



Foils:

featuring Evan Furness (*This Town is Small*), Hannah Doucet (*Blinkers*), Patrick Cruz (*the plumb and The Kamias Triennial*), Lillian O'Brien Davis (*The Goldfarb Gallery*), Theresa Wang (*Mercer Union*), Yasmin Nurm-ing-Por (*Two Seven Two*), Felix Rapp (*Le Chauffage*), Benjamin de Boer (*Hearth*), Elise Boudreau Graham (*Céline Bureau*)

November 16, 2024 2:00PM-4:00PM

Event Respondent Essay

Response to Foils

by Kate Wong

What I Will
by Suheir Hammad

I will not
dance to your war
drum. I will
not lend my soul nor
my bones to your war
drum. I will
not dance to your
beating. I know that beat.
It is lifeless. I know
intimately that skin
you are hitting. It
was alive once
hunted stolen
stretched. I will
not dance to your drummed
up war. I will not pop
spin break for you. I
will not hate for you or
even hate you. I will
not kill for you. Especially
I will not die
for you. I will not mourn
the dead with murder nor
suicide. I will not side
with you nor dance to bombs
because everyone else is
dancing. Everyone can be
wrong. Life is a right not
collateral or casual. I
will not forget where
I come from. I

will craft my own drum. Gather my beloved
near and our chanting
will be dancing. Our
humming will be drumming. I
will not be played. I
will not lend my name
nor my rhythm to your
beat. I will dance
and resist and dance and
persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than
death. Your war drum ain't
louder than this breath.

1.

What I Will by Suheir Hammad begins with a powerful refusal to be complicit: "I will not dance to your war drum". In this refusal, there is an assertion of agency. A declaration of autonomy. These words resonate with me, as they speak to the gravity of the moment we find ourselves in, both personally and collectively. In the chaos of our current realities, I find myself grappling with the unfathomable injustice and violence being inflicted on the people of Palestine. I find myself trying to make sense of being caught in systems that demand conformity and complicity. I am sick to my stomach by the continued silence that surrounds this ongoing genocide, as well as my own failure to find more meaningful ways to make a difference. Within this mess, however, the beauty and intensity of poetry offers solace and strength.

The Undercurrents Forum is a multi-part program that investigates the "place-ness" of Toronto: its built environment, the entanglement of real estate and the arts, and further socioeconomic, as well as political conditions impacting artists and cultural workers. The series kicked off in October of 2024, approximately a year after the latest escalation of the ongoing genocide in Palestine began—a period marked also by an insidious and related wave of political censorship, silencing, and upheaval within Toronto's arts institutions. The Forum, therefore, comes at a time of intensely felt urgency—as a way to come together to explore these distinct but interconnected threats to how we live and work together in this city.

Foils was the second Undercurrents event, focusing specifically on artistic, curatorial, and organisational strategies for contending with the increasingly precarious conditions faced by artists and cultural workers. The response I have written to *Foils* takes the form of a multi-tonal text, blending poetic, reflective, and analytical

elements. This approach has allowed me to confront the profound emotional weight of our current circumstances, which have impacted me personally since I moved to Toronto at the end of 2022. It has also allowed me to root my thinking in a brief but critical analysis of the very tangible systemic issues in the Toronto arts sector, that of course are not unique to this city, but reflect wider functions of neoliberal capitalism and western imperialism. I have also included a playlist of songs that have been important to me over the past year; music can and will always occupy a central role in the struggle for liberation. In essence, I have taken the invitation from Chris and Parker to respond to *Foils* as an opportunity to deliver a very personal reflection on the cultural ecosystem we inhabit in Toronto. The precariousness of our work as artists and cultural workers mirrors the violence we witness in the world, but it also reflects our resistance to it.

2.

I understand curatorial practice as vocational work. To work as a curator in the 21st century is to develop a value-driven practice rooted in a commitment to cultural stewardship; it is not enough to simply know about art. Within the precarious conditions that artists and cultural workers now face, curators must be able to attune themselves to the specificities of the places in which they work—the histories that informed them, the communities that inhabit them, and the policies, systems, and structures that continue to shape them. In this way, curators are cultural stewards who labour to expose and strengthen an intrinsic relationship between art and society. In this way, curators help to reveal the foundation role that art and culture play in processes of social transformation.

The work of the 21st century curator is inherently identity-driven and deeply entwined with one's worldview and values. Contrary to recent anti-woke discourse within art criticism that suggests that identity politics are the enemy of artistic innovation, art and cultural production can never be created in a vacuum. They are profoundly shaped by the social, economic, and political forces of their time, and even more so, by the personal histories and biographies of their makers. To claim otherwise ignores the deeply contextual nature of all our creative endeavours.

The challenge for the 21st century curator therefore, especially within institutional settings, is to find a way of aligning our work with our personal values. Curatorial practice is more than a means to earn a living. This job—this vocation—reflects a passion for artistic creation, and a commitment to affecting meaningful change within society.

3.

The panelists for *Foils* spoke from their varied perspectives as artists, curators, and cultural workers, addressing the numerous challenges we currently face in the arts sector. Discussions highlighted critical issues, including rising costs of living, gentrification, and the resulting loss of affordable live/work spaces in cities. Hannah Doucet, an artist and one of the co-founders of the Winnipeg-based project space Blinkers, raised questions about the dynamics of iterating versus legacy/permanence in starting new spaces and models, suggesting that “if you exist forever, you risk becoming exactly what you originally formed against”. Across the board, whether speaking as individuals or from the perspective of organizations like Mercer Union, the speakers all grappled with shrinking public funds and the near total absence of substantial yet ethical private or corporate funding. This lack of resources fosters a precarious environment that prioritizes individualism over collaboration. Scarcity breeds competition, forcing cultural workers to vie for dwindling resources, which in turn can erode community and collective efforts essential to nurturing and sustaining vibrant cultural contexts.

