

PART I: an institution that feeds at the same time that it is fed

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There are countless ways to start a story, to remember a project, and to form ways of living with one another. In more than one way, and because of the collaborative effort it took to arrive at the final set of exhibitions, even the birds are walking has felt like a story, a project, and an exercise in relation-building, all folded into one. And so, before I delve into the material and symbolic work on display, I would like to sift through some of the moments and questions that brought me together with the exhibiting artists, the institution, programming collaborators, and the community to finally stand at the mouth of lavender halls, anticipating the conference.

One of the heaviest questions I packed with me, on my way from Toronto to Edmonton, was a selfish one: What is my role as a curator, and is there a future for it – a future for me? I had reservations about curatorial strategies, institutional space, and the position of contemporary art in our world. I felt like I was drowning in over-statured dialogues on archives, histories, and utopias, and what felt like carnivalesque optics of inclusion and diversity. I wondered: Are anti-colonial projects, and by extension: curators of colour invited to provide colour to an already full table? Or, is there a future for our work, our labour, and our anticipatory politics in the spaces that we are invited to occupy?

More specifically, I asked: Could we take our criticisms and cynicisms of curatorial research to task? If, according to Maja and Reuben Fowkes, “Curatorial research is driven by a manic quest for the next big idea before it goes viral,” how could curatorial practitioners incorporate a deeper layer of reflexivity and open-endedness of research without succumbing to its superficial trends, which now often enrol people and questions at the heart of anti-colonial discourse?¹ In my attempt to work through this task, I turned to Olga Fernández López’ text, “What if an Institution was Curated? Intermediae as an Institutional Hypothesis,” which answers these questions by way of providing problematized accounts of its practice. López traces the beginning of two institutions by considering their attempts at “emptying” from the inside out.² She outlined the ways in which their attempts at embodying horizontality – or, producing culture with the public rather than for them – was short-sighted because they felt they could make the imbalance of power disappear simply by inviting the public in. But in recognizing their inability to match interaction with the public with a radical transformation of the self, both institutions realized the weight of their failure. In other words, it was not the trend of horizontality or a curatorial “emptying” that was needed but a deeper understanding

of the implications of encounter, on both the public and the self. As López put it, the inherent power structures of the institution and the curatorial could only be challenged with the emergence of “an institution that curates at the same time as it is curated.”³

An institution that curates at the same time as it is curated – a lot to ask from a single institution, a guest curator, and the short duration of curatorial research. What we were able to achieve, instead, at Latitude 53 was *an institution that feeds at the same time that it is fed*, a starting model, which best embodies the diverse forms of labour, trust, and reciprocity that unfolded through my encounters with the institution and its publics.

To recount some significant moments, we can perhaps work through a chronological timeline. During the course of my curatorial residency, I hosted two reading groups: Utopia Reading Circle and Future (Concrete) Workshop. Following some weeks of studio visits, walks, and independent reading, I was interested in thinking in and with community. Short essays by Joshua Vettivelu, Eve Tuck, Mark Dery, José Esteban Muñoz, Mary Zournazi, and Michael Taussig were circulated to participants to provide both canonical and emerging writings about desire, hope, and utopia. And so, Utopia Reading Circle was set up at Latitude 53 on August 15, 2019, where I circulated snacks, rose water, and extra copies while the group discussed the readings – their aha moments, connections, and some of the ways we could, or should, read Tuck or Vettivelu in Edmonton. This collective reading brought up some important reflections for the group: What was our position, as artists, theorists, students, educators, mountain guides, to consider and locate utopia or desire in Edmonton? Further, were these future-centric conversations just prompts for our own singular work and life, or could they move to collaborate with those that were not presently in the space?

