The use of a green screen studio in the Film Video and Integrated Media Department of Emily Carr University has enabled the focus to be on factual and experience-based information that the subjects deliver in their own words.[4] (Fig.1) For the educational video, the background is a

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[4] In setting up the shots I was imagining the simplicity of informational videos (e.g. TED Talks), which combine the solo speaking subject who delivers content in a formal, yet conversational manner with cutaways to presentation media like diagrams and illustrations. To break up the didactic content, an animation sequence builds on the group's use of the metaphor of a wolf in sheep's clothing. In the studio, I also improvised on a variety of techniques to assist the participants to deliver the content: reading, repetition, using cue cards, being interviewed, using memorized materials as well as improvising in a group setting. The presence of an experienced make-up technician on the set was an enormous asset for the participants to feel confident and ready to deliver material in front of the camera.

white space upon which key words and a simple hand-drawn animation prioritize meanings and create links between the topics. (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2: Lois Klassen and the Elder Financial Abuse Dialogue (North Shore Neighbourhood House), *How to Spot a Wolf - Recognizing and Preventing Elder Financial Abuse*, 2011. Video still.
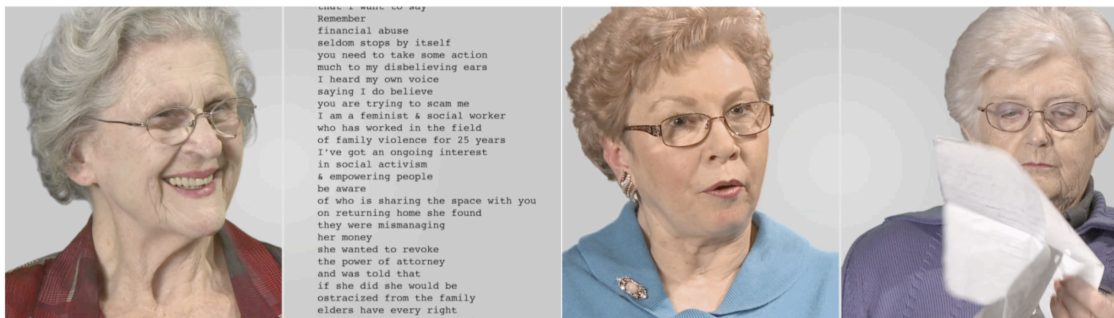
Fig. 3: Lois Klassen, *Word Finding*, 2011. Video still.

Fig. 4: Lois Klassen, *Word Finding*, 2011. Installation view, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver. Photo: Karen Garrett de Luna.

Highlighted in the video installation are isolated portions of the video that reveal how the women were working to find the right words to put in public the meanings that had been generated within their collaborative and community-based dialogue. (Fig. 3 and 4) As a looping four-minute sequence, the video features four frames in which short clips from the project transition in and out. In the left frame, individual participants are seen in silence thinking of what to say next or listening to the commotion of the video production process. In the next frame the verbatim text of the words that are heard by the viewer are displayed as a rolling archive. In the two frames on the right, video clips in which the participants speak the words that reflect core meanings generated from the community dialogue about elder financial abuse. In some instances, they falter or reiterate the importance of what they are saying. Various strategies used in the video making process like reading, reciting and story telling are intermingled.

[*Image unavailable.*]

Fig. 5: Beatrice Gibson, *The Future is Getting Old Like the Rest of Us. 2009.* Video stills, with actofs Roger Booth, Corrine Skinner Carter, Janet Henfrey, Ram John Holder, Annie Firbank, John Tilbury, William Hoyland and Jane Wood.

