

Failure to Adapt: A Conversation Between Syrus Marcus Ware and Elizabeth Sweeney

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In the summer of 2014, Syrus Marcus Ware and Elizabeth Sweeney teamed up to guest curate *Re:purpose*—an interactive group exhibition that focuses on artists who repurpose and reclaim objects and ideas within their practice, and in so doing, present new ways of seeing and understanding the world. Artists include jes sachse, Jan Derbyshire, Cait Davis, Stephen Fakiyesi, Maria Hupfield and collaborative work by Jason Tschantré and the late Lisa Bufano.

Here is how they describe the theme of the exhibition:

Repurposing is the act of altering something so it takes on a new function. For many, repurposing is not just a preference, but also a necessary act of survival. While evolutionists may argue that the ability to adapt is central to the survival of a species, repurposing creates space to redefine reality.

There are subtle yet important differences between the terms adapt and repurpose. The word adapt has many meanings, and within certain discourse, it is often associated with adjustments intended to make a more inclusive world. For example, we may modify a workstation to become wheelchair accessible; hiring practices are adjusted to respond to employment inequity and to encourage greater diversity in the work place. Adapting does not require major systemic change and rarely does it result in redistribution of privilege or empowerment. To adapt is to assume that the status quo should be accepted as is. Society however, presents an onslaught of misdistributions of power and inequality – and for the artists included in this exhibition, the notion of simply conforming to this reality presents a gross failure of imagination. Instead, they repurpose.

—S. M. Ware and E. Sweeney, 2014

What follows is an excerpt from the curators' conversations about the exhibition, the act of repurposing and an ongoing failure of imagination within the Canadian arts ecology.

Syrus Marcus Ware: Our exhibition description starts by making the distinction between repurposing and adapting. Why is this distinction important?

Elizabeth Sweeney: As we continue conversations around inclusion, diversity, and expanding notions of representation in the arts, there tends to be a focus on providing access and adapting. This language implies that there is a way of doing things – a correct way, a traditional mainstream way – and that there is a status quo, which will, out of kindness, bestow the olive branch of access (budgets, spaces, and time permitting of course). This often comes in the form

of an adaptation in the least obtrusive ways possible, in ways that are comfortable. For example a gallery may apply for a special grant to hire a guest curator of colour, or make an effort to include aboriginal programming once every two years. Perhaps they adapt public programs to include a special tactile tour or an audio description headset that is kept hidden behind the desk. The goal of these adaptations is not major transformation or empowerment, nor is it to challenge the reality that our institutions of art history have failed us.

SWM: The theme of this issue of NMP is failure. What do we mean when we talk about failure in this context?

ES: Several years ago Marc Mayer (Director of the National Gallery of Canada) was slammed by curators across the country for his egregious conclusion that the reason there was very little diversity in the NGC's collection was because they don't see colour (and I assume ability, Aboriginal status, gender, etc.) when curating and collecting –they just see excellence. We have heard this rationale from other curators and art gallery directors over the years, and this is nothing new. If you look back at the 62 or so artists that have been selected since 1952 to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, there have been only 9 women, 2 Aboriginal artists, and (as far as I can tell) zero artists of colour or disabled artists. The destructive implication of these selections of course being that these artists just aren't making art worthy of our national recognition or attention. And a quick glance through the Canadian Art Museum Directors Organization member list informs us that arts professionals from these same communities certainly are not the ones making the vast majority of these decisions.

In David Balzer's well-articulated review of the AGO's "Art as Therapy" exhibition, he reiterates the antiquated notion that museums are neutral mirrors of a society reflected by artists. He states "Museums are not agents for direct social change but reflections on what culture has been and is, through the sensibilities of the present moment."^[1] I would argue that the overt absence of diverse 'sensibilities' within our art institutions proves the opposite. Art galleries are not a mirror of society and they are not neutral. They instead send a very clear (and profoundly inaccurate) message that artists who are disabled, aboriginal or POC consistently fail to make great art, or art worthy enough to represent Canada, and they have no place in the leadership of Canadian art galleries.

I think you would also agree that these messages clearly demonstrate a different kind of failure –the persistent failure of Canadian art institutions to make meaningful change. Failure to see curators who specialize in diasporic art practices and the diverse cultures of Canadians as essential, not optional (i.e., contractual). Failure to take ownership (and action) for euro-centric collections that were built from long histories of colonization, racism, sexism and ableism. Failure to radically reconsider how audiences engage and access art. And the failure of our academic institutions to redefine the art histories, practices and artists we celebrate, study and revere.