What the community, if for a moment we can imagine these participants to represent it, also required was a way to materialize their own versions of utopia. A few weeks after the initial gathering, we invited the same participants for a Future (Concrete) Workshop on September 20, who were joined by others from both Latitude 53's and my own network. The aim of the workshop was twofold: To encourage a collective reflection of the ambiguous and shifting relationship between utopia, desire, and then to concretize it through a creative and collaborative activity. Following a brief summary of the first gathering, I asked participants to break out into small groups and do one of the following activities:

- Creating a “Welcome” brochure for New Canadians
- Contributing to existing rubrics of land acknowledgement in Edmonton
- Mapping an institution of the future
- Or, participants could initiate their own activity

Past participants migrated to form new connections and I moved to distribute the snacks. As a daughter in a South Asian family, this form of care through food and hospitality came natural to me. Each guest to our home, however distant in relation or trust, was welcomed with warmth and pleasure. Once everybody was settled in the drawing room, I was tasked with taking around the trays of hot chai, samosas, and namkeen. And of course, serving the eldest first. As I moved around the room with my community in Edmonton, I felt joy in recovering this role, albeit without any patriarchal insistence. I listened to and fed people, who were busy sharing their experiences of immigrating to Canada, the lack of accessible knowledge about Indigenous histories and presence, joys of dismantling current institutions – or, as a quick fix, adding doors from each side of the building. Some people reclined on the floor and others created alternative groupings of comfort, all the while participating in acts of sharing and creating knowledge through the night’s activities. The workshop modeled what Naveen Minai and Sara Shroff outline in their epistemology of the *baithak*, what are the modes of gathering informed by South Asian cultures: “To sprawl next to someone in an intimate, informal space is a specific relation between us: We understand that everything we say cannot be translated or made available.”⁴ The aim of the workshop was not to solve or remediate the trauma-centred discourses around social change, in and beyond Edmonton, but to begin in our occupation of the institutional space, and with ourselves not merely as guests/hosts, participants/coordinator, but as equal agents. Likewise, in closing the event with a gallery-cooked and Punjabi-style meal, we were moving beyond the ephemeral gesture of smearing the white cube space with a little bit of turmeric, and beginning to tease out what was possible through what was available. Pressed by the closures of resources and empathy around us in Edmonton and beyond, together we realigned our bodies in conversations with each other, and entered through one of the available doors of utopia.

In the moment, both Utopia Reading Circle and Future (Concrete) Workshop functioned as exercises for me when I was grappling with the responsibilities and possibilities of my role as a curator. I was interested in caressing my own personal and cultural histories to find more comfortable and comforting alternatives to curatorial work, which appeared to be constantly biting its own tail by bringing criticality and difference in, but poorly digesting politics. If we wished to be unbound by binaried relations and exclusionary practices, perhaps, utopia could not remain a mere curatorial investigation but become the bread we ate. Looking back, I am appreciative that I met Latitude 53 when I did, with the entrance of Michelle Schultz as Interim, and now Executive Director, Preston Pavlis as Communications Assistant, Roseanna Joy Nay as Development Intern, alongside the ongoing support of Adam Waldron-Blain as the Program Manager. Neither of us engaged with each other passively, and it was together with them that we continued to build on what could be an institution that feeds at the same time that it is fed.

