

Vibe Check

Transcript of “Episode 1: Fictioning Marginalia”

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Neven Lochhead: You're listening to CFRC 101.9 FM, located on the Queen's Campus in the basement of Carruthers Hall and online at cfr.ca. My name is Neven Lochhead. I'm an artist and curator based in Kingston. And welcome to the first episode of *Vibe Check*. This is a four-part radio art series that is being produced in relation to a solo video exhibition of mine called, *From the vibe out*, at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. I'm so grateful to Dinah Jansen who agreed to and encouraged this idea I had to produce some kind of “radio-fied” version of that currently closed exhibition, that we could air on the CFRC airwaves over the next couple of months. I'm not really quite sure what a radio version of an exhibition is or could be. So I'll say that partly this will be some kind of experiment in navigating an act of translation or transposition between art forms or art contexts. The first strategy that I'd like to try today will be to extend the sort of spatial poetics, or the density of the viewing experience of the installation, into musical formats and sonic arrangements. So you'll hear a lot of that today, through the kind of incessant sound tracking and layering that I've composed underneath and over top of the spoken content for today's episode. That spoken content for today is a bit strange in that it's basically an interview with myself, which was conducted by Dinah Jansen, shortly after the opening of the exhibition in late February. If you can manage to make it through my meandering responses to Dinah's questions, then at the very end of the episode I'll be featuring a recording by a wonderful local artist named Andy Berg, who's part of a group of artists that I'm working with as part of a learning experiment that we're designing together called *Fabricating Vibe*. And so, this recording from Andy is from a workshop that they did called “Calibrate-Your-Gravity.” And it's my hope that we might hear more from that group in future episodes, as that project develops as well. So I'll leave it there for now. And I wish you luck with the episode. Thank you for listening in. And with that, I'll hand it over to my good friend, Dinah.

Dinah Jansen: Hi Neven.

Neven: Hello Dinah. It's great to be back on the air.

Dinah: It's great to have you back on the air. And folks, we are talking with this fabulous CFRC alumnus about his new exhibition that is happening at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, over the next couple of months. And we've got a lot to talk about with this exhibition. Neven, but before we get into all of the fun things that we're going to learn about from you today regarding your exhibition, can you remind our listeners, maybe, about your time at CFRC back in the day. Some of our listeners might remember who you are from our airwaves.

Neven: Well, I appreciate the opportunity to revisit those years. I guess it would have been 2009 to 2013. I was involved in the station in a number of different ways over that period of my

undergrad. Started out as a volunteer and actually had the chance to be Music Programming Manager in my second year of school, and revisited that role again in my fourth year. Yeah, I think about that time with a lot of fondness! I mean, I grew up in Kingston and I remember the feeling of being introduced to CFRC and the community, as kind of unlocking Kingston for me in a whole new way. And I came to realize how much -- How many different communities pass through that basement. You know, artistic communities, for sure. Music communities. Also, academics. A lot of the activist community Kingston was involved with programming and things there. So it was -- It was so transformative for me. It really defined my time at Queen's. And I later realized how much I was learning, in that time, also about curating -- And we'll probably get to that later. But the role of being a programming manager called upon me to really think about curatorial practice and engagements with publics and just sensibilities, like how to produce the appropriate flow in a schedule, really influenced some of my more recent curatorial projects, where I'm looking at exhibition making through a kind of time-based lens and bleeding different media together and things like that. So, yes. That's a bit of a long answer, but I just -- I was so fond of CFRC and we were just reminiscing about you having a show back then called *Primordial Soup* and being one of those veterans who welcomed me in and made me feel comfortable and lucky to be working there -- So, yeah. That's my flashback.

Dinah: Well, for listeners out there who may not remember my show from back in the day, *Primordial Soup* too. When I retired my show and went on a temporary hiatus, I was finishing my doctorate at the time and had obvious things to take care of at the university in terms of -- As well as student governance and my teaching responsibilities at the time too. So I went on hiatus. And as I'm walking out the door, Neven was the last person I saw at the station when I was -- On that very sad day. And he gave me a very kind thank you card, which I still have. So it's a real pleasure being able to welcome Neven back to our airwaves folks. A real treat for me. And I hope it's a real treat for our listeners too.