In thinking about the formal considerations of the video installation, I was drawn to a recent work by Beatrice Gibson. *The Future is Getting Old Like the Rest of Us* (2009) was developed through an exchange with the artist and residents of four Camden's Care Homes in London, by way of the Serpentine Gallery's Skills Exchange program. In this project, attention to the materiality of conversation is produced through structures gleaned from modernist literature. (Fig. 5) Gibson and writer George Clark scripted a 45-minute film from fragments of transcribed conversations with the care home residents who were in the early stages of dementia. In making the film, professional elder actors re-performed the speech fragments, which the artist and writer had arranged in a vertical structure, resembling a symphonic score. According to Gibson, B.S. Johnson's experimental novel, *House Mother Normal* (1971), was an inspiration for the script. Distinct sections of the film reveal repeated narratives from the perspectives of each of the speakers. Like movements within a score, the themes take on distinct variations through layering and repetition of speech and images. The viewer is continually required to shift attention and filter out competing aspects of the dialogue.

In an interview, Beatrice Gibson described how the structure of the filmmaking process required complex negotiations of authorship that went beyond the engagement with the elderly participants:

> I wouldn't say this film is a collaboration with me and the residents of an old people's home. It is a very structured, composed and authored frame in which people realize a level of their own authorship, which is something different, maybe.

In the way, Gibson's experimental structure layers isolated utterances about culture and memory, it suggests that the viewers' selective attention is part of a process that involves many authors. Likewise the video installation, *Word Finding,* is imagined as a composite of meanings that are derived from people who have differing relationships with the original content. Starting with the

group's dialogue that was taken up in my collaboration with the participants, through to the scripting of the words through the video-making process and then in the final configuration that meets the art audience, the work's authorship is continually distributed. The eventual aesthetic isolation of dialogue fragments in the installation can be seen to be a Foucauldian strategy of asking about the discourse surrounding elder financial abuse: how are these women forming their words in public? What does their authority produce in their audience? Who are the other authors whose experiences have informed those pictured? Are they within this audience or another? Will I assume their position someday?

3.2   Past Works

In my earlier art projects, I have used dialogue with participants as a formal element. For example, in 2007, I collaborated with Cindy Mochizuki and Jaimie Robson on *Archive City: Portraits of Lulu Island* (Richmond Art Gallery). As a self-declared "memory collection agency," Mochizuki, Robson and I conducted informal interviews with residents of Richmond to solicit a set of isolated memories that were materialized through participatory and interactive forms. In 2009, I developed *Garden Gnomad* as a mobile documentation cart that I used as a dialogic tool to record my summer visits with community gardeners and urban agriculturalists. These works set up situations in which the meanings generated in private speech acts were distributed and re-authored. In this research, representation of conversation implies an unstable and open process of translation in the audience as well as the participants.

Fig. 6: Lois Klassen, *A New Word*, 2009. Video still.

During the course of MAA studies, I experimented with video as a technique to particularize public speech acts. In *A New Word* (2009), cell phone video footage of the dialogue between former Governor General Michaëlle Jean, her husband Jean-Daniel LaFond and artists at VIVO Media Arts Centre in September 2009 was transcribed, subtitled and re-read by individuals who had been present. (Fig. 6) In the video, the words of the distinguished guests are simultaneously re-told in an ensemble of voices that are played over the informally collected video footage. The layering of words and voices makes evident the process of translation that is both accessed and restricted by a re-mouthing of words. The project of gathering audience members from the event to repeat the words delivered by individuals of political and cultural authority, was motivated by my curiosity for how artists internalize such authority. In the midst of local arts funding cuts, the words of the dignitaries were delivered to encourage continued experimentation and creative production. My project staged an opportunity for these words to be mimetically re-authored and then disrupted through the inevitable confusion, humour and distrust that commonly accompanies the translation of authority and power.

Fig. 7: Lois Klassen, *Beds at Home, 2011*.Video still.

In a subsequent project, *Beds at home* (2011), an overheard conversation about housing is re-played through the use of dynamic subtitles sliding over cell phone photos of lavish bedrooms on display during Vancouver's recent Olympics. (Fig. 7) In this work, private talking is given authority through elegant representation. The viewer is presented with images without sound that show a contradiction of meanings: the desire surrounding the marketing of homes during a mega-event and the awareness of child poverty that becomes revealed as part of the speakers' everyday lives.[5]

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[5] Up until and during the Olympic events, I was actively observing and responding to the many calls for participation and involvement that greeted citizens and visitors. I was also producing participatory interventions, curating a speakers series at VIVO Media Arts Centre and eventually writing about participation in local cultural programming. Other studio experiments, like the installation and performance *2010 Home Rules* (2010), recalled the expectation of compliance with the mega-event's aims that were eventually carried through the actions of individuals.

