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The Shelf

VSVSVS: Stephen McLeod, Wallis Cheung, Miles Stemp, Ryan Clayton, Anthony Cooper, Laura Simon, and James Gardner

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The Shelf, a new project from art collective VSVSVS, is an experiment in navigating the complicated realm of collaboration, an activity that can stifle the individual voice. The seven members of VSVSVS - Stephen McLeod, Wallis Cheung, Miles Stemp, Ryan Clayton, Anthony Cooper, Laura Simon, and James Gardner - developed a framework in which they can play with collaboration while still maintaining relative autonomy and individual outputs. Building a literal shelf and using it as a platform for their collaboration, the project is composed of 49 square compartments, each containing a sculptural piece. To begin, each member of VSVSVS made one sculpture, placed in the first column of the grid. Each member was then assigned to a second compartment, where they interpreted the first sculpture and created their own piece in response. The sculptures are arranged on the shelf in this manner to show the morphing, changing responses. In this way, *The Shelf* represents collaborative art within a framework that allows each artist to uphold a unique vision while under the auspices of collective identity. The simple, formal configuration of the grid allows the audience to observe transformations as each member has the opportunity to respond to all the others.

Perhaps the most obvious individualizing aspect of the project is the use of material: each artist selects one material to work with, imbuing each set of sculptures with a patina of distinction. The combination of organic and synthetic materials of wood, plasticine, shiny paper and foam contribute to the piece as a whole by presenting a multitude of colours, textures and shapes. In some cases, the artists mix materials to exhibit the different ways an idea or aesthetic from a previous sculpture can bleed into the design of the next. Straying from the framework in this way is something the artists delight in, forging yet deeper into the terrain of collaboration by incorporating and sharing ideas in each other's sculptures.

Miles Stemp focuses on sharp angles and boxes, using cardboard and glue, as both a fastener and secondary material. Stemp frequently uses triangles or pyramids in his pieces, combining the organic quality of the cardboard with more deliberate, angular configurations. The paper sculptures are Laura Simon's creations. Incorporating highly saturated, colourful patterns and designs, she experiments with different shapes and structures, sometimes resembling origami, exhibiting the diversity of paper. Ryan Clayton's sculptures are constructed primarily with wood. Shots of colour accent the grooves and connections of the delicate curves of his asymmetrical structures. The foam sculptures, designed by James Gardner, combine multiple types of synthetic

materials. Through layering and pairing various shapes and colours, Gardner's pieces achieve a naturalistic feel. Anthony Cooper designed the stark white plaster sculptures. Through mold making and other methods, Cooper shapes both rotund, organic forms and fine, geometrical pieces, at times intensified by a dash of colour. The plasticine sculptures are Wallis Cheung's design. While employing various other materials as armatures, the focus of her sculptures lies in her use of saturated colours and combination of both natural and geometrical shapes. Finally, Stephen McLeod's central focus is wood. Creating sculptures with fine detailing, smooth surfaces, often accented with paint and Plexiglas.

As a collective, VSVSVS first came together through starting their own art and studio space in a large warehouse in the east end of Toronto. Each member had their own studio where the aim was to focus on their individual practices. After months of sharing the space, VSVSVS developed a synergy that has led to more collaborative projects. Exploring the challenge of working together while maintaining their artistic autonomy, the group developed a call and response game to help practice collectivity – a variant on the Exquisite Corpse, an old Surrealist parlour game. Each piece becomes a reflection on, or interpretation of what came before it. This process allows the group to work collectively, contributing to one larger piece, while also giving each artist an opportunity to develop individual works.

In this way, *The Shelf* allows VSVSVS to focus on individuality, forming reincarnations of each other's ideas to suit their own visualizations. In this coordinated framework, limitations are a means to preserve each artist's independence within a collective practice. The rules of the framework are malleable, and everyone is encouraged to push the boundaries or experiment with their materials. An opportunity for experimentation can also be found within the grid system, as it foregrounds the distinctive and intuitive connections that can be made outside of the routine left-to-right horizontal sequence. Fascinating arrangements can be found both vertically and diagonally and the audience is encouraged to meet the discovery of any pattern in the frame with their own interpretations. There is a certain musicality achieved in the patterns and transitions from one sculpture to the next. *The Shelf* explores the duality between collective and individual practices, encouraging a dialogue about the possibilities of coexistence as autonomous beings.

-Amy Jemmett