

BIOGRAPHIES

Native Art Department International (NADI) is a collaborative long-term project created and administered by Maria Hupfield (Canada) and Jason Lujan (US). NADI highlights support and creative endeavors using a variety of platforms and techniques in order to liberate artworks and aesthetics from reductive classifications.

Bureau of Aesthetics is presented in partnership with the Images Festival, 16-22 April 2020 and Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival: 1-31 May 2020. For more information visit imagesfestival.com and scotiabankcontactphoto.com

Images
FESTIVAL

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Cover image: Native Art Department International: *Bureau of Aesthetics: Study*, 2020. Digital photograph. Courtesy the artists. Photo: Jason Lujan.
Interior image: Native Art Department International, video still *Everything Sacred is Far Away*, 2019. Courtesy the artists. Photo: Jason Lujan.

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

NADI x FADO: Double Shift/Shift

Daily Activations: 7 - 25 April, 2020

Double Shift/Shift is a collaborative project between Native Art Department International and FADO Performance Art Centre. This program invites participants to engage in brief acts of collective care for the artwork *Double Shift* (2018), comprised of two painted hoodies sewn together. As a performance project in the context of a gallery exhibition, *Double Shift/Shift* elaborates on the essential character of the original artwork through an expansive mode of collaboration and recursion from: artist to object; object to exhibition; gallery to participant; performance to object; and back again.

FADO Performance Art Centre was established in 1993, to provide a supportive platform and a rigorous curatorial context for the work of Canadian and international performance artists. www.performanceart.ca

SESSION

Sunday 3 May 2020, 12PM

Artists Life of a Craphead will lead a SESSION on their recent work and research around themes of autobiography and fantasy.

Life of a Craphead is the collaboration of Amy Lam and Jon McCurley. Their work spans performance art, film and curation, using humour as a form of empathy. The name Life of a Craphead comes from the opening joke of the very first live comedy routine they performed together in 2006. Their work investigates, through the central principle of humour, the different ways in which power and authority are deployed. Their most recent exhibition, *Entertaining Every Second*, toured across Canada from 2018-19. The exhibition centres on research into Jon's family's experience of the American war in Vietnam.

SESSION is a project modeling itself after an incubator that invites cultural practitioners to engage with questions emerging out of a given exhibition.

FORUM: Native Art Department International, COUSIN, and Ogimaa Mikana Project

Saturday 23 May 2020

Native Art Department International invite members of COUSIN and Ogimaa Mikana Project to discuss horizontality as a strategic and behavioural order in collective practice and community development. Together they consider how the methodologies that orient collaborative work can model strategies for navigating disparate civic and artistic communities and institutions.

COUSIN is a collective supporting Indigenous artists expanding the form of film and is co-founded by Alex Lazarowich, Sky Hopinka, Adam Khalil and Adam Piron.

Ogimaa Mikana Project is an artist collective founded by Susan Blight (Anishinaabe, Couchiching) and Hayden King (Anishinaabe, Gchi'mnissing) in January 2013. Through public art, site-specific intervention, and social practice, they assert Anishinaabe self-determination on the land and in the public sphere.

FORUM is Mercer Union's ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances.

Presented in partnership with *C Magazine: Experiments in Criticism Symposium* at the Toronto Media Arts Centre.

Admission to our public programming is free and all are welcome.
For complete event details, please visit www.mercerunion.org



The Perfect Crime

I've heard of exactly two perfect crimes in my lifetime: the first, the strangulation of a fraudster on the run by their own pet boa constrictor; the second, the murder of a man by icicle.

The others are all imperfect.

The littlest known truth in the history of the world is that most crimes—and I mean, the imperfect ones—are born from a basic ignorance of poetry. This, from a man who did two years for a clumsy mountain of magic tricks before being released into the frigid air in nothing more than slippers and a prison robe. This, from a man who lost both his ears to frostbite right there at the bus stop—one ear, then the other—before being delivered into the wide open arms of the most innocent, loving, and unsuspecting librarian known to the history of libraries, what with her inky smile and half-dozen rooms bursting forth with poetry and fine classics so defined by the canon, all of it (her arms, the rooms, the books, the very concept of self-improvement) heated to the perfect temperature of kittens' breath.

My librarian lover feeds me lines of poetry, thinking that poetry alone will satiate my hunger. Meanwhile, my craving for the perfect line makes me hungrier than I otherwise would have been. I'm so hungry in fact that my hunger has since grown into a painful welt in my side that makes it difficult to carry books from room to room. If only I had a little bit of money, a little bit of bread to eat, I could repair the hole and become a great reader, a great intellectual. My lover, at least, wants me to believe in this possibility.