Fig. 8: Lois Klassen and Mary Oliver, *Offit, 2010*. Composite photograph of performance and installation. Photos: Lois Klassen.

During the summer of 2010, I participated in a collaborative residency with Mary Oliver at HubM3 in Salford, Greater Manchester, UK. *Offit* consisted of a short-run exhibition and two events at the end of our seven-week residency. (Fig. 8) The entire project considered the potential social impact of art production in a region facing rapid urban renewal. It began with a hypothesis that art production in the midst of early gentrification could produce a condition of imbalance, or a sense of "off-it" in Salford vernacular, where the dominant narratives of urban development might seem to be "not on it" or "not quite right." In the presentation of our work, we created an exhibition environment where the floor surface was askew and where images of Salford's pre-development demolition set the stage for conversation and performance. *Offit Offsite* was a set of site-specific conversation events that offered the audience a chance to discuss the social conditions for art making in Salford. As an international collaboration that dealt with local issues, we were extending to the audience our ongoing conversations about the ways that art production had responded to urban development in various geographies. By highlighting the act of conversation through the events, performance, and an interactive exhibition space, we were suggesting that active talking had produced the work and that it would also be required to complete its reception and distribution.

3.3   Case Studies: Linda Duvall and Kutluğ Ataman

I am considering here two artists whose practices demonstrate sustained use of dialogue in various forms. The artworks of Linda Duvall and Kutluğ Ataman show how authorship and power are negotiated through the use of private and public talking. In the artworks, the artist is at times a participant who is coherent with the subjects' social condition, and at other times they are the invisible enabler, recorder, or transmitter of words coming from people whose condition is distinct from both artist and audience. As with Beatrice Gibson's film project (described above) the case studies described here cannot be accurately described as collaborations. Instead the artists are experimenting with structures through which various levels of authorship are produced. This experimentation, which at times utilizes community-based interventions and dialogue as an aesthetic element in the installations, is an influence on my practice, and *Word Finding* in particular.
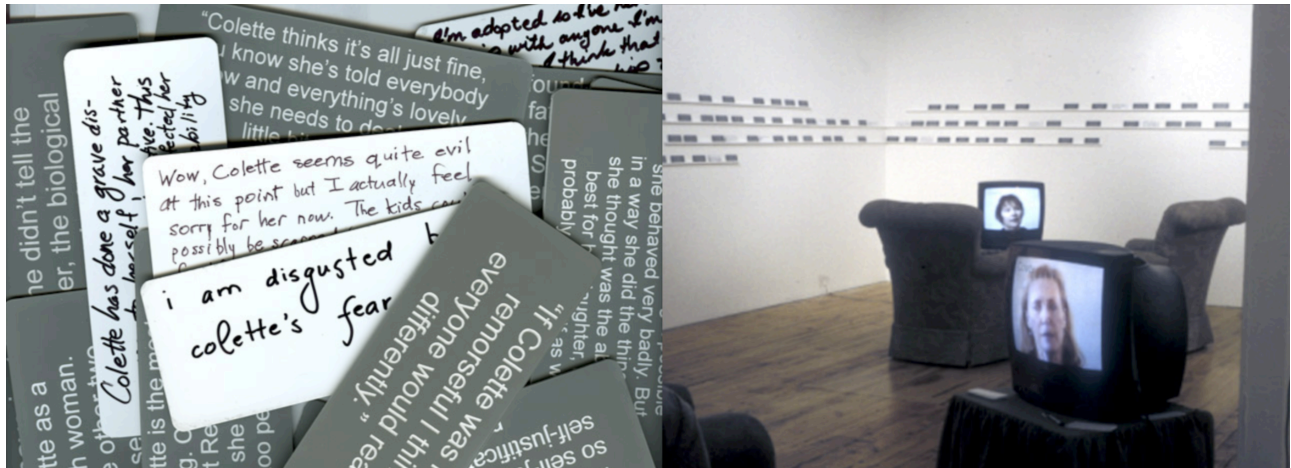

Fig. 9: Linda Duvall, *Tea & Gossip*, 2003. Installation view, Red Head Gallery, Toronto, ON.
Photo: John Loewy. Used with permission of the artist and photographer.

