Public Syntax
SAW VIDEO AT CRITICAL DISTANCE

Curated by NEVEN LOCHHEAD

NAAKITA FELDMAN-KISS and IVANIE AUBIN-MALO
HENRY ANDERSEN / MARA EAGLE / PHIL ROSE
ANNA QUEEN / MOLLY TEITELBAUM
VIDEO IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE WORKING GROUP

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How do we move as a multiplicity, and (as Fred Moten says), 'consent not to be a single being'? To move as a multiplicity, with shared differences that are not antagonistic — or at least are productively antagonistic? How can technology [be recuperated for its original purpose as] a cybernetic network of relation, enhancing and problematizing time, problematizing distance — everything from data to dust to cosmos…. How do we become cosmological beings?

Anjalika Sagar, in a talk on the occasion of the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale

PERHAPS IT IS UNUSUAL to open a foreword with a quote, but this feels fitting here as a reflection of, and on, a project and partnership that has proved to be anything but ordinary. The initial proposition seemed simple enough; in late 2017 we had succeeded in proposing and procuring dedicated public-facing space within our building for screen-based presentations, and thus began researching media arts organizations we might partner with for our upcoming sixth year of guest curated programs. In offering a curatorial platform for a collaboration of this kind, we were of course looking to expand our media arts capacity, but it is always also our intention to provide, for our part, a dedicated space, time, and support for curatorial and critical thinking, discourse, reflection, and experimentation as ways to re/consider and ideally expand upon our respective disciplines' often misunderstood or limiting histories, definitions, methodologies, and potentials.

In considering possible partners, we looked beyond Toronto city limits, not only to fulfill our mandate to foreground locally underrepresented practices and perspectives, but also to satisfy my own curiosity, as a person from elsewhere myself, to learn of programs, ideas, and initiatives originating from and within other places. Having recently launched their new project space, The Knot, under the guiding hand of Programming Director Neven Lochhead, SAW Video Media Arts Centre stood out for its clarity of focus and intention in making and engaging publics within and beyond its Ottawa-Gatineau orbit. I reached out with an invitation, and by February 2018 we had a partnership; by May we had parameters; by August we had the beginnings of a project.

Throughout the exhibition's yearlong development, the conversation returned again and again to how this partnership and project might critically address, extend, or otherwise engage with questions of the curatorial. What does it mean to curate today? What distinguishes curating from other creative disciplines, and why is this important? What has curating done and what can it still do? In

taking up these challenges thoughtfully, with a genuine interest in considering such questions, Lochhead was able to respond with sensitivity and ingenuity to our prompts, as well as to the complex preconditions of the site, paying careful attention (and in more than one instance, truly kind consideration), to the interests, abilities, and experiences of all involved: namely the incredibly diverse audiences who either attend our exhibitions or simply encounter its artworks within our building's public spaces; all of the wonderful artists; both our organizations and co-presenting partners; and, not least, his curatorial collaborators at Critical Distance. As a specific example, Lochhead's openness to working with us to explore and test creative access strategies within the exhibition-making context afforded us an invaluable learning opportunity, through which we were able to gain the momentum needed to successfully launch and continue to pursue this important initiative.

As you will see in this publication, the artworks in *Public Syntax* are precisely arranged in ways that, as Sagar puts it, "problematize time, problematize distance". Threading through architectural space, and weaving aurally and visually in and out of phase and view with each other, it is in the network of the artworks' relation that the exhibition comes together. But of equal, or perhaps even more lasting significance is the network of relation we have now established as a result of our organizations' coming together. For what are organizations but: **people, working together**? And if so, then collectivity at the organizational level means: **people working together, working together**. In this way we make an **exponential space** — a space that accrues ideas and possibilities and encounters and connections on a higher order than is possible between individuals. When this happens, it is a special amplification that occurs; not only in terms of space or distance (crossing borders, thinking more broadly, aiming higher, going deeper), and time (moving quickly, slowing down, thinking longer-term, going further), but in human-scale relational terms as well. An opportunity becomes an exchange, an exchange that begets change, and engenders a spirit and intention toward generosity, reciprocity. This is a gift. Through such exchanges, we can "consent not to be a single being".