Neven: They must be tearing up at this point.

Dinah: [Laughter] I feel great. I'm just -- Yes, I'm so happy. So, Neven, let's hear a little bit now about your work. You touched on it, even just in your last response there. Can you share a little bit about your artistic background? The work that you've been doing in your past residencies and installations. And even your teaching as an artist. Let's hear more about what you've been doing since your time at CFRC.

Neven: Since I walked out the door.

Dinah: Since you left.

Neven: Yes. Well, really it was during that four-year period at CFRC when I really started to engage with, or see myself as an artist. Another kind of local connection I want to name is the Artel Collective, where I lived during that period as well. Which was a kind of gallery, also a house for artists in Kingston to collectively operate this programming entity. But, you know, in that period I was doing an English degree and I was making these performances and videos on the side and had professors who were encouraging me to apply to art school. And I did that in my fourth year. I ended up going to Syracuse University, in a sort of small MFA program in video

art, kind of retro word. But it was very specifically focused on time-based media. And the teaching component down there was mostly TAing and running sort of crit environments with undergrads and things. I was lucky to get a job at – SAW Video in Ottawa, which is an artist-run centre, a longstanding one. It's been around for almost 40 years now. And found myself in a kind of curatorial position. Yeah. Again, where I was kind of a director of programming, like I was at CFRC. Like many artists who find themselves in curatorial positions, it's kind of -- It can be kind of difficult to separate out your artistic practice from your curatorial practice or to like not have them contaminate each other too much. But gradually I figured it out, and I was involved in so many interesting projects at SAW, the main one being the establishing and operating of its new venue called Knot Project Space.

Dinah: So what brought you back to Kingston?

Neven: Well, I left -- I left the job in early 2020. And I had some, you know, overseas projects and other things. But the pandemic hit. And I have family here and I just sort of moved back to have some stability in those early -- Those early months. And I ended up enrolling in the PhD program at Queen's in the Screen Cultures and Curatorial Studies program. And so that's the reason I'm sticking around now. Is that I have -- I have a position there and I'm again being able to do some TAing and working with students and so --

Dinah: And maybe we'll entice you back to the airwaves.

Neven: I know! I was going to have a sub-meeting with you about how do I get on the -- How do I get back on the air? [Laughter]

Dinah: Come to me!

[Laughter]

Dinah: Well, congratulations to you on returning to Queens University and entering into your PhD program. That's wonderful news for Queen's University and our community too. So, okay. And you're doing some other really great stuff right here at the university as well. You have an exhibition underway now at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, entitled *From the vibe out*. So Neven, let's learn about the new exhibition. And from the Agnes's description online, if I may check it out here, I understand that *From the vibe out* brings together your language propelled approach to the moving image, with your curatorial space making practice. A project that summons a semi-fictional, artist-led research Institute, as interlocutor. So Neven, in plain terms, break it down for us. What are you exhibiting at the Agnes? And what does it all mean? Boom!

[Laughter]

Neven: I could -- I could try - You know, primarily I'd say this show is -- It's a solo exhibition of some work that I've made over the past eight months. So at a basic level, there is video work. It's sort of dominated by these two large vertical projection screens that are the identical size of the doors to the room. So they kind of have this appearance of being cut out of the wall or otherwise being blockades to be put back into the wall. There's also some print works. There's sound components, speakers that are embedded in these objects that are kind of resonating