But I'm wretched and dispossessed, always will be, like they told me, and when I throw my fist into the window of a car to snatch yesterday's forgotten stale bread, I have the cleanest delivery in the history of the world, leaving no glass for the innocents to tread barefoot into. I sneak out in the night and heap crime upon crime, each one more perfect than the last. Meanwhile, my librarian lover states publicly that I am not capable, and points to another, less-literate suspect. "No one who reads poetry would commit such a crime!" she cries, desperate and unbelieving. Now I want not only money and bread, but also literary acclaim.

Some years pass in the quietude of fireside reading, writing, and petty crime. I am famous, for a time, while the less-literate subject does two years for never stealing yesterday's forgotten bread and grows ever hungrier for a more righteous plot.

It isn't until one snowy evening in late February that I finally meet my fate. Stuck straight through the heart by a blade of ice, the likes of which is never found; the bloodstained book vanished from my lap. The less-literate subject escapes through the window and becomes a great writer of poetry. The librarian, mourning, reads these books but refuses to see them for their honest, innovative forms.

Who knows what poetry achieves? My only hope is that, with this new knowledge, you, too, might write the perfect line—

You, too, can commit the perfect crime.

—Jacquelyn Zong-Li Ross

SPACE: Erdem Taşdelen | *Vicissitudes: Act Three*

14 March - 30 May 2020

SPACE invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard located on the east façade of Mercer Union. *Vicissitudes: Act Three* (2019) is the third edition in a series of four billboard images commissioned by Mercer Union. An accompanying text written by Jacquelyn Zong-Li Ross can be found above.

Erdem Taşdelen is a Turkish-Canadian artist who lives and works in Toronto. His work has been shown most recently at venues including Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (2019); VOX Centre de l'image contemporaine, Montreal (2018); Pera Museum, Istanbul; Or Gallery, Vancouver (2017); Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg (2016). Taşdelen received the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize in Visual Arts in 2016, and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2019.

Jacquelyn Zong-Li Ross is a writer based in Vancouver. Her fiction, poetry, essays and art criticism have appeared in *BOMB*, *Mousse*, *Fence*, *C Magazine*, *Kijiji* and elsewhere, and her chapbooks include *Mayonnaise* and *Drawings on Yellow Paper*. She publishes books by emerging artists and writers under the small press Blank Cheque, and is currently at work on a novel and a collection of short stories.



Native Art Department International: *Bureau of Aesthetics*

14 March - 30 May 2020
Opening Reception Friday 13 March 2020, 7PM

Leading Support is provided by TD Bank Group

FORWARD

Does every voyage accounted "under the stars of the refrigerator" need to end in tears?

In 2015, we took our lead from fellow Brooklyn-based artist collectives and banded together to create a new starting place, validating our presence in New York and bringing our ideas into existence. If asked to choose between participating or being ignored, then we choose to do what we want: to work with who we want, how we want, with total freedom, our only guide being accountability to one another.

We became aware of Marc Fischer's text, *Against Competition*, while involved with ABC No Rio, a collectively-run centre for art and activism in New York that was founded in 1980 by artists committed to political and social engagement. Fischer's essay offers what we find to be a preferred approach to considering community relationships in the hyper-competitive environment of the art world.

Against Competition has served as a sought-after community catalyst for emerging performance and political arts groups since its release in 2006, and aligns with our own value scale developed as children growing up in our respective Indian households in Texas and Ontario. It is one of the bedrock texts on which Native Art Department International bases its overall ethos. Blurring the distinction between art made for survival and art made for critical intervention is not for the faint or weak hearted.

—Native Art Department International



Against Competition

Recently I received an email from a student in Ireland. He had discovered an interview in which I discussed an old project that sounded extremely similar to something he had been working on for a year and was about to exhibit. This discovery sent him into a “mini-crisis” and he wrote to see if I might share my thoughts on the situation. I sent this student printed materials from my work, as I strongly feel that artists who are doing similar work should make an effort to know each other, share knowledge and perhaps even work together. There is no reason why two variations of the same idea can’t happily co-exist.

So much of the way that the art world is structured favors competition. Grants are competitive. Art schools stage student competitions. Students compete for funding. Hundreds compete for a single art school teaching position. Professors compete with other professors. Artists compete with artists — stealing ideas instead of sharing them, or using copyright laws to guard against thoughtful re-use. Artists compete for shows in a limited number of exhibition spaces instead of finding their own ways to exhibit outside of these competitive venues. Artists conceal opportunities from their friends as a way of getting an edge up on the capital-driven competition.

Gallerists compete with other gallerists and curators compete with curators. Artists who sell their work compete for the attention of a limited number of collectors. Collectors compete with other collectors to acquire the work of artists.

This is a treadmill made from decomposing shit that is so devoid of nutrients that even its compost won’t allow anything fresh to grow. We need something better to run on. Some artists are bypassing competitive approaches in their practice, suggesting possibilities for a different cultural climate. Since the 1960s, numerous artists have made works that take the form of strategies, proposals, gestures and instructions. While these works are not usually presented as invitations for others to reinterpret, making variations in a similar spirit still has the potential to yield rewarding results.

