

Vibe Check

Transcript of “Episode 2: Speculative Itinerants”

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Neven Lochhead: You are listening to CFRC 101.9 FM located in the basement of Carruthers Hall on the Queen's University campus in Kingston, Ontario and online at cfrc.ca.

My name is Neven Lochhead. I'm an artist and curator in Kingston. And I'm feeling again quite lucky and grateful to Dinah and CFRC for this opportunity of doing a bi-weekly half-hour radio program that I'm positioning in relation to an exhibition of mine called *From the Vibe Out* which is at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, but which is currently closed due to the lockdown. So this program was made as a kind of pivot point that has allowed me to keep some of the ideas and strands of that work in motion and in relation with a public.

Last week, I tried to translate some of the poetics of the exhibition onto the airwaves through musical composition. This week, some of that will carry over but it's mostly going to be focussed on a learning experiment that I'm conducting with the Dark Matter Playgroup, which is a project initiated by Sunny Kerr and Michelle Bunton at the Agnes. And they frame the Dark Matter Playgroup as “a nomadic mentorship-based program supporting adaptive forms of collectivity and art-making, under the conditions of the pandemic.” So, I'm a kind of mentor in this program. And I've been designing with this wonderful group of artists, a sort of modular assignment-driven peer-to-peer learning habitat. Which is, I should say, also a modified remix of an open educational resource that was designed by Neil Mulholland at the Edinburgh College of Art called *Contemporary Art and Open Learning*.

So, in this episode, you're going to kind of eavesdrop on a module that I just completed with the Dark Matter Playgroup over this past week. And as you'll hear, I'm taking this context of the radio very much into account. And thinking of how it can be a platform to both allow this group to come together in some kind of way in the absence of working in physical space, but also to open up the mechanics of this open learning experiment to you - to the public that I encounter on the airwaves. And so, it's a kind of experiment in interrogating the potential openness of these educational models. So I encourage your attention, and if you feel up for it, also your participation in the module that you're about to hear. So thanks for listening, I'll hand it over to myself, in a different hat.

Vibe Check

Hi everyone, it's been a while since I -- -- put together -- -- a module for the group. But I'm keen to sort of turn back to -- -- our learning experiment. Now that term is wrapping up -- -- just

walking on my way to the studio now. Unfortunately, that idea of the shared studio space is going to have to be paused until the stay-at-home order lifts. But not to be deterred, I have devised a little activity -- an exercise here in Module Two that will, I hope, give us a kind of alternate context to do some embodied learning or haptic experimentation. And also a becoming public to each other. It's an assignment that is built off of a couple of exercises from Neil Mulholland who offered a couple PDFs in the last module. Anyways, I've been talking to Neil and I asked him to record a little prompt of himself walking around Edinburgh. And this sort of recording he sent in a way kick-started my thinking for this module. So I'll just hand it over to Neil briefly.

Neil Mullholland: I think what I'd like to try and talk about is this whole idea that I mentioned in this talk about the creation of open research objects, following what Boshears has to say about that. So his idea is that you create an open object, that could be an artwork or it could be something that you write, could be anything really, so long as you can license it with a Creative Commons license that allows it to be repurposed. So it's really a question of thinking of what it would mean if we took Boshears at his word and we tried to apply that sort of logic to the creation of works of art. And I think also, with that in mind then, thinking of these artworks as somehow being things we can repurpose to build other artworks or possibly to use them for other ends and means. So thinking about them as being like reciprocal readymades. You know, Duchamp used Rembrandt as an ironing board. That sort of idea. So I guess there's the potential to think about how these open research objects can become something that you... you know you could use them for other purposes than as artworks. I suppose there's also the thing to consider here whether artworks are research objects at all, whether they are something other than forms of research. So maybe that's contestable, but I think the basic premise is that somehow we can license things in such a way that makes them open and interoperable. So his other caveat here is that he thinks it is slightly pointless doing that unless we are focused on creating new publics. So the key thing here is that as people use and engage with these open objects that they become new publics for whatever it is that the object does, whatever it intends to have as engagements. This is about affordances, maybe. Like, what does the open research object afford and enable in this kind of interaction between the people who engage with the object, and the object itself? The object is constantly being changed through that interaction and it is always in the process of becoming something else. - - [noise] Oh... okay...