In her work *Tea & Gossip* (2003), Linda Duvall establishes a gallery setting for visitors to gossip with her about a fictional scenario that is told to them by people on a television screen.

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Duvall's video clips introduce visitors to issues relating to complex family configurations resulting from emergent reproductive technologies. When the artist is not present, visitors can contribute pieces of gossip to the growing collection on shelves along the gallery walls. (Fig. 9) Duvall's enabling and materializing of gossip produces audience involvement that is not expected in the space of the gallery. In a sense, this is a subversion of officially sanctioned ways for issues surrounding reproductive technologies to be handled in the public context. In the absence of institutionalized experts, there is a haphazard approach to ethically disputed scenarios. It implies an attitude of equality amongst the opinions generated by the participating audience. In this way Duvall is concerned here and in other works with a respatializing of dialogue: by locating speech acts like gossiping in the gallery they are given a measure of public distribution. *Word Finding* works in a similar way to respatialize the verbal exchange of elders into an art context. The fragmentation of texts that is a feature of both *Tea & Gossip* as well as *Word Finding* is also an act of dislocation. As in Beatrice Gibson's film, the isolated utterances in these works require that the audience actively engage in assembling and thereby authoring the content.

In two other works, Duvall avoids representation of the dialogue altogether. In *Cross City Coffee* (2007), she arranged for individuals to exchange visits to the homes of strangers. Matching participants from economically disparate neighbourhoods and providing transportation and support as needed, Duvall did not participate in or represent the conversations in artworks. She hoped that despite the absence of a direct audience, the project would work through the participants to dispel "myths that surround core neighbourhoods" so that "new understandings of all areas of the city will develop" (lindaduvall.com). Also avoiding representation, her recent work, *Where were the Mothers?* (2009), concerns her involvement in a mothers' support group. Though this group is the subject of the work, its verbal content is restricted from the installation's audience. In its place, videos of the participants' hands and their children's music are used as signifiers. A professionally

recorded CD created by the adult children in collaboration with commissioned songwriters provides

a lingering memento that circulates outside of the gallery. (Fig. 10) Present in both of these works is

the unseen dialogue that would be compromised or could be damaging to the participants if it was

made public. Beyond these considerations of ethical representation, however, there is also the

suggestion that even though the audience is restricted from hearing the dialogue, it is generative of

other acts of authoring, such as the subsequent storytelling –between neighbours after *Cross City*

Coffee coffee dates, or the song-writing of the children in *Where were the Mothers?*. The restriction

of the original content is a way of isolating dialogue as a continually active, though invisible,

element in the work.
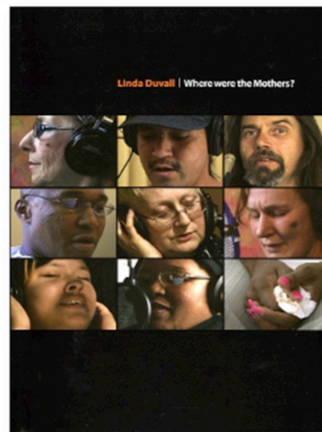
Fig. 10: Linda Duvall, *Where were the Mothers?*, 2009. Full-colour
catalogue, co-produced with the Art Gallery of Mississauga and
Dunlop Art Gallery, essays, CD-ROM, booklet.

As with *Word Finding* there is an element of community-based art production in *Cross City*

Coffee and *Where were the Mothers?*. Within these works there is the aim to produce socially

ameliorative impact through collective involvement of others. As activist gestures within

disenfranchised communities, they distribute power in ways that are directly felt by the participants.

Through the formal integration of these gestures into art systems, however, Duvall is privileging the

works' dialogical elements. In this way she enables audiences who are distinct from the issues to consider the agency of talking in the art and the talking that they produce alongside the work.