Ideas are not necessarily used up just because they have entered the art historical canon (and many good projects remain unfamiliar to most audiences). This older soil remains fertile for new plantings.

More art projects could be created with the built-in understanding that they can be freely re-made or given a new twist by others in the future — like classical music compositions that still get played two hundred years after the composer died. Take the example of the late composer John Cage’s three movement composition *4’ 33”*. It was first performed by David Tudor in 1952. This work has since been given many reinterpretations over the years by artists as diverse as Frank Zappa, The BBC Symphony Orchestra and The Melvins. The work finds new meaning with different performers, contexts, times and places.

Redundancies, repetitions and overlaps are often neglected because they complicate the bigger picture and show art to be the much larger social mess that it really is. We don’t have to run away from repetitions.

Since 2001, the Philadelphia-based collaborative group Basekamp has been doing lectures, discussions, events and project planning around the theme of redundancy in the visual arts. Late last year they co-organized an event series titled “Making Room for Redundancy” with Lars Fischer (no relation to the author). They have been dreaming up and building models for terminals where the viewer could enter an idea and see all of the overlapping permutations of how it has been explored before. Basekamp recently gave a lecture titled simply “I am a Collaborative Artist” at the Infest: Artist-Run Culture conference in Vancouver. For artists who are open to working with others, such conferences can be a good place to strengthen or develop new friendships, fueling new collaborations or broader inclusion in pre-existing projects.

Another mutually-supportive practice: the French artist Céline Duval enjoys a prolific collaboration with the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann, who is about thirty years her senior. This began when Céline contacted him wanting to help with raw material for his work and now they publish books together. They collaborate on equal footing despite large differences in age, experience and success in the art world. The viewer must untangle the mingling voices in these co-authored works, ask questions, or just accept the hybrid and enjoy the resulting complexity.

Making participatory artworks can open up your practice and build a loose community in the process. Since 1997, Chicago-based artist Melinda Fries has been running the website ausgang.com. Ausgang is essentially an artwork in web form that contains the work of various contributors (many of whom are not artists). Melinda creates categories that are of personal interest (examples: “Living Situations,” “Things In The Road,” “Bus Stories”). Contributors then flesh out these themes by submitting stories, images, or projects that are suitable for the web. The site is updated seasonally. Melinda’s project is enriched and expanded by others and the contributors get a platform for their work that will be seen by many viewers.

The people who participate often send out emails promoting the site and their contributions that are included. The site is not a

flimsy catch-all for anything and everything. Melinda functions as an editor, but she allows a very broad range of ways for one to participate. In the interest of disclosure, I contribute to ausgang.com regularly, but perhaps you should too?

While there is a joy in finding people with shared affinities, establishing communication and friendships with artists who have shared interests and ideas is not a retreat from the challenge of making tough critical art. Who better to kick your ass a little than your collaborators? The disposable, vague, or one-liner qualities in so much recent art reveals a lack of sufficient peer-to-peer ass-kicking. Collaborative projects by their nature insist on constant feedback and criticism.

Arguing against competition is not necessarily a vote in favour of an idealized world of shiny happy people holding hands — some of the most productive collaborations can have a lot of tension and disagreement. The fascinating documentary *Some Kind of Monster* shows Metallica band members and co-founders James Hetfield and Lars Ulrich in exchanges that are sometimes so lacking in civility that at one point Ulrich is reduced to getting in Hetfield’s face and screaming: “FUUUUUCCCCKKK!!” In an additional scene on the DVD, Ulrich admits: “I’m afraid of changing what has worked. Twenty years of hatred sold one hundred million records.”

One of the great tempestuous working relationships in film history was that of director Werner Herzog and actor Klaus Kinski. In Herzog’s documentary *My Best Fiend*, Kinski’s behavior on the set during one film was so angering that the director seriously contemplated murdering him. When Klaus Kinski wrote his autobiography, he reportedly gave Herzog advance notice that he was going to trash the director in the book because he felt that attacking his friend would lead to increased sales. The two even collaborated in their mutual infuriation with each other but clearly, and more importantly, they pushed each other to perform better and make more ambitious and passionate films.

How can we build a stronger network among people with shared interests and values? In a recent talk that we hosted at Mess Hall in Chicago, curator Nato Thompson brought up the impressive and widespread networks that the hardcore punk music scene has crafted, where a band has a place to play and crash in nearly every major town. This is something he longs to see happen for experimental art and cultural practices in every part of the U.S. — particularly those areas that are culturally under-served. An audience member noted, however, that part of what enabled the hardcore scene to do this so effectively is that there is a shared language that is easier to understand. People seem able to grasp the terms and aesthetics more easily. Music can circulate quickly and simply. It often has a bracing, visceral and emotional power; heady forms of art and critical theory are generally a little less catchy. You could listen to eight hardcore songs in the time it takes to read this essay.

