

THE WORK WE DO WHEN WORK IS DONE ELAINE: A SPECIAL EVENT BY DERYA AKAY AND ANNE LOW

To host dinner as a renter in Vancouver involves some level of conceal: we live in small and necessarily multifunctional spaces. To welcome guests to our tables requires a clearing of makeshift home offices, a storing of laptops and papers, a sweeping of loose ends into drawers or closets—a tucking away of things. Still, much more is revealed to a renter's dinner guests. A guest will survey our objects and images, glimpse our products, and scan the titles of the books we've read or plan to read. Certainly, the recipes we choose for company are revealing—how we dress our greens, the spices in our repertoire, our preferred varieties of fats—but inconcealable views of our everyday rituals are what provide the most compelling evidence for our personal contexts. How the produce husks pile, how the dirty dishes stack on our kitchen counters, how the hand towels hang to dry in the very bathrooms where we wash our faces—these continue once the guests are gone, absorbing the burden of temporarily increased capacity. Through reliance on these existing rituals, the home-cooked meal is resourceful, lived-in, intimate.

Exhibitions in studio-run project spaces are comparable in this way. Distinct from Canadian artist-run centres that receive operational support from granting bodies, the majority of costs associated with studio-run galleries are folded into adjacent studio rental fees. As such, somewhere behind the walls of their presentation rooms are the places where artists struggle, wonder, and unwind. The exhibitions produced by these gallery spaces, like a dinner prepared in the home, present the opportunity to eat the fruit of our daily rituals—the artists' active practices afford studio-run spaces the capacity to host independent initiatives.

Bend Toward the Sun, Bring the Sky Beneath Your Feet was curated by artist Jasmine Reimer and presented in February of 2016 across two Vancouver studio-run spaces, Dynamo Arts Association (DAA) and The Bakery. Handsomely assembled, the group show brought together artists whose recent work can be characterized by a material exploration that favours instability, or flexibility, over notions of permanence, or finitude. The exhibition also unveiled significant improvements to DAA's project space, namely the removal of its drop ceiling, and

the raising of its lighting fixtures—conceptually simple but logistically complicated changes that dramatically altered the room. Through these spacial enhancements, DAA's supporting community of skilled labour was immediately perceivable, with the renovations representing countless hours volunteered by artists who already provide the foundational support—in the form of monthly rent—that makes these exhibitions possible.

Reimer's show, in part due to its timing, conveyed an overwhelming sense of generosity, which extended to the exhibited works. Their gestures toward flexibility expressed a kindness between artists and materials—to forfeit finitude is to accept some level of fallibility—a sense that if cardboard were to collapse inward, or if terry cloth were to sag, much would be forgiven. Further adding to an undercurrent of hospitality was the knowledge that independent, artist-initiated efforts of this kind exist almost exclusively without fees for exhibiting artists, or curators, meaning the eight here—Johnny Burgess, Jessica Groome, Jenine Marsh, Ella Dawn McGeough, Steve & Meghann Hubert, and Les Ramsay, along with Reimer—offered their work unpaid.

To view this fact of generosity and resourcefulness as somehow a concession against the legitimacy of studio-run exhibitions would be to miss my point. On the contrary, all good artists work for free at times, whether through these kinds of volunteer or unpaid gestures, through donations to auctions benefitting galleries or artist-run centres, or to some extent by engaging with or critiquing each other's work. Exhibitions and events by artists, for artists—the opening of *Bend Toward the Sun, Bring the Sky Beneath Your Feet* was attended by a disproportionate number of us—are founded on principles of reciprocity, their free labour contributing to regenerative pockets of good-fellowship for artists, serving to balance the uglier sides of a volatile and at times captious industry.