Neven: Okay, so what Neil's talking about there about the open research object, and this emphasis on it needing to produce new publics -- -- has made me start thinking about this radio program that I just started a couple weeks ago called Vibe Check, as a possible tool for us in lieu of sharing a physical space that we could occupy the radio airwaves, and this very transmission to coexist as a group and carry out a set of related but dispersed activities and come together within the space of the edit of the radio show. So, it's an open question and idea of how we might occupy the radio in this way. And I'd really like to try it with you guys if you're open to it. Yeah part of the challenge of what I'm proposing would be to not just upload the outputs of our workshop, but actually to transform the radio program into an open educational resource. So that would involve me repositioning and recodifying the outlines of the activity called *Speculative Itineraries*, which I'm hoping you'll carry out, into a kind of public facing resource

that would have the ability to be taken up by a listener -- by a public. And it would invite people to remix or improvise upon the contents of the transmission. So it's pretty interesting to be talking to you actually: I'm, of course talking to you directly as a group -- as the Dark Matter Playgroup -- but simultaneously, I have one eye on the listener to the radio show Vibe Check. And potentially of other publics that I will encounter there, cohorts of co-learners that could form around this very broadcast. I think that's what it would mean to do open education on the radio and indeed I feel a bit strange, the kind of boundaries of our virtual classroom are exposing themselves to a public audience. So we're both learning and teaching in and through a public platform. So with that I'll just frame the assignment *Speculative Itineraries*, its various steps. For the Dark Matter Playgroup, you'll be able to just read all that below. And for the listeners at home, I'll be reading the instructions out on the air in just a few moments. And then we will shift to hear, I hope, a collective edit of the documentation from running this assignment within our group, which we can share with the listening public of CFRC.

So, this assignment is called *Speculative Itineraries*. If you'd like to do it, you need to find a peer or a friend who is willing to commit with you to the prompts, which I will outline in detail. You can also find a transcript of these prompts on the Agnes website alongside archival audio of this very radio show.

So:

Step 01: Essential Activity identification.

This step should take 30 minutes of individual reflection.

Identify an essential activity or errand that you need to do or would like to do that will take place at some point this weekend. Make sure that this is an outing that will require you to leave your place of residence, ideally involving a walk or even a drive of some kind to another location that is separate from your interior domestic space. Ideally, the essential activity that you identify will be something that will take no less than 30 minutes. Its purpose could range from the practical (such as grocery shopping, mailing a package), to the personal (such as getting a bit of fresh air, doing some exercise, visiting a loved one), to the creative or cognitive (such as walking to your studio to make an artwork or going somewhere quiet to read a chapter of a book). But whatever it is, try to choose an errand or essential activity that is not going to be particularly stressful or rigid when you carry it out. As these activities will eventually be altered by your peer learner, which would mean that they might need to potentially unfold in a slightly unexpected manner. And so this requires some flexibility on your part.

All right. On to...

Step 02: Essential Activity Transcription.

This step should take no more than 45 minutes of individual reflection and some writing.

In an email to your peer learner or your friend - your partner in this exercise - inform them of your chosen essential weekend activity. Explain to them when it is likely to happen, as well as its desired goal, such as, "I need to get some fresh vegetables," or "I'll need to clear my head,"

or “I need to go make an artwork,” things like that. In the format of an itemized itinerary, similar to what you would receive from Google Maps when you plot a trip, detail for your partner the route, or the a series of steps or actions that you will be taking on the weekend to complete your essential activity. So, try to explain this route to your partner in meticulous detail, going over its basic motions and durations, for example, “eight minutes walking along Gore Street.” But also try to describe potential secondary sites and features that you expect will occur along the route. So, in other words, try to give attention to the scenic or peripheral areas, the sense experiences, the other characters that you may encounter on the way for your activity, but what you may not typically perceive as the core parts of its completion. You know, these additional descriptions of secondary sights or things, they don't need to be overly immersive. You can simply mention to your partner aspects like, “Here I will pass a magnolia tree,” things like that.

So with that kind of mode of thinking carefully move through your essential activity and make an itemized transcription of that activity describing the full scope of your trip and its logistics. When you're done that, send this as a document or email to your partner.