Some online communities show promise. For the past couple years I’ve been frequenting a particularly hyperactive online music discussion group for obscure loud rock. The number of times the distant feel of the Internet breaks out into the real world on some of these sites is uncountable. When people attend concerts together often the next morning one person will write about it and another will post the photos they took and it all gets shared with thousands who couldn’t be there. I’ve been offered places to stay in numerous cities based purely on my taste in music, received un-requested packages of CDs and have been loaned books through the mail. A band had their van and equipment stolen, so one forum member named Foetuscide quickly set up a Paypal account that people could donate to.

When Foetuscide was left homeless by Hurricane Katrina, people started sending her money at the Paypal account she originally created for the band. There has been endless support for a board member named EvilFanny who had to undergo brain surgery. A discussion thread about the merits of old Slayer and Celtic Frost records can happily share space with a thread where EvilFanny asks other board members if they know anything about going on Long Term Disability. While these big online communities are messy and filled with more than their share of knuckle-draggers, sexists, homophobes and right wing morons, the generosity of participants can be breathtaking.

The challenge for artists who want to build supportive networks like this is to find communication strategies that can help them connect to each other with the passion that music fans across the globe excel at. We need to make our emails to strangers whose art and ideas we care about resonate with that obsessive nerdy excitement that music geeks generate in their sleep. Art blogs are popping up all over Chicago but I have yet to see any become a truly action packed, socially dynamic online community where

artists, curators, viewers, writers and every other kind of participant mixes it up and generates ideas that take real hold in the world. One of the oldest Chicago-centric discussion forums, Othergroup.net, sometimes goes for a month without a single post. In order for critical and experimental art networks to become stronger, and for audiences to grow, artists need to expand the range of ways we operate. When artists work with others, they complicate their practice and these collaborations often enrich everything they do. They organize shows and events that include other artists, write about other people’s work and assist people with their creative endeavors. There is no reason why more artists — including those who have comparatively solitary studio practices, can’t cultivate those skills in order to work more effectively with other people.

In the process, they learn to write, organize, publish, curate, educate and do anything else necessary to bolster support and dialogue for the ideas they value. More than anything, they learn to take the initiative and build something larger than themselves. In the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, artists could do this work on the government’s dime at NEA-funded not-for-profit Alternative spaces.

Now that the money is gone and most of those spaces are no longer in existence, new methodologies need to be worked out. We need each other more than ever. Working with others not only opens the individual artist to the resources, skills, criticisms, and ideas of their collaborator(s), but also frequently to those of the collaborator’s peer group or network. This inevitably creates a larger audience for the finished work and sows the seeds for future collaborations with an even greater variety of people. Creating opportunities for others always results in more personal opportunities. When it becomes clear that you operate from a place of generosity, people become more generous with you — sometimes offering things like free use of equipment, huge discounts on printing and even free use of a storefront in Rogers Park (the location and arrangement that has kept Mess Hall going for over two years now). This approach may not result in a vacation home in Malibu or the opportunity to snort lines of coke off of prostitutes’ asses with Jörg Immendorf, but is that really the reason you became an artist in the first place?

Working toward a global network where one creates opportunities and, in turn, can respond to limitless opportunities without the pressure to compete, allows for a more generous, diverse and open art practice. In these ways, one can break the isolation of being alone, defending a head-full of secret studio realizations that some kid in Ireland has probably already figured out anyway.

Note: In the spirit of this essay, a number of collaborators provided feedback. Thanks to: Brett Bloom, Melinda Fries, Terence Hannum, Brennan McGaffey, Scott Rigby and Dan S. Wang.

—Marc Fischer

POSTSCRIPT

Against Competition was originally written for a short-lived journal from Chicago titled B.A.T. (the acronym changed meaning with each issue). The editors at the time were William Staples, Julia Marsh, Keri Butler, and Elijah Burgher. This essay appeared in issue number two in April, 2006.

B.A.T. was a modest photocopied publication with a print run of just a couple hundred copies, so the essay had a limited reach until Temporary Services, a group I’m a member of, uploaded a PDF version to our website. Since then the text has been downloaded thousands of times. It has also been included in other projects devoted to sharing critical writings such as aaaarg.org and the artist Stephanie Sjuco’s ongoing project *Free Texts: An Open Source Reading Room*.

Temporary Services values printed publications and the organic circulation of writings through non-digital channels, so in 2014 we made *Against Competition* into its own booklet and invited the artist Kione Kochi to design this booklet and create new illustrations that appear throughout. That version, which includes an Afterword, is available from Halfletterpress.com.

To receive future publications by mail and many other benefits, become a member of Mercer Union. Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.