[*Image unavailable.*]

Fig. 11: Kutluğ Ataman, Küba (L), 2004 and Paradise (R), 2008. Installation views, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008.

In a similar way, some of the dialogue in Kutluğ Ataman's video installations is grounded in community involvement. With *Küba*, Ataman presents to the viewer footage of people describing their lives in closed zone within the city of Istanbul. (Fig. 11) Küba is a place of asylum for leftist militants and those outside Turkish law, and is a place where the artist himself sought residence in the past. His access, combined with experiences of imprisonment, established his legitimacy as a documenter for this community. The artwork that he produced from the project became a gallery installation of 40 found TV sets with armchairs of various descriptions set in a grid-like arrangement in a large gallery. On the screens, they describe their community's legitimacy in an animated delivery. Ataman's interjections from behind the camera along with the intimate arrangement of furniture implies that the speaking subjects, the filmmaker, and the audience are all engaged to some degree in an active dialogue about their living conditions. In contrast and perhaps in order to disrupt this reading of community representation, Ataman produced another installation, *Paradise*, to be exhibited next to *Küba*.[6] In it, Ataman presents a nearly silent arrangement of 24 flat screen monitors with headsets. On the uniform screens, individuals speak about the pleasure of living in a place that they identify as paradise on earth –a wealthy town in Southern California. With expertly shot footage, each subject is seen describing the comfort and security of their lives. Seen together *Küba* and *Paradise* are, like Duvall's *Tea & Gossip*, a respatialization of dialogue.

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[6] The first combined exhibition of *Küba* and *Paradise* was at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2008.

The installations distinctly contrast the spaces and conditions from which the dialogues were generated.[7] Ataman describes it as a way of demonstrating that geography and history are constructed through dialogue. He suggests that the spoken exchanges between individuals on a screen and the camera-holding artist, as well as the patiently listening viewers, can be understood spatially:

> I look at people like buildings. Instead of walls and rooms, we have stories and experiences. As long as we can live these stories, express these stories, tell and retell these stories, then we can stand up, the way a building stands. Talking is the only meaningful activity we have. Once we are no longer willing or allowed to tell our stories, we collapse into conformity. I like to look at my subjects in this way. My interest in recording them is not a service or anything like that. I am interested in their stories and how the telling functions in the context of their lives. (qtd. in Honigman, 82).

Ataman who was trained as a filmmaker has settled on the circulation of these stories through art installations rather than documentary film, archiving, or activist video. Within the formal space of the gallery, the viewer is confronted with the artist's reconstructions of the places and stories he has captured. The elaborate installations make evident that the artist along with the audience have a hand in creating the identities and geographies on display. As dialogical works the installations suggest that the viewer has a number of ways to get involved in the work. Whereas the quantity of video in *Küba* and *Paradise* requires that the viewer make choices about how much to see and hear, the distinct arrangement of the space –its furniture and technology—requires that the viewer decide how much of the artist's construction they should believe and later repeat.

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[7] For writer, Matthew Stadler the institutional conditions of the works' presentation in Vancouver functioned as "a kind of Orientalism" (8). By denying the twenty-four speakers in *Paradise* the capacity to be seen in dialogue with the audience or the artist, Ataman enabled the commissioning institution a place of power, according to Stadler.

Duvall and Ataman's works as case studies demonstrate to me that the integration of community-based actions with the respatializing of dialogue within art settings, can offer the audience ways to participate in the authoring of the work, despite their distance from the content or location.