HAUNT, the independent and idiosyncratic arts platform for which I am writing, was created with these principles in mind. Currently housed in the unfinished basement and garage of a Cedar Cottage home, HAUNT was originally conceived of as an entity representing the simple pooling of resources among its organizing artists—primarily myself and Curtis Grahauer, but supported by a rotation of collaborators. Born out of the Master of Fine Arts program at Simon Fraser University School for the Contemporary Arts, HAUNT embraced inventive and transitory venues out of necessity—while the school supplied us with artist studios, it could not meet our need for regular public exhibition spaces. We chose initiatives with impermanent sites: roving

projects, events, and exhibitions in short-term venues. Our communal network gave us access to private spaces that could accommodate semi-public presentations. This included an apartment situated in the Woodward's tower, directly above the SFU School for the Contemporary Arts, and the Interurban Gallery, as well as other temporary and somewhat unconventional spaces within the university institution.

While HAUNT continues to evolve beyond this initial context, certain fundamental attributes of the organization have held strong. It remains collaborative, accommodating, adaptable, resourceful and generous. It aspires to be a place for community gathering, however untethered to permanent address. With three exhibitions at our current location now behind us, and several more planned here for the upcoming summer season, our future is nonetheless committed to a mobile approach to programming.

Prior to January of 2016, the basement and garage spaces HAUNT occupies had been used by their owner for purposes typical to basements or garages. They housed the sort of things apartment dwellers find difficult to justify: in-between items, there but perhaps forgotten, deemed extravagant for the home—failed projects, outmoded equipment, slightly obsolete technology, or theoretically reusable or recyclable goods. At times when the lighting is not so dim you'll notice tucked-away elements that will remain here past HAUNT's tenure: a piano, salvaged from disposal, a clunky, but functional elliptical trainer, and an assortment of gardening tools. The objects hint at the daily rituals that afford us this luxury of space, in a city where afforded spaces are scarce. To express appreciation for our curious domestic venue, however, is not to say we happened upon a place that was immediately suitable for arts programming. These far from perfect walls and floors in their current condition represent our sweat and tears, our epic battles with dust and grime, and an ongoing vie for territory against various encroaching creatures.

In spite of all the moving pieces required to make our 2016 programming a reality, this initiative follows in the footsteps of many successful others before it. Most notable was Hardscrabble Gallery, which until recently was programming backyard exhibitions and performances a short walk north from here. A project by artist Erik Hood, now the Associate Director of Vancouver's Artspeak Gallery, it was fittingly titled with a term descriptive of hard work and struggle. Much of this labour was underemphasized by Hood's impressive resourcefulness and extraordinarily diverse skill set, and due, once again, to the everyday rituals associated with maintaining a home, yard, or garage

studio. Those lucky enough to attend one of the 13 distinct exhibitions and related gatherings hosted by Hardscrabble—I was among the gratified individuals programmed there—can attest to the important role the gallery played in providing Vancouver artists with spaces free from additional rental costs, market concern, or the daunting supervision of granting bodies.

Returning now to the idea of a home-cooked dinner—*Elaine*, a special event by Derya Akay and Anne Low, initiates a basis for gathering through the offer of a shared meal, prepared by the artists. Foreshadowed in some regard by a recurrent event they informally refer to as Sunday supper—for which Akay, Low, and a number of friends regularly gather—*Elaine* could be seen as a vital community-building exercise. Set amid sculptural, drawn and printed works in the recently cleared garage, it situates itself between the artist's studio and the kitchen counter—informal spaces activated through making. *Elaine*, like all of us, is generous, offering a cornucopia of roasted fare and the fruits of our labour. Gone are the cobwebs that swathed the rough shack—its walls are now prepared surfaces for works on paper, flower garlands, and baked dough shapes.

Most importantly, and like HAUNT, or Hardscrabble, *Elaine* fills a gap, promoting much needed camaraderie through paralleled leisure and labour, fostering intergenerational friendship and exchange among artists. At HAUNT's recent opening reception of Susanna Browne's exhibition, *I Need You*, curated by Jenn Jackson, Colin Browne and Marian Penner Bancroft discussed the era of their youth in Vancouver when a basement rumpus room was common—a time when bars, or coffee shops, or other commercial spaces were less frequented. We, as Vancouver artists, used to have spaces like these—like *Elaine*—where home and studio coalesced and could accommodate larger gatherings. Tonight, as we partake of Akay and Low's ambitious menu, let's bask for a moment in the rewards of their efforts, while mindful of the work required by all of us to be here.

-Lucien Durey