



**Window
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Chalk Form Census

Alison Snowball

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Chalk Form Census (CFC), the title of Alison Snowball's window installation at Xpace Cultural Centre, plays on the name of Canada's now defunct long-form census (LFC). Snowball's minimal installation consists of a chalkboard that presents a series of eight pre-selected questions, one at a time, over the course of the exhibition. Instructions on how to respond accompany the installation. Snowball has setup unique CFC accounts on three separate social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), each of which support a different form of response and exchange.

Censuses occur at scheduled intervals of time. They represent a moment to stop and collect social and economic information about a population's experience. Census data becomes more valuable when placed in comparison with past years, as it provides insight into how a place changes over time. Statistics Canada, a reputable public institution¹, administered the LFC so as to ensure the confidentiality of individual responses. Their practices promoted privacy both through how they tabulated responses, and from the relatively large scale of the smallest geographic area that raw data is available for². The census is a tool for understanding the social composition of a place. As such it provides evidence to inform different planning processes at the community, municipal, regional, and national scale.

Snowball's project emerges from the tension within Canada's census between public polling, personal information and privacy. The Harper Government transformed the LFC into the National Household Survey (NHS) in 2011. This action has compromised the quality of social and economic information Canadians can access about ourselves.³ The Conservative government claimed that the mandatory nature of the LFC made it overly intrusive, and thus made completing the NHS a voluntary act. Voluntary surveys receive a lower response rate from lower income, immigrant, and newcomer communities. Low response rates from certain communities introduces bias into the data, with specific facets of the Canadian experience going unrepresented. The perceived social composition of a place influences resource distribution.

¹ Stats Can was described by former Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney as the "pre-eminent statistical agency in the world" in 2010, prior to the introduction of the NHS.

² The smallest area that raw data is available for is called a "Dissemination Area". A DA is an area comprised of 400 to 700 persons.

³Grant, Tavia. "Canadian income data 'is garbage' without census, experts say" *Globe and Mail*, Oct 4 2013. Web. Jan 15 2014

Underrepresentation of certain communities within the NHS will lead to poor planning processes.⁴ With *CFC*, Snowball focuses more on the mechanics of polling rather than the use value of the data.

CFC engages two distinct publics. The first group encounters the work at its physical site, while the second group witnesses the first group's responses online. Members of the second group will either follow a member of the first group, or stumble upon it serendipitously. Xpace is located at an area in Toronto where the grid breaks and two east-west streets intersect. As such, its window gallery faces a Lansdowne bus stop, with multiple routes picking up and dropping off commuters in its immediate vicinity. *CFC*'s accidental audience will easily consume its pared down form. It invites reflection as it may enter the thoughts that occupy the idling bodies of people waiting for transit. As individuals respond, their answers will be aggregated. Responses from the first group will provide insight into the social composition of the area around Xpace. As people from the second group begin to contribute, the portrait broadens. It no longer reflects the character of a strict geographic region, but instead a network of relationships.

Snowball's questions differ in nature from those of the LFC or NHS. Her questions can be grouped into the three categories of: behaviour, perception, and pain. The first set of questions, "Where are you going? What are you talking about? What are you doing?" provide insight into the everyday behaviour of her respondents. Her next set, "What do you trust? What do you believe in? What is real?" shift the subject of inquiry towards the audience's more personal perception of the nature of being. Finally, "where does it hurt?" moves beyond the expression of opinions and beliefs, and requests vulnerability. The arc of these questions moves from everyday chatter towards a kind self-awareness that may be less easily shared.

What happens when someone asks you a question? In an unfolding instant, several parallel and perhaps unconscious evaluations occur. "Who is asking? Why are they asking? What are they *really* asking? What is my perceived responsibility and stake in answering accurately and in a timely manner? And who else will hear my answer?" Here, Snowball's open-ended questioning of the public can illicit a variety of responses: ones that form and are shared immediately and ones that may come after the fact. While this work invites public response, it's impact can't be quantified by the number of formal replies. In the same way that a census produces a new awareness of the experience of a group of people, *CFC*'s persistent questioning will produce in some people, self-reflection that will lead to new personal understanding, whether those answers are vocalized for the project or not.

The mechanics of this project also point at a transition within culture towards a more porous relationship between our digital space and physical space. Emerging in the 80's, personal use of networked computers allowed individuals to experiment with their self-presentation through constructed identities. In 2014, our online personas have become tools for the maintenance of

⁴ Hulchanski, David, Et Al. "Canada's voluntary census is worthless. Here's why." *Globe and Mail*, Oct 4 2013. Web. Jan 15, 2014

our personal and professional lives. This commercialization of digital platforms has brought new use value, while at the same time having the consequence of limiting experimentation. The ways in which we interact with these media are mostly prescribed: self-branding through interaction with constant digital interactivity.⁵

For four weeks, Snowball is asking her audience to reflect on their lives and to express it in a publicly visible (not publicly owned) forum. The LFC provided a comprehensive way to collect information about the social and economic experience of people living within Canada. It enabled informed planning processes at community, municipal, provincial, and national scale. The Harper government undermined it on the pretense of protecting Canadians' privacy. *CFC* works within this tension between personal information and privacy. It highlights a current issue, yet to be resolved, about private unaccountable entities occupying a more significant position than public accountable ones in the collection, storage and use of our information.

-Simon Rabyiniuk

⁵ Coleman, Beth, "Interview with the Virtual Cannibal." *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011. pg 84