4   Research Methodologies Surrounding *Word Finding*

All this to say that, in the realm of contemporary art, we do not seem to be watching what

we say in terms of holding back. Rather, we may be increasingly interested in considering

the aesthetics of people talking together. (Monika Szewczk, 4)

Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces* (2004) articulates a critical framework for dialogical art

practices, especially community-based and activist artworks. His theoretical analysis makes a place

in art criticism for works that "solicit the viewer's interaction in a direct or accessible manner,"

after and in opposition to the isolation of formalist critiques (82). Working with theories from

Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin, Kester discusses the power relations of inter-subjective

exchange within dialogical aesthetics. Many of the case studies featured in *Conversation Pieces*

demonstrate the challenges posed to artists who enter exchanges that cross boundaries of class, race

and gender. In particular, he notes that there is often an avoidance of critical analysis and fetishizing

of the authenticity of the artist's coherence with the participant's social condition. In many ways,

Kester's book seeks to hold these practices accountable to the avoided critique. Throughout his

writing, he privileges works that enable "active listening," works that are based on "connected

knowing" out of feminist epistemology, and those that feature interactions "drawn out over

extended periods of time" (151, 113, 112). Kester suggests that each project should be examined in

its specificity: there should be consideration of the artist's capacity to treat their relationship with

the participants critically and self-reflexively as part of the work itself (130-1). Instead of

reductionist political critique, he is asking how collaborative and process-based works can consider

instead what is achieved through social exchange in art. In the midst of his analysis of dialogue in

community-based interventions, Kester is considering the phenomenological possibilities of

proximity in the extended intersubjective exchanges staged in art:

The moment that passes between posing a question and receiving a reply is marked by both risk and possibility. The risk of doubt and uncertainty, and the possibility of an opening out to the other; a movement from self-assurance to the vulnerability of intersubjective exchange. (Untitled 2004)

Though Kester's open theorizing is useful for an expanded view of conversations in art, the older theories of Mikhail Bakhtin articulate more specifically the subversive workings of dialogue in aesthetically presented cultural forms. For artists, his ideas echo the materialist approaches of artists in early twentieth century Russia in which ordinary things held revolutionary potential. As a theorist working in the midst of the Russian revolution, he articulated the subversive workings of "dialogism," as represented in various genres of speech acts, particularly the literary novel. His notion of "heteroglossia" contained the dispute and conflict between official and unofficial discourses within the same language. He recognized that in every utterance there could be found traces of past and future meanings, which would each be uniquely understood by the speaker and the receiver. He contrasted the inherently heterogenous characteristic of dialogism to the "monologism" of official genres like government utterances, for example, which the lower classes would inevitably have a tendency to subvert through such things as parody or carnival. This glossary definition gets at how his theories contained political resistance in the context of the 1920s in Russia:

Dialogue is perhaps the basic trope in all of Bakhtin's thought. There is no existence, no meaning, no word or thought that does not enter into dialogue or 'dialogic' ('dialogichekii') relations with the other, that does not exhibit intertexuality in both time and space. 'Monologue' and 'monologic' ('monolog' and 'monologicheskii') refer to any discourse which seeks to deny the dialogic nature of existence, which refuses to recognize its

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responsibility as addressee, and pretends to be the 'last word'. Such discourse is typical of authoritarian regimes. (Roberts, 247)

Like constructivist artists who were working around the same time, Mikhail Bakhtin developed his ideas in the midst of ideological rhetoric that placed high value in the context and the activities of the everyday or *byt*. To understand the importance of everyday life in this context, we can look to Christina Kiaer's study of the "things" made by Russian constructivist artists in the 1920s. Kiaer describes the widespread intellectual and public discussion of the time around the question of *byt*.[8] She explains how materialist Marxists situated their rhetoric on a linguistic division of *byt* or ordinary life, and *bytie,* the spiritually meaningful side of existence. A transcendent aim of early twentieth century Russian culture was not so much concerned with a distinction of private from public, but of material from spiritual (Svetlana Boym described in Kaier, 52). In a radical use of ordinary life as a site for revolution, constructivist artists offered up new forms for socialist life that would provide transcendence from both backward peasant traditions and bourgeois materialism. Their things (working class clothing, furniture, theatre sets, for example) revealed worker-based industrial production while rejecting, to double effect, folkways as well as decadence.