From Ottawa to Toronto, from billboard to artist's book, from airwave to object to instant to idea —"from data to dust to cosmos". Can we think through the curatorial toward becoming cosmological? In making space for multiplicities, I think this is what curating always already has the potential to do. And in *Public Syntax*, I think we did, indeed.

SHANI K PARSONS
Toronto 2019

EXHIBITION-AS-SEQUENCE

MOST SPECIFIC TO MY CONTRIBUTION AS THE GUEST CURATOR for the exhibition was an effort to respond to CDCC's mandate of "advancing curatorial inquiry." The rigorous and supportive environment at CDCC encouraged me to experiment with alternative modes for presentation, and through this posit questions of curatorial practice more generally. This ultimately resulted in an attempt to conceive of and choreograph Public Syntax as an exhibition with a linear sequence: as a map to be traveled through in one direction. Charting an exhibition in this way, upon the momentums and directionality of the linear, allowed me to consider the relations between the included works beyond their spatial proximities, and instead navigate and balance their coexistence through temporal, musical, and linguistic axes. How could one work echo, bleed into, or nest itself within the next? How could the exhibition operate polyphonically, or sustain and build a rhythm as it is navigated? What is the syntax of an exhibition, and when would it behave as a sentence? Admittedly, the tactics that emerged from these questions were only thinly employed in this exhibition, but these considerations have opened up questions for thinking about time-based curatorial protocols, which I will briefly outline here as an offering towards CDCC's curatorial community, before turning to the individual works:

In Amanda Beech's lecture "Constructing Time," presented as a closing gesture to Public Syntax at the Small World Music Centre—located on the first floor of Artscape Youngplace—she delivers her polemical critique of contemporary art, and specifically its privileging of the "open" or "ineffable" work as being both morally good and somehow the most critical—an antagonism that has been a central mobilizer for her practice across multiple projects. For the first time in this closing lecture, Beech situated her critique within considerations of how contemporary art engages with time. Through this lens, she isolated three figures or postures that have hindered contemporary art's ability to think about time correctly and operate upon it:

