



Photograph courtesy of Anne Bertrand, Centre des arts actuel, Skol.

No Closure From Julie Ault

Centre des arts actuels, Skol

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Felicity Tayler

Introduction

Julie Ault recently came to Montréal to lead a master class on closure for artist-run centres; and to deliver a lecture on the critical positions of her distinguished artistic, editorial and curatorial practice. Ault's visit was planned in two parts: the first a master class, restricted to an intimate group of participants and hosted by Skol; and the second, a public lecture hosted by the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery (LBEAG) at Concordia University. The theme of closure combined in the two events as Ault's lecture addressed the challenges of archiving in the work of Group Material and in her recent exhibition reflecting upon the life and work of Félix González-Torres (1957-1996). The financial and organizational collaboration between Skol (an artist-run centre) and the LBEAG (a university gallery) grew out of a shared interest in the historical significance of Ault's multifaceted practice and the earlier work of Group Material. Both Skol and the LBEAG support artistic practices that are research-driven, explore the intersection between politics and aesthetics in the public sphere, and questions of self-representation. Ault's interest in dialogue as form or content seemed a natural fit for a collaborative process between organizations that do not usually partner and share resources to this degree.

Significant as forms of public gathering, the master class and the lecture also demonstrated Skol's and the LBEAG's support of living artistic culture in the city. More than two hundred people attended the lecture – the auditorium seats overflowed and the audience sat in the aisles. The lecture was recorded and has now been generously made available through the LBEAG web site. This synopsis will focus on the experience of the master class because it was not recorded, and many participants and those who could not attend expressed interest in the proceedings.

Julie Ault accepted the invitation to Montréal because she found it to be welcoming as well as respectful of her practice and innate way of working. She explained that the experience of working with Skol and the LBEAG was far from the treadmill of “programming mania” endemic to many cultural organizations at this time.



Video still, courtesy of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Deborah VanSlet.

Traces from the Master Class on Closure With Julie Ault

In attendance: Julie Ault, Sarah Bélanger-Martel (Independent), Anne Bertrand (Artist, Artistic Coordinator, Skol), Mathieu Beauséjour (Artist), Vincent Bonin (Independent Curator), Nicole Burisch (Independent Curator, Production Coordinator, Skol), Julie Châteauvert (Artist, Activist, Artistic), Vicky Chainey Gagnon (Director/Curator, Foreman Art Gallery), Barbara Clausen (Independent Curator, Professor, Université de Québec à Montréal), Rebecca Duclos (Independent Curator, Professor, McGill)

University), Marie-Josée Jean (Curator, Writer, Director, VOX, centre d'image contemporaine), Jon Knowles (Artist), Denis Lessard (Artist, Translator, Archivist), Michelle Lacombe (Artist), Chris Lloyd (Artist), François Lemieux (Artist), Jessica MacCormack (Artist, Professor, Concordia University), Marina Polosa (Education and Public Programs Coordinator, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery), Bernard Schütze (Writer, Translator, Curator), Felicity Tayler (Artist), Michèle Thériault (Curator, Writer, Director, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery), Manon Quintal (Cultural consultant), Sarah Watson (Head of Public Programs, McCord Museum).

The restrictions to public arts and heritage funding introduced by the minority Conservative government in 2008 magnified an already existing malaise in the non-profit cultural world of public galleries, museums and artist-run centres. Drastic cuts to arts funding in British Columbia in 2009, and more recently, the Netherlands in 2011 amplified this concern. There is a pressing feeling that something in the terrain of the public sphere is shifting, but it is difficult to define, and in turn act preemptively. My impulse to initiate this collaboration and issue the invitation arose from a desire to critique the thing you love. Understood one way, “closure” is pop psychology’s specious promise of relief from trauma. But a second meaning raises a hypothetical question: What happens if we shut the doors, or the doors are shut for us? In contemplating loss, we may confirm what is most important to us. Likewise, we may become aware of certain ideologies, or base assumptions that shape our world-view.

The master class was chosen as a form because it implies that the “master” has significant experience and insight in her area of practice. The “students” are advanced practitioners in their own fields. They arrive at the class to actively share their experiences; the “master” acts as a mirror reflection (although slightly distorted) to compare and learn from. Ault’s knowledge of not-for-profit “alternative spaces,” their day-to-day operations, and their subsequent historical representation, comes from her decades-long practice with Group Material, as well as from her research for the book, *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*. Ault’s personal drive to study this area came from a desire to understand the field she came of age in as an artist, the larger social field that Group Material was a symptom of, and the conditions under which an “alternative” movement’s vitality stagnated and dissipated in the 1990s.

