



TWO MISTAKES

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In the summer of 2014 I made two mistakes. The first was that, assuming I would receive a grant, I bought a digital projector to install in my apartment. I rationalized the extravagance as a work expense. I make video work sometimes, and the projector would allow me to see things in initial stages that I wouldn't otherwise see until later in the editing process or during installation. I didn't get the grant. And I didn't have a job or any savings.

The second mistake is related to the first. I put up a shelf in my living room for the projector. I'd had enough experience with projectors to expect the projector's fan to be loud, so I didn't want it close to me where I sit while watching things, nor did I want to move the painting that hangs above the couch, nor did I want to mount it above and have a cord ruin the flatness of my ceiling. So I placed the shelf towards the corner of the room, close to the outlet so the cord wouldn't show, thinking I could just keystone the image onto the wall. I knew enough about projectors to anticipate fan noise, but not enough to realize that keystoneing is for *minor* adjustments only, not for projecting from oblique angles, and that the more I adjusted the image the lower the quality would be. I eventually bought a ceiling mount and a cord management system the same colour as the ceiling. And I ended up with a shelf

I neither needed nor wanted, a shelf that mocked me every time I looked at it.

I'm sure I made other mistakes that summer, but these two are my favourites. The projector became an excuse to have people over to watch films, and I turned the shelf into a gallery.

I like to talk during movies. I use Brecht as a way to justify it as a radical political gesture. Several years ago while watching *Purple Rain* in a theater I exclaimed to a friend of mine how bafflingly sexy Prince was, and was asked to "please be quiet" by a man sitting in front of me. I hissed back "If you want to be an audience of one, go rent the DVD!" A book is an individual space. A theater is a social space. So when I thought about how I could best use my projector socially, the idea of talking during movies was the one I found most promising. I had been to some of the *Dim Cinema* programming at the Pacific Cinematheque, where audiences would watch a film and then be encouraged to speak about it after in whichever groups they might split into. I thought the films I saw (Dan Starling's and Casey Wei's) were fantastic, and the conversations after were okay, but I would have preferred them to happen simultaneously. So when I decided

**DIM-WITTED CINEMA,
or
TALKING THROUGH
MOVIES
2014 - 2016**

to invite people with whom I enjoy talking to my home to watch films, the subject line of my first email was "Dim-Witted Cinema, or Talking Through Movies." My apartment, being quite small, could realistically only manage 10-13 guests. Some people I invited were uninterested in the project, and never showed up. I stopped inviting them. Others were enthusiastic.

We watched *Gung Ho* (1986) first, Ron Howard's distressingly racist treatment of American deindustrialization and the fear of Asian modes of production. I thought this would funnel us into more explicitly critical, difficult films like Raoul Peck's *Lumumba* (2000) or Nikita Mikhalkov's *Anna 6-18* (1994), but when only one person showed up to the second screening, Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* (1964), I realized that the programming had to be responsive to its audience. So our next film was *Mr. Mom* (1983), where Michael Keaton—who also stars as a white-working-class everyman in *Gung Ho*—"discovers the inherent inequality of his labour prejudices as he is forced to confront the structurally undervalued sphere of domestic work." That's how I phrased it in the email invitation, anyway. Subsequent films were mostly decided upon collectively in the conversations during and after the films. We watched Patrick Swayze in *Roadhouse* (1989); Denzel Washington in Nick Cassavette's ham-fisted two-hour-long argument for socialized medicine, *John Q* (2002); the bizarre gentrification thriller *Wolfen* (1981); and the even more bizarre *White Nights* (1985), starring Gregory Hines and Mikhail Baryshnikov in a Soviet socialism vs American racialized capitalism dance battle.

There were fifteen screenings in total between 2014 and 2016, most of which were accompanied by thematic snacks and drinks. At the end of the program, I produced sixteen small, eighty-page full colour books of all my email invitations and hand delivered them to everybody who attended a screening. If I'm being honest, I think that book is the best thing I've ever made.

The shelf that was meant to hold the projector is a 12"x12"x1/2" piece of bamboo. I have a friend who is a cabinet maker and he had some lying around. If I were designing a shelf to be a gallery, it would neither be that size nor of bamboo, nor would I put it in a dimly lit corner of my living room over top of a modem, a router, a computer, and a rat's nest of cables. I know about apartment galleries. I know about Barb Choit's Allergy Gallery and Lee Plested's The Apartment Gallery, though I never visited either. I have been to others, in different cities, and however interesting the work might have been, I couldn't help thinking: "Who thinks art is so important that they want to live with it like this? Who likes art THIS much? Who wouldn't rather this closet be a closet?" I write about art, I teach about art, I make art, and I'm close friends with people who do the same. But I have never thought it was a good idea to live in a gallery, nor to invite people to my home with art as our primary reason for interacting. I had previously considered designating a small section of my apartment as a domestic gallery, mostly because I had some glass display cases I really liked (in a way, more than the work that was in them) left over from a couple of exhibitions. I thought they would look good in my apartment, and that maybe I could borrow work from friends or make my own exhibitions in them, and invite people over to see them. But I never followed through because a) they would have taken up too much space in an apartment that is already impeccably organized, and b) I didn't want to invite people over just to look at and contemplate artwork. It seemed like a poor structure for social engagement.