Step 03: Speculative Itinerary Creation.

This step should take no more than 60 minutes of individual thinking and writing.

So after receiving the itemized itinerary from your peer, in which they outline their essential weekend activity, spend some time reading it and contemplating its context and dynamics. Imagine the trajectory of your peer as they are carrying out their task. If needed, maybe Google Search the site of their activity to get your bearings if their particular locale is different from your own. You know, this could take place anywhere from Kingston to Berlin, Paris, depending on where your partner is. Consider the stated goal of their activity and ask yourself whether this will factor into your response. So, consider what you know about your peer already, their general vibe, their interests, and reflect on whether these will be ingredients for you to use or tap into as you go about your next step, which is to start thickening and modifying their itinerary through a process of speculative annotation and itinerary editing.

This part of the assignment is a unique opportunity for you to directly inflect the logistical dynamics of your peer and their goal-oriented errand. Your modifications will potentially affect, improve, or simply make strange their otherwise regular everyday outing. The modifications and additions that you make to their itinerary are open-ended for you to play with and improvise upon. Although, there is one rule that you must abide by, and that is that you must not interfere with the completion of their stated goal. As in, you can't modify whether they go to the grocery store or not if that is the stated essential aim of their activity. This means that the focus of your additions and creativity and logistical experimentation must occur on the route of their essential activity. So, in other words, you will be modifying and designing aspects of their journey rather than their destination. Or you'll be building a learning habitat, rather than identifying the outcome of that habitat, which just predetermined.

So yes, using their itinerary of their essential activity as a kind of frame, begin adding in speculative, playful annotations and edits. Thickening their schedule, as you adjust or add in

text, such as instructions, prompts, and descriptions of peripheral tasks that you're inviting your peer to take up as they go about their activity.

So, for example, in your acts of annotation or modification, perhaps you'll introduce alternate routes for your peer to take, encouraging their diversions into peripheral or secondary spaces, such as those they've named in their itemized itinerary. You might decide to add in interruptions or moments of pause to their outing. For instance, proposing that your peer carry out a brief, immersive sonic experience, writing in something like, "Before entering the grocery store, please sit in your car for five minutes listening to the attached song." Perhaps you'll direct your peer to search an outdoor site for a certain material or collect an object of a certain size. Or maybe read quietly a text that you deem is relevant to a specific location that they're travelling through. Alternatively, you might opt to be quite subtle in your speculative itinerary writing. So for instance, you might simply assign a calming playlist for your peer's head-clearing walk. Or you might instruct them to carry a specific object in their pocket as they grocery shop. But whatever your approach, when you feel that the itinerary's thickened enough or modified to your liking, then send this edited, annotated document back to your partner.

A note is that it's important that you send this to them at least a day before they're meant to carry out their essential activity so that your peer can schedule in more time to carry out the modified trajectory that you've designed for them.

Step 04: Conduct your Speculative Itinerary.

The duration of this task will vary depending on the original scope of the central activity that you've offered to your peer for alteration, as well as the volume of the alterations that your peer has made on that activity.

Bring the speculative itinerary that has been designed for you by your peer as you set out on your essential activity. Use their itinerary as a guide as you embark on your outing. As you go, you'll start to make decisions about whether you will adhere to or pass by the altered itinerary that your peer has made for you. You should also feel free to improvise on their written instructions or to pursue unexpected tangents that might arise out of your tweaked, logistical choreographies. When it's possible in your outing, try to record video or audio of moment that you're encounter, as you carry out the tasks on your itinerary. So for example, if there's a task for you to collect an object, then take a moment to make a short video on your phone of that object or record yourself describing something that your peer asked you to witness... [voice fades out]

[Music fades in]

Neven singing: *Study is talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing and suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of a speculative practice.* (a quote from *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, published by Minor Compositions in 2013).

Were there any thought processes set in motion by your peer's alterations?

Were there unexpected encounters on your route that altered knowledge of a specific space or object?

Were there any reactions that you witnessed from bystanders or unforeseen characters who came into and inflected the activity?

Was the stated goal of the errand still able to be completed, and was its outcome enhanced or hindered by your peer's altered itinerary design?