SMW: Yes, totally, as workers in cultural institutions, we feel the weight of this failure in our everyday lives. As artists as well: this sense of our participation being an inclusion or adaptation from the 'core' or centrality of white supremacist and ableist 'normality'.

What would our institutions look like, feel like, operate like if we got rid of these ways of thinking? If we imagined co-creating a space that was by, for and about all of our lives, our creativity, our communities? Would these spaces even exist as 'institutions'? Would we even hold objects 'in public trust' at all in this other reality?

Artists have a way of helping us get over our 'failure of imagination'. Perhaps bringing artists into the functioning of these places can help us better understand what we need to do next to move forward? In our exhibit, *Re:Purpose*, the artists have all proposed projects that challenge our limited imaginations and suggest new ways of working with existing objects and tools.

ES: Absolutely. Let's take the work of Lisa Bufano for example. Lisa was known for her dramatic and captivating performance work using repurposed wooden table legs as prosthetic-stilts. Instead of performing in prosthetics that resembled and looked like "real" legs, and trying to dance and move like non-disabled dancers, Lisa instead transformed her body into a completely new form, with completely unique gestures and movements. Lisa's work defiantly redefined our relationship with inanimate objects (i.e., prosthetics) and how a human form looks, moves and dances. Online you can see a video called "[Mentally Fine](#)", which documents Lisa's performance with wooden stilts in a store window at the Alaska Centre in Boise, Idaho during an artist residency. Two older women come up to the window and we catch their conversations.



"Is that a person?" one says to another.

“it’s a she.”

“a she?”

After the videographer documenting the work explains a bit about Lisa, her practice, and her qualifications as an artist, one of the women reply:

“But is she handicapped?”

To which the videographer tries to respond respectfully and accurately about the limitation of Lisa’s limbs.

“Mentally fine though?” they respond.

“ah... yes”, he responds.

“Did she come up with this all by herself?” they ask

“yes”.



This video tells us so much about the defiant role of repurposing. Lisa’s work challenged these viewers’ assumptions about what a “mentally fine” human being looks like, and perhaps even redefined for them what a disabled person “can come up with” all by themselves. Instead of failing to fit her atypical body into traditional dance practices, Lisa Bufano instead redefined entire notions of body and movement.

SMW: When we spoke to Stephen Fakiyesi about his work in the show he talked about repurposing being an apt strategy for critical engagement with the world around him. He uses repurposing as a call to action, getting others to re-examine objects and moments that can often become ubiquitous through mass consumption. His work “Stacks” uses playing cards to explore colonialism, imperialism and the prominence of European royalty. The viewer is invited to consider oversized plastic cards that alternatively feature images of Black kings and queens, which participants can playfully stack like a house of cards to create various structures.



Stephen said this about his work:

I think there will always be a need for individuals, groups and most certainly artists to imagine the world not as it is but as it can be. I do not lament the present order of things. Rather, one of the privileges of being an artist on the peripherals, as it were, is that you have

the distance to more readily perceive the status quo and possibly challenge it. I have a pretty active imagination and faith in something greater than myself to think that, even now, all things are possible. Failure means an opportunity to engage my environment anew, with a fresh and broader perspective and a renewed vigour and hopefully learn from the past, and to embody the change that I am actively seeking to have made in the world. If we haven't given up hope, situations do change and people, in particular, are not beyond redemption. To borrow from an Old Testament proverb; "even a living dog is better off than a dead lion". So, life is good.

Stephen's work not only challenges our framing of empire, but also our understanding of what is expected within a gallery setting. His work employs an interactivity and art-based play that challenges our idea of museum etiquette. It repurposes the exhibition space, making it a living room, a meeting space, a community setting.

ES: Yes, it's precisely this kind of playful challenging of expectations (and of etiquette) that is at the core of this exhibit. In particular, I am struck by Fakiyesi's call to artists to "imagine the world not as it is but as it can be." This is a great contrast to the practice of seeking out art that reflects (and reinforces) the world as it is, and a call to action to those in positions of power to do so.

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[1] David Balzer, *Only Connect: What's wrong with "Art as Therapy"*, Exhibition review of the Art Gallery of Ontario's "Art as Therapy", May 3 2014 –April 26, 2015, Canadian Art, Posted May 27, 2014 and accessed here: <http://www.canadianart.ca/reviews/2014/05/27/art-as-therapy/>

Re:Purpose

Guest curated by Syrus Marcus Ware and Elizabeth Sweeney

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 72 Queen St., Oshawa

August 9 – September 7, 2014

Closing reception: RMG Fridays, 5 Sept, 7 pm, ASL interpretation provided.

www.rmg.on.ca