from inside the image. And some text works on the reverse panel of these screens. That's a kind of basic, what it is. I mean, what it also is, is, you know -- It's work that was made during a pandemic. And I feel like that's important to point out that this isn't a kind of project that was carried over from the before times. It was me revisiting an artistic practice in this period where like the art world, as we know it, was really upended and paused. And the relationship to publics was changed, and things like that. So I'd say that I really opened myself up to, okay, this is a destabilizing moment. How can I make a work that has traction in this time? And so it's very much an experiment with this context. But as you also pointed out it -- All of that gets wrapped in this semi-fictional frame of this Institute. And we could get into that. I think that that was, in some way -- Yeah, a response to what I was just saying about how do you produce traction for your work? Or how do you kind of -- How does your work land somewhere, right now? And as I was working, you know, I was making a solo exhibition work and working on these kinds of self-contained artworks. And I was kind of not getting excited by that. And I thought, this is not really pivoting enough in response to this moment. And, yeah. I kind of started to [Laughs] hallucinate this fictional institute that was based in Kingston. I was writing, I was doing a bunch of text experiments, writing with the voice of this institute. And that was producing a kind of more interesting dynamic for me, in that, this entity was demanding to institute itself through the work. It wanted to kind of emerge. And it was applying pressure to me, in the making and kind of saying, this is -- We want to carry this kind of emphasis. Or we want to have a really specific focus on Kingston and things like that -- So, it just became a kind of helpful tool for me to tether the work to some kind of -- Some kind of sense of traction. I hope it's making some sense.

Dinah: This really fascinating. I love how multi-tiered or multi-layered -- Maybe tiered is the wrong word. It sounds a little too structural, I guess -- But multilayered, anyway, the motif that's happening here. But also I think that the media that you're using -- You use several different kinds of media to --

Neven: Yeah, absolutely. So I could talk to that. I mean, I think that that's important because, I should also say that, you know, when you go to the show, you're confronted with a lot of paper. Like it's a digital work, but there's this stream of documents that you are confronted with on the screens. And this was kind of my response to this fictional institute wanting to assert itself. So, I thought, what are some tools that I can use to do that? And I had just, as I said, moved back from Ottawa. And I had this kind of archive of notes and meeting minutes and PDFs that were the kind of grey literature or the kind of marginalia of an actual space making project that I was engaging in, in Ottawa. And I started to think of these in the same way of how, you know, in climate science we have these data points that we can locate in the now. And how these data points or these trends, in the present, can infer a kind of image of where we might be in 10 years, 50 years from now. So this kind of -- I don't know if it's deduction or inference or something. But using a kind of set of coordinates to produce an image of some kind of future state. Or in this case, a kind of future institute. And so I started working with these documents. And I didn't just scan and reproduce them. I altered them. I kind of would take PDFs and perform a kind of grangerization -- a thickening of these documents. And through that, I started to see this institute forming. Through how they were making these documents, you know?

Dinah: Yeah. That totally makes sense! Yes. Okay. So I'm kind of curious then if we can -- If we can explore a little more about the media. So your -- Your work is drawing on like text on screen with moving images. There's some minimalist music involved.

Neven: Right.

Dinah: Lots of colour. How do your media forms convey ideas and messages in the way that you want them to? In ways that other media cannot, for example, like a painting.

Neven: Yes. I wish I could paint...

Dinah: Maybe this is like the kernel, like, what does it all mean? What is art, kind of stuff, right? But why did you choose -- What is it -- What is it about the media that you use that conveys messages that other media cannot, at least for you?

Neven: I wonder if I know exactly how to answer that. I mean, you mentioned the minimal music thing and it makes me think of how, you know, I make work for a gallery context often. And work with time-based media for a gallery context. And that situation of a gallery, it has a very specific type of viewership in it. You don't know when a viewer will enter the work. You don't know if they are even there to see your work. They might be passing through to look at the Rembrandts or whatever.