For Bakhtin, ordinary speech, which is at the structural core of the novel genre, was a semiotic cue for readers to recognize the counterhegemonic potential of common discourse. In the novel form there is a stratification of meanings or "heteroglossia" between characters as well as between the readers who experience various understandings of the dialogue's representation (Bakhtin 332). In this way, the novel contains the anti-authoritarian potential to deflate official and ideological meanings through mass circulation. It is these ideas about materialized dialogue as a disruption or distribution of power that are useful in understanding the impact of Linda Duvall's

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[8] In 1923 Leon Trotsky produced a set of essays for the party newspaper *Pravda.* These were later assembled in a book under the title *Questions of Everyday Life*.

and Kutluğ Ataman's acts of relocating gossip and neighbourhood banter. In these works, it is not only that the community-based dialogue achieves authority through public presentation, but also that the participants' speech is presented as open to interpretation and re-interpretation. In this way, Bakhtin explained, the reader or audience is continually involved through reception and translation.

In a recent two-part text, Monika Szewczyk also asks aesthetic and formal questions of the "discursive turn" in contemporary art. As with Bakhtin's heteroglossia, Szewczyk wonders if art, like conversation, can take up more than one position; if it offers a discourse about misunderstandings. Are the other parts of conversation that are not usually thought of as conversation considered—like neutrality and silence? How do we "watch what we say"? She calls up examples from eighteenth century paintings that displayed aristocratic conversation as a way of transmitting their right to rule. If conversation is seen to be the place where value is negotiated as in the eighteenth century, what is being displayed by artists who stage conversation now? Liam Gillick also refers to a discursive turn in relation to power. For him, the parallel nature of the discursive to the dominant culture built on global capital enables a self-consciousness that can be a position of strength and weakness. Both writers suggest that within the workings of an argument or conversation there exist possibilities of disruption and refusal, through speaking and translation. My recent projects produce words and utterances that circulate within ordinary talking. Like in the work of Duvall and Ataman, *Word Finding* is primarily concerned with the construction of subjectivity and the continual negotiations of authority and power through language or conversation. As with Bakhtin's heteroglossia, the words have been generated from various social conditions and power relations. In this way they offer the listeners an invitation to continually translate and transmit the meanings within shifting social conditions.

In her 2006 introduction to a reader of theoretical texts and artists' statements concerning the use of participation, Claire Bishop suggests that participatory works from the 1960s until now

have tended to reflect three categories of social or political intervention. First, many participatory art projects aim to create an image of an "active subject" who is politically empowered through either symbolic or physical gestures. Second, participatory art forms often work to distribute the authorship to many participants, thus to model a more egalitarian social world. Third, these art forms are also used to materialize a social bond in the face of the isolating effects of capitalism (Bishop, *Participation* 12). Bishop's texts have presented a pointed critique of works that privilege the ethical over those that have attempted "to think the aesthetic and the social/political together" (Bishop, *Social Turn*). This analysis has often been reiterated as a critique of community-based or activist art for which the emphasis shifts to ethics of representation over the artist's authorship. Community-based projects and social art practices often avoid the critical analyses that consider both formal and ethical considerations, and that in Szewczyk's words "take up more than one position". It is both the challenge and the core expectation that *Word Finding* be positioned both in the community and the institutions of art school and gallery. These dual positions aim to combine the aesthetic alongside the social/political.

5   Conclusion

An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.

(Jacque Rancière, 280)

In his pedagogy-based analysis of participatory theatre, Jacque Rancière suggests that, like the learner, the spectator's emancipation is not achieved through involvement in the staged action but instead in the active translation and the ensuing story telling that functions as a form of distribution. He suggests that the post-production talking amongst the audience needs to be considered to be as equally intelligent and important as the acting on stage. In this way, the audience continues to author and circulate the work in dynamic ways that are not restricted by the artist's original intention and social condition. *Word Finding* puts forward the idea that there is an active crowd within and outside of the artwork that serves to complete the work. Through a recognition that the work's formal structure requires mimicry and translation, or through the storytelling subsequent to the work's presentation, authorship is neither determined nor fixed.

As an artist making art from conversation as a method, this research project has also called on me to ask what am I authoring within an unknown crowd of authors. In *Word Finding,* I see that my actions create the subject positions of invitation-issuing host, the advocate for video representation based on negotiations over interests and resources, and the inquiring researcher who questions the discourse. Alongside artists like Gibson, Duvall and Ataman, the form of my work implies that active involvement is a continuing requirement for reception of public and private utterances that are put forward in my art.