The morning began with Ault providing insight into her practice as a whole. She made it clear that her interests had recently shifted to questions of historical representation. Her focus was no longer on sustaining the activities of artists’ initiatives, but rather on their incorporation into the public record. Ault’s edited volume, *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material*, and the deposition of Group Material’s archives in the Downtown Collection at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, reflect this interest in preserving the material traces of a project that has ended but eludes closure (during her public lecture Ault elaborated further on these shifts in her practice).

The contents of the day’s discussion can be grouped around four themes: archives and the public record; fields and structural layers; myths and radical beginnings; and self-determination.

Archives and the Public Record Early in the day, Denis Lessard invoked his experience as archivist for Skol, and shared his hope that his preparation of the archive would open a space for new beginnings. Marie-José Jean remarked that artists tell alternate histories through exhibition strategies. For Ault, there is a difference between the “archive” as a documentary baseline that is open to change and accrual, and “archives” as the institution that holds the records of public memory. She spoke of “activist archiving,” which critically addresses the process of archiving itself. Formal archives hold authority. Ault’s choice of the Downtown Collection at the Fales Library was made specifically to avoid exclusive enclaves like the archives held at MoMA and the elitism implied by conventional notions of “Fine Art.” Her choice consciously positioned Group Material as a cultural and aesthetic social practice alongside other civic groups. Ault strongly encouraged us to consult the Downtown Collection as an example of an archive that maps a cultural terrain by accessioning and preserving the memory-traces of different groups (artists, musicians, dance groups, community groups, etc.) in relationship to each other, rather than isolating them in individual fonds according to rules of institutional order. Skol’s decision to keep their archive in their office space effectively maintains the archive outside of authoritative public record. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the label of “alternative” imposes a binary, an inside and an outside: if Québec’s formal archiving institutions exclude the records of artist-run centres from their cultural mandate for preservation, it may be advantageous for artist-run centres to position themselves not as an alternative, but as a structural layer in a larger social field.

Fields and Structural Layers Michèle Thériault asked, what is the field? There is a tendency among artist-run centres to identify with entities that share a similar organizational structure, and likewise, to differentiate themselves from museums, commercial galleries, and cultural organizations operating beyond visual and media arts. This tendency is in part due to the important presence of lobbying groups such as the Regroupement des centres d’artistes autogérés du Québec (RCAAQ) and the Artist-Run Centres and Collectives Conference (ARCCA). However, looking around the table at the participants one would have to understand the field as an interconnected web of individuals who move in and out of different roles in diverse institutional structures. The curator at a major museum is also an artist who sat on the board of an artist-run centre. A technician at a social history museum is also an artist. A university professor is also a curator and writer. An artist is also an activist for social justice. An artist is also an archivist and a translator. A student in Art History is also an assistant to the Federal MP of their riding. Artists who show at artist-run centres also show in museums and in commercial galleries, publish magazines or play in bands. The field is expansive, rather than reductive (see the recent report by Guy Bellavance, which offers a sociological analysis of the field of visual arts). To consider this field critically, one needs to acknowledge that all institutional forms, including artist-run centres, operate through politics and are subject to forces that determine status and power. In Ault’s experience, “artist-run” is not always artist-centred. As an exhibition venue, the “artist-run” space does not necessarily produce culture differently. For her, the artist-run centres of Québec appear to be a structural layer (like museums or public galleries) in a larger cultural field. This position as a structural layer is not by default “alternative,” if we understand this to

mean the ability to disrupt the well-worn patterns through which status and power are established.

Myths and Radical Beginnings The afternoon opened with a session where those around the table shared their experiences, beliefs, desires and historical understanding of artist-run centres and artist-run culture. Ault's relative unfamiliarity with the local context forced participants to clearly articulate concepts that are often taken for granted – concepts such as public funding, board structures, and the state of the art market. A preoccupation with the relationship of artists and artist-run culture to public funding dominated this session. Significantly, questions about keeping public funding, or having access to it, eclipsed reflection upon why these monies were made available in the first place.

After listening to the exchange, Ault responded by explaining that for Group Material, and most other artists' spaces funded through the National Endowment of the Arts, there was never a promise of continued funding. This meant that they were pushed to continually reinvent their approaches, innovating forms in response. The instability of this experience emphasized the speed and flexibility of the temporary. While wondering about the effects of permanence, she referred to Vienna Secession, an independent exhibition venue formed in 1897, by the union of Austrian artists, which continues to this day. Does the longevity of the institution compromise the vitality of dialogue cultivated by more temporary initiatives? On this point, Barbara Clausen questioned what community meant to artist-run centres. In response, Vicky Chainey Gagnon explained how, in the rural context of Lennoxville, the Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University had started a mentorship program to help support an emerging artist-run centre until it became eligible to apply for public funding. François Lemieux's, *We Left the Warm Stable and Entered the Latex Void* (or, *WLTWSAETLV*) was raised as an example of a local space that operated with a limited duration that emphasized hospitality and friendship. In this way, it avoided the anxiety of permanence demonstrated by Anne Bertrand, when she suggested that the older organizations could maintain their continuous funding but at the same time, reinvent themselves, as new generations moved through them.