The thing to do with a recording of yourself reflecting on these questions is to send it back to your peer along with any media that you may have recorded during the itinerary informing them about the effects of their itinerary design.

So, with that now published, we can turn our attention back to the Dark Matter Playgroup, and check-in with them in this final section of Vibe Check, to see how they fared, and what came of their initial playtest. The keen and capable group that they are, have taken it on with great generosity and imagination and sent along a bunch of recordings as well as scripts and scores, that I've taken the liberty to sort of fold together and re-inscribe here into a radio format, making an edit that I hope the group and I will continue to modify, and perhaps build from. So, we go and encounter Bicky, who's doing some -- -- some speculative grocery shopping here at the Metro.

Bicky Marquez: This experiment will start with the basics. Let's find fresh bread. As you can see here, there is nothing fresh yet. So there is nothing to smell, actually. I can't find anything that can -- -- let me know if -- -- the product I'm finding or I'm buying is completely fresh. But I will -- I think I will just choose a random thing. Let's say, a plain bagel. This is disappointing because I can't actually -- -- perceive the molecules that this kind of bread are releasing when they are fresh. So the next step is to find something of another colour.

Dorothea Paas: I dress for time travel. I imagine a line connecting me from my starting point to my destination, the small park. I consider this line to be the radius of a circle, and the small park is right at the centre of that circle. I think about what might have lived inside this circle 300 years ago, 3000 years ago, 300,000 years ago. I do this through research and fabulation, some irreducible combination of both. I leave through the North door. I get in the car and drive it down the gravel road towards Highway 2. I turn left onto the highway. I fill my car with Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne." I listen as I drive through the rain. I consider this car to be a mobile atmosphere. Something material enough to coat my clothing, stick to my skin even after I will exit it.

[Music]

Bicky: So, let's say I want to add some lemons to it. As you can see here, lemons are like kind of rounded structures, right? They are not perfectly rounded, but that's the point... that's the -- they don't need to be. Otherwise, -- -- we wouldn't have multiplicity in the world. And -- so the weakest and the strongest wouldn't be possible, right? So -- -- we'll be like a boring planet with same structures, with no complexity. So, if we are talking about the strongest and the weakest, let's choose tomato, which is the most rounded tomato that I can find which would indicate

that I'm choosing the strongest -- the more, the more perfect structure, if that makes sense. Let's say this is my tomato -- my perfect tomato. So the other ingredients for a tuna salad [voice fades out].

Neven: When walking along Brock Avenue, make a quick detour to Noble Street. Stop in front of the gallery and check out the black and white pictures hanging outside on the fence. Consider making a short story with the images you're perceiving and the environment of the cafe.

Noah Scheinman: It's maybe late summer, and it's still really warm, and the big garage door is pulled up. So there's an easy flow between inside and outside and just this nice kind of -- you know, kind of rhythm sort of... Well, it's actually more of arhythmic, or kind of movement between people inside and outside. And just people generally feeling a kind of sense of bliss. And there's also just this kind of new appreciation for these kinds of moments. Because this was something that was such a simple pleasure, for so long for most of their previous experience of these kinds of spaces and moments within their life. Now, there's kind of this sort of meta recognition that this is something, that is, the kinds of small pleasures that essentially are kind of incrementally kind of accrete into sort of a kind of a full life. And in fact, as is so often the case, it's these kind of intervals that we kind of build the supposed more kind of grander moments of our life around. And I find that people kind of within the space are kind of feeling that. So -- -- that's very kind of kind of present in the kind of mood, I would say. I would say it's -- -- not a kind of exuberance. It's not sort of ebullient, a kind of overflowing. It's sort of a much more, sort of -- almost a polite kind of processing that is on the one hand social in the sense of people acknowledging this sort of... rediscovered novelty.

Neven: Vibe check, episode two.

Underworld: Life. It's a touch. Everything is golden. Open. Wider. Stumble. Catch. Yeah! (Song: I Exhale [DJ Koze Remix] – Underworld)

Neven: Special thanks to Andy, Noah, Gabe, Bicky, and Dorothea.

Featured Songs:

Leonard Cohen: Suzanne (1967)

Underworld: I Exhale (DJ Koze Remix) (2016)