1) post-1968 forms of punk nihilism (surrender to conservatism and "no-future"), 2) the tragic modern subject who thinks and knows but cannot act (surrender to presentism and solipsism), and 3) the response to the horrors of totalitarianism (surrender to indeterminism and a future without project). In opposition to these, Beech's works seek to build a practice this is a constructivist one, using the force and world-making potentials of language and images to produce "commitments in the present which extend and infer commitments to a time in a future."
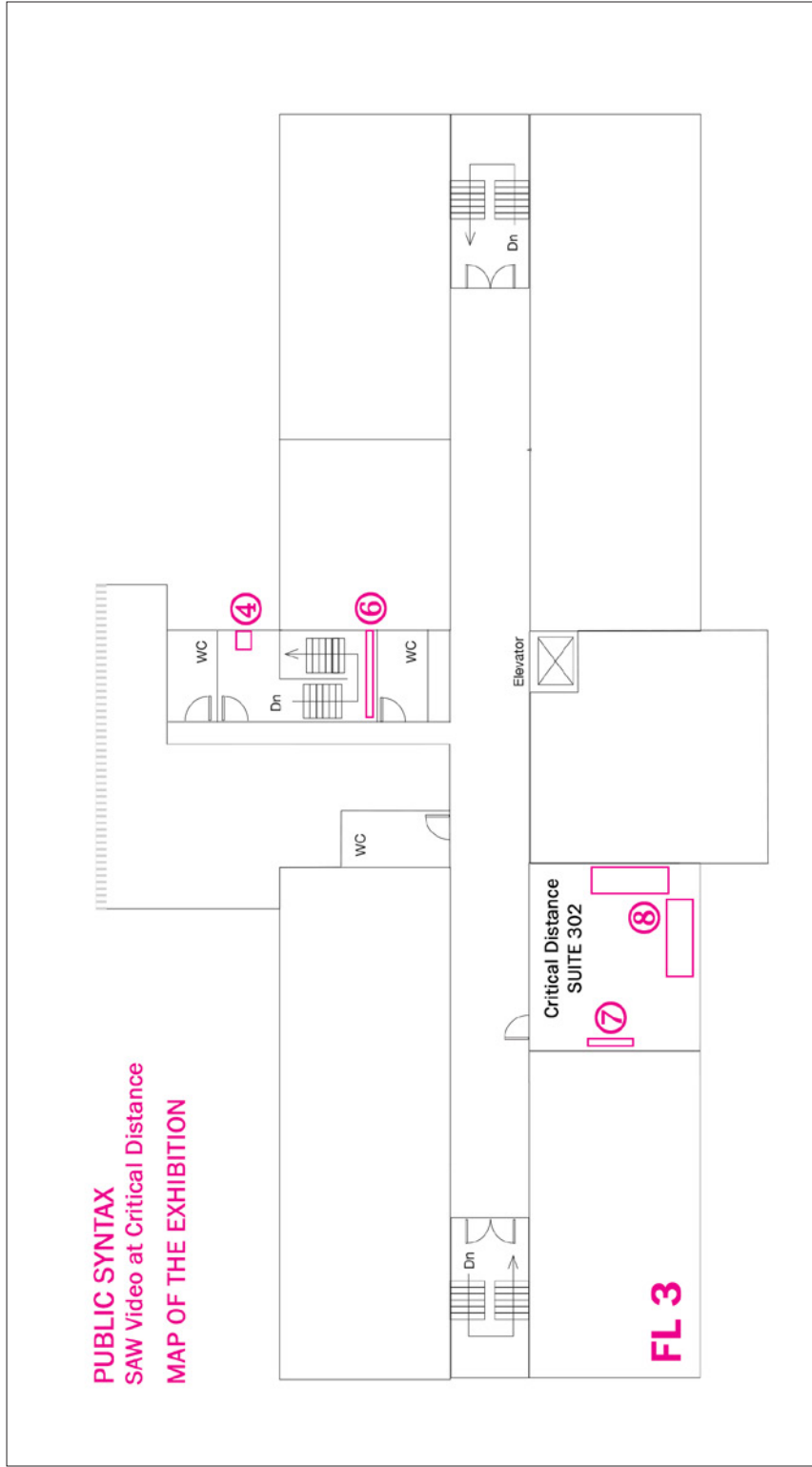
If we are to take Beech's critiques seriously (and I am of the opinion that we should), and instead think about time as a construct which contemporary art can and ought to operate on, then how might the curatorial play a role in, be shaped by, and rise up to the demands made by these temporal commitments? If the time that contemporary art privileges is indeterminate, then what role do habitual exhibition-making protocols play in creating and sustaining these circular frameworks, and how might different curatorial processes intervene upon those closed circuits? How might exhibition-making be repositioned as a temporally determinate procedure, as an operation that makes plans, has committed logistics, and has continuation beyond its closing? Can we instead draw time as a line with an arrow? A time-based curatorial practice would seek to produce agreement between works through their syntactical relations, and through this conjure momentums over territories, rhythms over juxtaposition, constructions over criticality—all compressed into the shared directionality of a linear exhibition. A time-based curatorial practice could produce an exhibition that would be a site rooted in and of time; would be actively thinking about, shaping, and defending its future; would function as a language with a rhetorical force; would be held together by syntax, strategy, and solidarity; would become a sentence.

