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Uncommon Commons

Mary Tremonte, Parastoo Anoushahpour, Jp King
Curated by Amber Landgraff
August 1 – 23, 2014

col·lab·o·ra·tion /kəˌlabəˈrāSHən/

Noun

- * The action of working with someone to produce or create something
- * Traitorous cooperation with an enemy¹

At the heart of the exhibition *Uncommon Commons* is an exploration of collaboration and collective making. Artists Mary Tremonte, Parastoo Anoushahpour and Jp King call to question common themes surrounding production, authorship, and the authority of an individual maker. In all of the works, elements of play are used to encourage participation and experimentation. *Uncommon Commons* asks: Do playful collaborative methods have critical capacity? What does an offer of working together look like? And can we find political potential in cooperation?

Solidarity

[W]orking together can start from as well as create forms of solidarity and friendship, which are then to be pursued as both condition and intent, motivating actions taken and allowing work undertaken...friendship [can therefore be considered] as a form of solidarity: friends in action.²

In *Social Movement, Staying Power* Mary Tremonte uses collective silkscreen printing, pasting and distribution to look at processes of immigration and migration, place and transition. Reflecting on her own relative ease of movement given her privilege as a white able-bodied American (economically stable, educated and with a clean police record), Tremonte has developed an additive printstallation (print installation) intended to make visible a dialogue about migrant justice in the city of Toronto by providing information and using the space as a site for dialogue. Tremonte is adept at “Institutional Resource Extraction”, a term she uses to describe taking on opportunities (and funding) offered to her as an individual who has access and sharing with a larger community in order to extend access, and share skills, information and support. Tremonte’s work frequently

¹ “Collaboration” Google Dictionary. <http://www.google.com/search?q=collaboration+definition>. Accessed July 31, 2014.

² Celine Condorelli, “Too close to see: notes on friendship, a conversation with Johan Hartle,” *Self Organised*, ed. Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen. London: Open Editions, 2013. Pg. 63.

extends an offer of working together and in the process this working together is intended to develop common spaces and open up access.

On February 21, 2013 Toronto was declared Canada's first Sanctuary City, a designation that allows everyone regardless of immigration status access to city services. While this is an important first step, the city needs to take steps to put this policy into practice. For *Social Movement, Staying Power* Tremonte works with other artists and activists working on migrant justice in Ontario to draw attention to and make visible migrant stories and rights in the Toronto area, distributing posters and other multiples, teaching skills of silkscreen printing and design, and making connections between access to services and access to media and visibility.

Negotiation

Whenever anyone talks about negotiation, it is as a rather corrupt, threadbare, compromising notion; somehow it lacks honour of nobility, and is considered exactly the reverse of principle. And yet it would seem to me that anyone who made an assessment about creativity and how it comes about, within, say, the history of Europe of the last five hundred years, it would be invariably through people's capacity to make intelligent negotiations, which do not actually have to be compromises. It does not seem right to reduce negotiation to a kind of zero-sum game.³

Parastoo Anoushahpour's *Not Even the Weatherman can Predict Murder* takes as its source forty hours of raw footage, notes and audio recording developed during a residency at the Banff Centre in June 2013. The intention of the project was to develop an open ended experimental method of collaborative filmmaking and was devised and executed between Anoushahpour and fifteen other participants: Ramona Beneveniste, Frank Chang, Helen Cho, Sarolta Cump, Brendan Heshka, Paul Macgee, Jenny Macmaster, Hazel Meyer, Agiti Ohri, Josee Ouellete, Lucy Pawlak, Olivia Plender, Holly Schmidt, Patrick Staff, Helen Turner and Nathalie Wuerth. Choosing to use the participatory performance techniques of Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, the intention of the process was to see whether using methods of play could help to upset the hierarchy of production and allow for all members to take on simultaneous roles of actor, director, cinematographer and public.

The negotiations required to collaboratively edit this material proved difficult, so each member was given rights to the raw material. The video on display here is one possible edit of that material. Anoushahpour chose to use formal decisions in order to edit the material into a single channel video installation, focusing on structural methods of organization such as symmetry, repetition, inversion and doubling in order to attempt to maintain the open-ended nature of the project – where an individual authorship of the material is resisted and the multiple camera views contribute to a fragmenting of a single unified point of view. The raw material includes video from multiple viewpoints including several steady cameras, a helmet camera, and a computer camera to record people reflecting on the process in a more diaristic fashion. What results from this is a video that reflects the chaotic and engaging process of the works' own production, creating an

³ Mark Cousins, "On Support," *Support Structures*, ed. Celine Condorelli et al. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009. Pg. 67.

engaging glimpse into the making of the work, and documenting the possibility and negotiation involved in its production.

Invitation

Paradoxically, the deep suspicion of institutional power has given artists a license to recreate facsimiles of institutions that are superior to what they copy, both symbolically speaking, and often in terms of functionality. The superimposition of reality and fiction, play and power, is only fixed in one state or the other temporally, as expedient, or when a granting authority or state decides to examine the entity close up.⁴

Jp King uses the guise of a fictional institution to present *The Nomadic Residency Council's Artist-in-Residence Official Pop-Up Office (NRC-AIR-OPO)*. Through a strategic appropriation of the kind of language typically used by arts councils, King's *NRC-AIR-OPO* offers open letters of invitation to gallery-goers inviting them to participate in one of several self-directed semi-structured residency opportunities. Available on site during the run of the exhibition are both Official Letters-of-Invitation and a Residency Reporting Station where participants can first accept the invitation, and then to return and provide documentation of their completed residency experiences.

NRC-AIR-OPO can be viewed as a satirical criticism of the influx of Artist Residency programs popping up all over the world. Many Artist Residencies require artists to pay large sums of money to participate, limiting access to these creative opportunities to those artists with disposable income. When you also consider the time required participating in many of these residencies, that access becomes even more limited. However the project is also a sincere and genuine offer on behalf of King. Here the letters of invitation offered ask participants to consider the time involved in everyday things as a creative experience. Through the appropriation of the institutional language of arts councils and funding bodies, the audience is invited to participate as artists in a role of cultural prestige – playfully subverting the gate-keeping of these programs to offer the status of contemporary artist to anyone who chooses to participate. As the letters of invitation explain, acceptance to participate in these residencies can be as simple as finishing this sentence.

The artists in *Uncommon Commons* use collaboration and collective making to disrupt authorship, to share access, and to encourage experimentation and play. For Tremonte collaboration is used to invite others in, to share resources, and build safer spaces for skills to be shared and ideas to be disseminated. For Parastoo Anoushahpour collaboration allows for a combined authorship of materials, where the outcome of a work can vary exponentially and the process of making can reflect a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices. And for Jp King, collaboration takes on the form of an open invitation from a mockstitution, a mimicry that allows participants open access to institutions where they may have otherwise been excluded. In the end *Uncommon Commons* considers what a common space for making and thinking can look like, and some of the many forms that collaboration can take.

- Amber Landgraff

⁴ Gregory Sholette *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. London: Pluto, 2011. pg. 161.