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Appendix A

Texts describing the methods and goals of the Finding Home™ dialogue process as printed on display materials at Regional Knowledge Exchange event.

During Dialogues Together We
- Encourage new connections, relationships and strategies
- Examine present day contexts, deriving new strategies
- Value diversity and foster cross-cultural understanding
- Strengthen values-based problem solving skills
- Identify workable next steps for individual action

Our Goal
To equip seniors with skills to end isolation, build networks, and learn a values-based approach to resolving everyday problems.

"How to Spot a Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" flyer and poster generated from the second session of the Elder Abuse Awareness Dialogue Project, Finding Home™, John Braithwaite Community Centre and North Shore Neighbourhood House, North Vancouver, 2010.

Finding Home™:
How to Belong in a Changing World

John Braithwaite Community Centre &
North Shore Neighbourhood House

How To Spot A Wolf In Sheep's Clothing
Cherishing Independence In Our Golden Years
Elders Dialogue #2 – September 15th, 2010

"Financial abuse can lead to the loss of our independence, our well being and our freedom to choose where we live and what we can afford to do."

Why Sharing Stories About Financial Abuse Is Difficult…

- Shame & embarrassment
- Family honour
- Denial that family is taking advantage of us
- Fear of being judged & feeling stupid
- Cultural pride & fear of being stereotyped
- Cultural denial that financial abuse exists
- Confusion around what is love & what is abuse
- Belief that "you shouldn't air dirty your laundry"

Our Tips to…

Move Past Embarrassment…

- Remember you are not alone, many people get taken advantage of
- Gradually tell people, first choose close friends & family, then others
- Be humorous — it helps integrate the experience
- Learn from the experience

Transform Denial…

- Listen to what other people are saying to you about the situation or person
- Be rational & list the facts
- Remove emotion to gain a better understanding
- Talk to someone outside your family or culture

"We need to stand up and say no more! It transcends all cultures, elder financial abuse is not acceptable. It is up to us to shake the tree to make the leaves fall."

— Dialogue Participants

What Makes Us Vulnerable…

- Loneliness
- Feeling insecure & needing attention
- Poor self image or ill health
- Unmet needs or dreams
- Having assets people envy
- Lack of information about financial abuse

Building Trust Across Cultures Keeps Us Safer…

Our Tips…

- Learn about other cultures & value their strengths
- Realize there is good & bad in every culture
- Don't laugh at other cultures; laugh with them
- Have a spirit of curiosity

"When we have respect and understanding for each other's culture, it is easier to share our problems & reach out for help."

Our Prevention Strategies…

- Intergenerational & cross-cultural respect & understanding
- Wait 48 hours before making a decision
- Learn about types of financial abuse
- Don't share personal information with a new person
- Put contracts & financial arrangements in writing
- Power of Attorney — always have two people
- Speak to non-relatives when it is a family problem
- Make maximum withdrawal arrangements with your bank
- Learn to be assertive
- Talk to professionals
- Call a friend

Learn Our 10 Red Flags You May Be Dealing With A Wolf…

- Creates dependency & isolates
- Uses flattery
- Tells a sob story & plays on your weakness
- Their story doesn't add up
- Everyone is telling you there is a problem
- Too much, too soon
- Too good to be true
- Gut feeling
- Being rushed into decisions
- When a "long lost relative" shows up expecting a lot

ELDER ABUSE AWARENESS DIALOGUE PROJECT

Seniors Dialogue Program Designed & Facilitated by:
Finding Home — How to Belong in a Changing World

In Partnership with:
Association of Neighbourhood Houses of BC
John Braithwaite Community Centre
North Shore Neighbourhood House

This project is funded by the Government of Canada
Canada

In-Kind Contributions from:
bc211 we can help
SeniorsBC.ca
British Columbia

Hosted by:
www.findinghome.ca
www.anhgv.org
www.jbcc.ca
www.nsnh.bc.ca
www.rhdcc-hrsdc.gc.ca

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