Many of Group Material's projects irrupted from a sense of urgency – was this also the case with artist-run centres? Did those artists who founded artist-run centres expect them to extend in time? Michelle Lacombe and Jessica MacCormack loosely referred to the radical beginnings of some of these projects, and to the desire among younger generations to seek a genealogy for their own impulses. Vincent Bonin responded with a brief overview of how funding programs and artist-run centres have been bound up from the beginning – from the Local Initiative Program Grants, to the creation of the Association of National Non-Profit Artists Centres/Regroupment d'artistes des centres alternatifs (ANNPAC/RACA) in 1976 as a lobbying agency to secure funding for artists/cultural workers. The episode of Jack Chambers' challenge to the National Gallery of Canada was invoked as the origins of Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC), the organization that lobbies for artists' rights such as exhibition and reproduction fees. Sarah Watson brought up the correlation with post-war labour movements, and asked to what degree this was a part of artist-run history.

In response to our performance of memory and forgetting, Ault referenced the “happy beast” in Nietzsche’s essay *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, saying that there is a certain degree of freedom in a lack of historical awareness. Otherwise, it is a question of gaining an understanding of historical forces, an awareness of one’s position in history and determining how art can give history form. To her, it seemed as though in our local environment, there was a need for further reflection in this area through forms of exhibition and publication. But she cautioned against relying too much on affirmative modes that seek only to confirm artist-run centres’ existence. Rather, the act of historical representation should involve an analysis of the larger social forces at play that gave rise to the organizations themselves. By studying individual centres on a case-by-case basis, Ault suggested, you can map the larger field of what they were trying to be alternative to. Considering their passage into the archive can be useful in this situation, since that passage reflects and performs some of the ways in which institutions are constituted. Institutional forms are born of politics.

Self-Determination Julie Châteauvert explained her recent experience of trying to secure funding for the activist project *Artivistic*. Contrary to earlier generations of non-profit organizations, current funding structures have required *Artivistic* to adopt an entrepreneurial model that demonstrates the ability to generate autonomous revenue and hence stimulate growth. She explained that she is not averse to change, but that she would prefer change to happen in the direction of “solidarité sociale,” rather than through the imposition of market models on the non-profit sector. What seems to be at stake here, then, is whether the forms adopted by artists arise from an internal impulse, or whether they are imposed by external conditions. As a pertinent example, Mathieu Beauséjour had to leave suddenly to negotiate with the landlord of the Fashion Plaza who is threatening Centre Clark with eviction. The figure of the stable tenant, reliable due to government funding, no longer holds allure when higher paying businesses are just as happy to inhabit old industrial buildings.

Considered from this perspective, Bernard Schütze’s question—“what is self-determination?”—revealed much of what is at stake in this conjuncture. Artist-run centres seem caught between the “freedom” to reinvent themselves according to the cycles of the free market, and the very different freedom from oppression sought through social justice. Returning to the initial question, what happens if we shut the doors, or the doors are shut for us? For some of us, the urgency regarding “closure” may therefore be about how to radicalize our social contract with the state and its strategies of funding. Vincent Bonin’s suggestion of an economic analysis of the field, including a comparison of the discrepancies in different centre’s assets, could be a way into this discussion. For Bonin, artist-run centres are a construct – artists use them (and their funding) for different reasons.

In what concerns the financial collaboration between the LBEAG and Skol, the funds for the master class were raised in part from the attendees themselves and in part by the creative diversion of funds from the RCAAQ coaching program supported by Emploi Québec. It is worth mentioning that an argument had to be made to convince the funders

that this day of dialogue and reflection had the same merit for artists as professional development in strategic planning and other administrative skills.

Ault found the group in the master class to be engaging and the day to be stimulating and productive. For her, it was an opportunity to learn about the politics of culture in Québec (and by extension Canada). She was surprised by the extent of public funding dedicated to the arts sector. Though neither the expectation of closure nor recommendations for the future were outcomes of this day, many participants felt the urgency of deepening the dialogue.

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Suggested Resources

Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985. Julie Ault, ed. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Ault, Julie. *Show and Tell*. Lecture at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, October 21, 2011 <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php>

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Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory History Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

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