An issue left unaddressed during the event—one that undergirds the question of ethical arts funding and is central to an interrogation of “place” in Toronto—is the monoculture of donors that provide the majority of private money to the city's mid- and large-scale arts institutions. As a result of the large sums they provide to the city's major contemporary art institutions like the AGO and MOCA Toronto, this small but highly influential group of donors wields the power to control cultural production in the city; they also support the ongoing genocide in Palestine, and have, since October 7, 2024, successfully silenced a number of institutional curators who were public with their humanitarian views. Due to the power of this group, and influenced by Canada's 2019 adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition of Antisemitism (which conflates antisemitism with legitimate criticism of the state of Israel with a chilling effect on free speech), private donors who are not explicitly aligned with these politics remain dangerously complicit in their silence.

This crisis in arts funding in Toronto poses profound implications for artistic freedom, a diversity of perspectives, and the autonomy of cultural institutions in the city. The consequences of these conditions are stark: homogenization of ideas and output, creative stagnation, and an eerie and pervasive sense of collective disempowerment. The infrastructures that have historically supported creative practices in Toronto have crumbled, leaving us unsupported, isolated, and without faith.

4.

And I found you In this smoking chaos; our shoulder blades kissed¹

So, how do we unite as artists and cultural workers in Toronto, where a wealthy few control the limited number of arts institutions, and by way of this, control cultural production? How can we do meaningful work when the elite capture of identity and community has almost, if not completely, hollowed these terms of meaning?

Within this mess—within this smoking chaos—we must focus collectively on devising new ways of working, and on building cultural spaces that do not rely on unethical sources of funding. This is the only way to dissolve the insidious power structures that censor us, and that promote the idea that some lives are more valuable than others. To counter the erosion of existing infrastructures and support systems—to empower ourselves against precarity—we must take responsibility for transforming the environment in which we work and live. We must devise new strategies for finding one another. We must create the conditions that allow us to gather, to listen closely, and to observe deeply. We must be humble and open, embracing the perspectives of others, and allowing them to strengthen our own positions.

To be in community with one another is the most potent form of resistance, and this is one of the functions of the Undercurrents Forum. In these bleak times, as we brace ourselves against dark, cold waters, we must understand what solidarity is, what it offers, and create the conditions in which to produce it.

Playlist

"Kyle (i found you)" (3:16) by Fred again...
 "Raoui" (3:46) by Souad Massi
 "Name of God" (3:29) by Mustafa
 "I Float Alone" (4:35) by Julee Cruise
 "Sa Dako Paroon - Reprise" (3:15) by Bong PENERA
 "Oh, Lovely Appearance of Death" (5:13) by Efdemin
 "Butterfly Net" (4:36) by Caroline Polachek
 "Another Day" (2:54) by This Mortal Coil
 "Pretty in Possible" (3:36) by Caroline Polachek
 "Perfect Stranger" (3:17) by FKA Twigs
 "Imouhar" (5:07) by Mdou Moctar
 "Eusexua" (4:23) by FKA Twigs
 "100" (3:20) by Dean Blunt
 "Sunshine, Love and Music" (2:07) by Larry Graham

[Link](#)

About the writer:

Kate Wong is a curator and the founder of SITE Toronto. Dedicated to shaping the social, intellectual, and material conditions through which art is produced and experienced, SITE is a new kind of contemporary art institution focused on supporting artists and connecting art more meaningfully to everyday life.

Wong has held senior positions at leading institutions and galleries including the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Serpentine Galleries, Sadie Coles HQ, and V.O Curations, where she established a residency program for early-career artists and cultural practitioners. With over a decade of experience working in Canada, the UK, and internationally, she has led award-winning interdisciplinary exhibitions, experimental and research-driven programs, long-term cross-sectoral partnerships, and community-rooted initiatives grounded in social practice and place.

Wong has been an invited speaker at institutions including the University of Toronto, Tate Modern, and V&A East, and her writing on contemporary art and culture has appeared in publications such as e-flux, Yishu Journal, AnOther Magazine, and frieze. In 2027, she will serve as Visiting Faculty at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

About Pumice Raft:

A **pumice raft** is an ecological phenomenon that usually follows an underwater volcanic eruption. Amongst the lava, plumes of pumice stones slowly float to the surface of the ocean. If the wind is calm the individual stones form what some sailors have reported as floating islands that appear out of nowhere. The pumice raft has even been known to ferry flora and fauna to new shores. More than an illusion on the horizon, a pumice raft represents a vessel, a conduit, a vehicle; its very constitution cultivates an environment where things can come together in the spirit of collaboration.

Pumice Raft is also a federally registered non-profit organization in Tkaronto/Toronto, incorporated in 2018. From November 2019–December 2025, Pumice Raft hosted exhibitions and events at unit 103 of 348 Ryding Avenue. Pumice Raft is currently pursuing nomadic programming and working on a variety of oral history research projects. Pumice Raft's activities begin from an ecological activist approach to the display of visual art and the facilitation of related education. This means that the guiding principles of the organization are rooted in a conception of place that begins with the protection of people and the planet. The activities of Pumice Raft take place on the land of the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat, and the Anishinabewaki ᐱᑦᑕᑦᑭᑦᑎᐱᑦ. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this territory and participate in the lineages of this land.