



Publics:

featuring Sagan MacIsaac and curatorial collective Aisle 4 (Emily Fitzpatrick, Shannon Linde, Patricia Ritacca, and Renée van der Avoird)

January 12, 2025 2:00PM-5:00PM

Event Respondent Essay

Response to Publics

by Dallas Fellini

Parker says that the commons are unownable; they are for everyone. Living in a city like this one, I have internalized a different truth, amidst militarized encampment clearings and Doug Ford’s unending privatization of the public. But then there are moments when the city’s tendency to forefront the private and dissolve the public are punctured. In 2019, architectural designer Phat Lee and poet and artist Benjamin de Boer poured concrete onto a bench in order to undo its hostile architecture, transforming its uninhabitability into something that could better fulfil the needs of unhoused people and other publics who occupied this so-called public space. This action comes to mind today, gathered in a room with a community, of sorts, listening to my peers speak about how we might begin to orient public spaces, public art, and public funding towards the people meant to benefit from these forms of “public good.”

Sagan thinks of publics as it relates to audienceship. Patricia asks what it would mean to start with a public first, and then consider what type of art—if any—would serve them. How can we resist the dichotomous impulse of framing the exhibition as central, and public programming only as accompaniment, a footnote to the exhibition proper? A lesson I learnt hard and hold close as a curator of exhibitions which frequently focus on trans artistic practice: It’s convenient to believe that representation will eventually amount to structural change, or that showing more trans artists in a historically trans exclusionary gallery will automatically create sustained trans audienceship. This is often not the case; bringing trans art practices to the audiences of major museums, or even artist-run centres can be disillusioning at best, or endangering at worst, illuminating how the basic needs of a public are often overshadowed by the idealistic optics of inclusion. An exhibition tour offering context to trans history feels good and looks good, but what does it mean to host programming like this at a space that does not even offer

a gender neutral bathroom? The facade crumbles under its own weight.

Chris wonders: why does public art so often feel in discord with the public? I visit my friend Phil at work in a part of the city most unsettling to me, perforated with public art photo opps—colossal peace signs and hearts coloured to match the rehearsed rustic character of the district. The value in this work lies in its role as a conduit for looking; the work produces value for the city, endorsing a touristic economy of spectacle. Phil gives me their employee discount for a new pair of loafers that would have otherwise been out of budget for me. I look elsewhere as I walk back to the streetcar stop, my gaze fixed to my shoes. made possible – and the costs that continue to be borne by those who produce the city’s cultural life.

About the writer:

Dallas Fellini is a curator, writer, and artist living and working on Treaty 13 territory (Toronto). Their research is situated at the intersection of trans studies and archival studies, considering representational and archival alternatives to trans hyper-visibility.

Dallas holds a Master of Visual Studies in Curatorial Studies from the University of Toronto, and a Bachelor of Arts from OCAD University. They have curated exhibitions and screenings for the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, the Art Gallery of Guelph, Art Metropole, Libby Leshgold Gallery, Gallery 44, Vtape, Trinity Square Video, Xpace Cultural Centre, Hearth, and Riverdale Hub Gallery. Their writing and criticism has been published nationally and internationally in publications including The Brooklyn Rail, Canadian Art, C Magazine, Art Documentation, The Journal of Curatorial Studies, and Cornelia Magazine. Dallas is the recipient of the 2024 Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators. They are currently Curator of Programs at Art Metropole.

Dallas is a cofounder of Silverfish, an arts publication devoted to interdisciplinary collaboration, skill-sharing, and cultivating sustained dialogue between emerging artists and writers.

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 ᐱᓂᓴᓂᓇᑲᓄᐩ . We are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this territory and participate in the lineages of this land.