It was with the encouragement and assistance of Latitude 53 that I was able to extend my own visions and invite others who would arrive for, in the words of Ashok Mathur, “not just for a seat at the table, but a way to remake the table and all its settings.”⁵ I developed a series of workshops, entitled “Has the Community Been Fed?,” as a nod to the global campaign, “Has the Artist Been Paid?” Through this rallying question, I hoped the series could highlight the work of artists with socially-engaged and community-situated practices, while creating a space for reciprocal exchange between communities, artists, and institutions. It opened with a writing workshop led by Toronto-based artist and writer, Lauren Lavery, who worked with writers with varying levels of experience to collectively consider key approaches to critical art writing. While a focus on Edmonton-based artists and communities was the driving force for this program, Lavery’s presence as an outsider was invaluable, not for the perceived lack in the local scene but rather to introduce the participants to a broader network. Second iteration was led by artist and curator Christina Battle, who in returning to Edmonton brought back with her an extensive knowledge of visual and participatory forms of activism. *Postcards for a Better Budget: Reimagining the Cut*, which was later reactivated for the group exhibition, was an endeavour in centring what she recognized as, “the role of the artist as one who not only reflects the world back to us, but also helps us to imagine alternative ways forward.” A screening of short videos was followed by a mail-art activity, where participants were invited to respond to the recent release of the Alberta government’s budget cuts by crafting postcards and cupcakes. Close in the heels of Battle was a new Edmontonian, Riaz Mehmood, who presented an artist talk and a meal, which reflected his birthplace and ongoing research interest in the Pashtun region of Pakistan. He discussed the Khudai Khidmatgar movement (‘servants of God’), and the contemporary Pashtun-led movement called the Pashtun Tافل Movement (PTM). In considering both the historical and recent forms of Pashtun-led social movements, Mehmood demonstrated the agency of alternative activisms to subvert both local and global censorships. To close of the series, we invited aiya 阿呀!, who developed a bird-watching activity for their collective in Edmonton’s Chinatown, followed by a public celebration of Dongzhi 冬節 (the Winter Solstice) at Latitude 53. As a group fostering intergenerational and multi-disciplinary engagements, aiya 阿呀! includes Asian diasporic-identifying artists, Chinatown community members, academics and organizers, coming together to challenge issues of displacement, gentrification, racial and economic oppressions in amiskwacîwâskahikan/Edmonton’s Chinatown. Taking cue from one of the selected readings from my summer programming, namely Eve Tuck’s “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” aiya 阿呀! organized a bird-watching program in Chinatown to re-order the space through another lens: that of its “winged and feathered inhabitants.” Collecting their material

perceptions in the form of images, diary entries, they communally shared through the celebration of Dongzhi 冬節 (the Winter Solstice), a time coloured by both hope and darkness.

Reflecting on my work alongside those carried out by collaborators and the institution itself, an important reminder came from the Finnish institution, Museum of Impossible Forms (m{if}), who thoughtfully articulate, “We want to be hospitable, but we are not a motel, we want something in return.”⁶ Through the months of questioning, gathering, and feeding, indeed, we collected many forms of returns. Through my development of reading materials and activities for the Utopia Reading Circle and Future (Concrete) Workshop, I was gifted with the labour of the participants as they enrolled themselves enthusiastically in the process. Lauren Lavery, Christina Battle, Riaz Mehmood, and then aiya 啊呀! took turns negotiating the public and private openings of radical hospitality, as they offered feeding material to both the public and the institution. Rather than emptying out their resources and energy, they all accumulated something in return: a moment of collective learning in community. Over the course of the research and programming activities, together we gradually morphed into active guests and hosts within *an institution that feeds at the same time that it is fed*.

¹ Maja and Reuben Fowkes, “Renewing the Curatorial Refrain: Sustainable Research in Contemporary Art, in in *Curating Research*, eds. Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson (London, UK: Open Editions/de Appel, 2015), p. 48.

² Olga Fernandez Lopez, “What if an Institution was Curated? Intermediae as an Institutional Hypothesis,” in *Curating Research*, eds. Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson (London, UK: Open Editions/de Appel, 2015) p. 98.

³ Ibid, 105.

⁴ Naveen Minai, Sara Shroff. “Yaariyan, Baithak, Gupshup: Queer Feminist Formations and the Global South.” *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Researc*. Vol. 5 No. 1 (2019): pp. 31-44. p. 37.

⁵ Ashok Mathur. “Complicating Non-Indigeneities and Other Considerations around Race in the Art and Design University.” *RACAR: Revue Dart Canadienne* 44, no. 1 (2019): 54–63. p. 55.

⁶ Museum of Impossible Forms (m{if}), “How to be Hospitable Without being a Motel – Thinking Hospitalities,” in *Rehearsing Hospitalities Companion 1*. (Berlin: DE: Archive Books). p.59.