A sentence means that there is a future.
Gertrude Stein

NEVEN LOCHHEAD
Toronto 2019

The following pages feature brief artist texts about each of the works. As stated above, the exhibition was envisioned as a sequence to be navigated from front-to-back through the various corridors leading to or away from the central exhibition space. We have attempted to replicate this sequential nature of the show, or perhaps fix it within linearity that the exhibition in fact could not accomplish or regulate sufficiently. Through the design ~~work of Shani K. Parsons~~ and a series of descriptive textual navigations occurring in between the individual exts, the exhibition-as-sequence unfolds here in this book-as-exhibition.

map foldout

PUBLIC SYNTAX
SAW Video at Critical Distance
MAP OF THE EXHIBITION

Critical Distance
SUITE 302

Elevator

WC

WC

WC

Dn

Dn

Dn

④

⑥

⑦

⑧

FL 3

[Voices fade. Speaker goes silent. An empty humming. Nothingness. Another sound emerges from further up the stairwell. A light clicking. A beat that is out of time. Inconsistent. Continues up the stairs. Every movement resonates hard throughout the space. Arrives at a flat platform. The source of the clicking sound comes into view. Approaches the device hanging in the corner of the platform. Gets close. Leans in.]

Frown

Throne

Fern

Gone

Goner

Goanna

Manner

Männer

Mona Lisa

Holla

Hotter

Hover

Whoever

Hooters

Honda

Hombre

Fonder

Fondle

ANNA QUEEN
I Don't Know (Corner Flip), 2019

Similar to Henry Andersen's audio composition that bookends the stairwell, Queen's sculptural practice of "location-tweaking" is propelled by tangential experimentation, creating new formal arrangements that respond to, incorporate, and extend the pre-existing materials, objects, and colour palettes that are found in the site of installation. Composing the work from afar at her studio in Rockland, Maine, Queen collected images and videos of the stairwell platform from the exhibition's curator, and through this research acquired a convex security mirror (an element repeated elsewhere throughout the stairwell) and began working with a tarp identical in hue to the strong blue motif of the stairwell paint job. Reflected in the disorientating spherical gaze of the mirror, Queen's iPhone is centrally located on the tarp. A spectral presence taps buttons on the screen; its clicking creating a beat by diligently selecting the first word that is offered up by the phone's predictive text algorithm, which is designed to learn the vocabulary and texting habits of its user in an attempt to help finish their sentences. Unlike Andersen's ever-expanding word game, the algorithm soon exposes the limits of its associative abilities, tripping over its own syntax and becoming caught an infinitely affirmative, Sisyphean refrain: you can do it for you and you can do it for you and you can do it for you...

[Voices are heard again, echoing now from above and below. A vertical polyphony. The semblance of language pulses. A choral ambience. The clicks beat perpetually. New sounds are heard fading in from above. Exterior spaces. Cityscapes. Tinkling bells. A brief orchestral swell. Hard cuts like channel surfing. Continues up the stairs. Arrives at another flat platform. Turns back towards the stairwell. A convex mirror on the opposite wall. Two fluorescent lights on either side. Above this, a wall with a video projection playing a video: the Moon being recorded with a shaky hand...]

Holla

Hotter

Hover

Whoever

Hooters

Honda

Hombre

Fonder

Fondle

[Leaves the space. Retraces path to exit the building. Stairwell. Spheres. Clicks. Words in rhythm. Hears: "Trembling, treble, timbre..." Lobby space. Sounds of activity. Children playing. Exits the building. Down the ramp towards the sidewalk. A street-side billboard at the base of a large tree. On it is the image of a pink post-it note with a hand-written word. Reads: "Oposiyik."

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

NAAKITA FELDMAN-KISS is a queer artist of mixed roots whose practice examines concepts of inheritance through highlighting experiences of intergenerational memory and liminal identity in contemporary forms of oral tradition. Her process-based explorations manifest as transmedia installation works, often incorporating text-based, performative, technological and social elements. Recent presentations include New York MoMA PS1 (2012); Eastern Bloc, Montreal, QC (2015); Unnoticed Festival, Nijmegen, NL (2016); Galerie B-312, Montreal, QC (2016); Knot Project; Space, Ottawa, ON (2018). She currently works between Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa.