But the shelf in the corner that would have been more trouble to take down than it would be to leave up seemed like an opportunity to investigate the social supports of art and friendship without much sacrifice. The conceptual scaffolding I developed around it goes like this: I ask people who and whose work I admire to lend me a piece that will fit on a 12"x12" shelf. If they agree, I invite them over to install the work and make them dinner. They leave the work for me to live with,

and in exchange I write about it and post the text online, along with an image, on a website called *shelfed.ca*. I don't do any press besides an announcement on my only social media apparatus, a rarely used Twitter account. I promise to send the artist the text for their approval in advance of posting it, and to alter it in any way they recommend. Then I return the work to them. Initially I imagined exhibitions of 6-8 weeks, but they have turned out to be closer to 4-5 months, as other projects with deadlines and pressures and my job often get in the way.

around with in my pockets at some point. Steven Brekelmans lent me an assemblage. Gabi Dao, whose work is currently on the shelf, lent me her gelatin ears. I'm not sure what food I served for all the dinners, but I remember the conversations all being very nice. I remember being grateful and surprised that people would bring something that they thought seriously about and made with purpose and leave it with me, and that they would come over to spend time talking to me. I remember that I was happy to feed them and have them in my home.



Elizabeth Zvonar, "Leather Gloved Hand: Burned", 2015

Abbas Akhavan was the first artist I invited to show, and he lent me a foil swan. Elizabeth Zvonar was the second artist, and she lent me a cast-hand incense holder, with incense sticks she made herself. Colleen Brown lent me a box of pocket sculptures, all of which I walked

It's a similar gratitude and reciprocity that characterizes the writing I do in response to the work. I have written for journals and for exhibition catalogs, and in those cases always feel a territorial anxiety around readership and genre. But as the texts I produce for Shelfed are primarily

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Steven Brekelmans, "The Fisherman", 2016.

for the artists, and aren't written in any kind of direct relationship to curatorial framing or gallery residue, the writing has become more personal. I do not select which work to borrow, after all, so often find myself at a loss when initially encountering it and thinking about how to write about it. I have yet to resent a work in the way I might if I were tasked with reviewing an exhibition for a particular publication, and had trouble finding a way to enter it. In those cases, with their deadlines and generic research or vernacular pressures, I might find myself—often out of impatience or self-doubt or distance—looking for reasons to criticize the work, or the space, or the curation, or the larger structures of exhibiting art. But because I live with the work in my home,

and generally don't have conversations about it beyond those I have with the artist or with friends who visit and are interested in it, my writing doesn't take on or respond to the same discursive pressures. Because I spend time with the work differently—I eat, drink, nap, watch tv and movies, host friends, read, water plants, vacuum and clean in close proximity to it—I think about and through it differently. So my text on Abbas's work begins with an anecdote about my mom's reaction to one of Abbas's paintings, and moves into historical prohibitions against eating swans. My text on Elizabeth's work discusses the evening she installed the work, and how the piece's olfactory character was overwhelmed by the smell of forest fires that blanketed Vancouver for a few days that

summer. I don't know which days, exactly, or even which year, because the exhibitions aren't dated (though I'm sure I could figure it out if I tried). My text on Colleen's tactile work includes an investigation of a weird, nervous habit I have of touching my keyring or playing with a car's gear shift in a particular way. I entered Steven's work by thinking about a building I have been fascinated by for years but actively prevent myself from knowing in any further detail. I don't know how I'll write about Gabi's work, but I suspect that, like the others, it will be rooted in something personal. I hope the artists don't mind. If one ever does, I'll write about their work differently until they are happy with it. There has yet to be a Works Cited section in any of the texts, despite me quoting directly from other sources. I figure, what's the point? If Google Analytics is anything to go by, nobody has visited shelved.ca in over six months. I think that's likely a problem with the site, though, since a handful of people have mentioned to me that they have looked at it during that time. But my point is that the way I write for Shelved is a different kind of writing, in a specific space, and one that is rooted in a particular relationship to art, friendship, and reciprocity.

When I began thinking about how to frame Dim-Witted Cinema and Shelved in order to write about them, I thought that they might be best understood as ambition-less. Neither of them appear on my professional CVs (art or academic), nor have I sought out conventional spaces like conferences, symposia, or journals to theorize or trumpet them. I generally don't talk about them unless other people bring them up, or somebody who is already in my apartment asks me about the work on the shelf. Even this text only happened after the editors of *Charcuterie*, who I like and admire, invited me to submit something and then told me that they would prefer a reflection on Shelved to what I initially gave them. But when I say "ambition-less" I fall into the same thought trap that irritates me in others, where everything needs to be absorbed into a

professional or personal or instagrammable ledger of experience, as if when we're not working actual jobs we're interning for some future position or relationship that we hope we'll like better. So I won't say they are ambition-less. Their ambitions are just different. They have a hope and a pleasure my other work doesn't. I've been surprised by them.