IVANIE AUBIN-MALO honours her Maliseet roots through dance. Upon graduating from École de danse contemporaine de Montréal in 2014 she was mentored and taught the Fancy Shawl Dance by Curtis Joe Miller. She has collaborated with renowned artists Marie Belzil from Moment Factory, Tanya Lukin Linklater, DJ KXO, Buffalo Hat Singers, Moe Clark, Barbara Diabo, Alexandre Morin and Soleil Launière. She has also choreographed and performed in Ktahkomiq by Ondinnok and Mito-Jogos de Recusa by Marcos Nery, presented at the SESC Festival in Brazil. Ivanie's most recent piece called MULA was presented at Tangente in Montreal in November 2018.

HENRY ANDERSEN is an artist whose projects typically centre on written text and evolve through open-ended collaborations with friends. He has presented work at kunstenfestivaldesarts (BE), La Loge (BE), Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (AU), ZKM-Karlsruhe (DE), Damien and the Love Guru (BE), Beurrschouwburg (BE), and the 2017 Pune Biennale (IN). Recently, he released a record of spoken text, Stanzas or the Law of the Good Neighbor, with the Belgian label KRAAK. He is interested in poetry, architecture, and erotica, and is a founding member of the Slow Reading Club, with Bryana Fritz.

MARA EAGLE is an American artist based in Montreal working in a wide range of media including sound, video, sculpture and performance. She pulls intuitively from the world of pop-culture, the Internet, and technology industries to create enigmatic and often humorous work. Born in 1988 in Boston, Mara holds a BA from Marlboro College. After attending the Chautauqua School of Art in New York state, she moved to Montreal in 2012 where she is currently an MFA candidate at Concordia University. Her research has been generously supported by the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Fonds de recherche du Québec-Société et culture (FRQSC), and the Berggruen Institute.

PHIL ROSE is an Ottawa/Gatineau-based media artist. His works involve single-channel videos, installation work, and photography. He has served on the boards of Saw Video and Daïmõn and was the coordinator of the Available Light Screening Collective for more than fifteen years. Currently he is the owner of Cinetronic and has worked with media artists, non-profit organizations, and documentary producers in a variety of production-related areas. His work has been exhibited in Canada and internationally.

MOLLY TEITELBAUM is a Canadian filmmaker and visual artist from Ottawa. Her work explores being a woman in the 21st century by shedding light on female-oriented concerns, preoccupations, and desires of the moment. She was a participant at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2015), an artist in residence at The MacDowell Colony (2016), and Yaddo (2017). She holds a BA in Art History and Political Science from McGill University (2013), and an MFA from Parsons (2015). She is currently based in New York City.

ANNA QUEEN (b.1990) is an interdisciplinary artist working in sculpture and video. She graduated in 2013 from Maryland Institute College of Art earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Ceramics. In 2015 she was a participant at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Anna has been a Resident Artist at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Vermont Studio Center, and The Banff Centre. Her work has been shown at Firecat Projects, Chicago, FAB LAB DC, The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, and Page Bond Gallery. She currently lives and works in Rockland, Maine.

THE VIDEO IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE WORKING GROUP is comprised of five Ottawa-based artists — Pansee Atta, Sasha Phipps , Ryan Conrad, Helene Lefebvre , and Maayke Schurer — each of whom have been commissioned to produce a new work to be projected large-scale on preexisting architectural facades in Summer/Fall 2019 as an extended exhibition. In lead-up to these public installations, the group of artists is engaging with the program's Resident Critic, Malini Guha , as well as the program's visiting lecturers, in discussions and exercises that are examining the complexities of 'publicness' through contemporary concerns.