Dinah: Yeah. As some people at the Agnes do. [Laughter]

Neven: Yeah. As they should. So I've always thought of it as a challenge actually, for time-based work. And at the same time, I am sort of not a fan of seeing cinematic style works in a gallery, where you have to sit down for 45 minutes or something to take it all in. Or see the second half first and then see the first half later. So this can be challenging. It can also be liberating. You then don't have to worry about your work having a beginning, a middle or an end. You have to kind of produce strategies in the work that will win the attention of that viewer and sort of compel them to commit to the work. That is really the starting point for me, when we talk about these other strategies of like minimal music or using text. I *want* to produce that commitment. And so I want people to encounter the work, be addressed by the work and to be kind of pulled into it. And also to feel like that there is some kind of system happening. That if they spend time with, they could sort of figure out that system. So I think that's my connection to the minimal music. Is, how it's different from kind of ambience in that -- We do have a sense that there's some kind of compositional strategy happening here. Like I think of the work of Julius Eastman specifically. A kind of more militant form of minimalism, that encourages -- Encourages a form of committed listening, or committed viewing, things like that.

[Music]

Dinah: I'd like to learn a little bit more too, because we've talked about the text, as well, that appears in this work. Do you -- Are you -- What kinds of -- What text are you using? You don't have to give it all away to us, but are you writing specific like prose or poetry and then adding it

in? Or are you selecting meaningful passages from Moby Dick or something? [Laughter] What is the text that you're using?

Neven: It definitely varies from project to project.

Dinah: Okay. Is it your own creative work or are you using, or modifying the work of poets or authors elsewhere? Or you saw some news clips or something?

Neven: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, let's take this project as the one to look at.

Dinah: Okay.

Neven: It's definitely a blend of what you're describing. There are a lot of PDFs in this work that have been rearranged. And titles of works that have, yeah, have been sort of turned inside out or are tripping over in themselves, and things like that. So there is definitely an element of having a relationship to texts which already exist. I became interested in this work specifically, with like the experience of like skimming through a book like this and how that's a form of reading because you pick up the text that is in bold font. And it kind of -- It carries like just the aroma of the concept or like the vibe of what the author is trying to do. And I wanted to try to privilege that type of skimming of -- Or like speed reading a bunch of documents. So that strategy makes me want to write, or rearranged those texts, in a certain way, in that they need to sort of transmit something when they just move across the screen for two seconds. There's also a form of writing in this work of marginalia, like where you have a text and you see the way a reader has thickened that text with their own private notes, or they put a heart somewhere or a star. And I became interested in that too. Like leaving this trace of the imagined institute and portray something about them as a thinking body, where there's kind of thought at work in the archive -- In the imagined archive, and things like that. But you know, unlike other projects that would require completely different -- [voice fades out]

>> Nobody knows what an institution can do, just as nobody knows what a body can do. Only the practice of exhibition-making gives the organization a sense of what it is capable of inventing, of its range, of its reach, its core, its expertise, its strength, its focus, its sense of what is possible, feasible, imaginable, inventible. Kodwo Eshun.

Dinah: The current exhibition too is based -- Like this is work that you've just created within the last year, since the pandemic became an everyday part of our lives. But it also sounds to me that the textual aspects are almost a little bit autobiographical, if I may, because you are a pre-comp, PhD candidate. You are speed reading at the moment and doing a lot of marginalia. And it's going to get weirder and heavier as you move towards your comps too, right? [Laughter] So, was that intentional? Were you thinking about that as you were getting the texts together? Were you like, this is what I do. This is what I'm doing every day.

Neven: I mean, that's a good point to bring up. And another layer to add to that is that, it is drawing from an actual archive that I produced by doing actual work as a curator. You know, actual work. I mean, I think it has autobiographical elements, but tries very hard to move away from those.

Dinah: Right.

Neven: That's kind of a direction of it. It tries to draw a line with an arrow, away from those sort of specific autobiographical components, to point towards this other entity.

Dinah: Yes.

Neven: But you know, another thing that's great about that is that, it means that making the work is possible because -- Yeah. I think it just kind of folds into work that you're already doing. And I found it a lot easier to sustain that behaviour I was mentioning, because it just sort of required tweaking a certain form of study that I was doing already, and will continue to be doing. And it does create a kind of strange relationship with that work in that, when I'm making notes, I sort of think, oh, maybe this is something for the institute. I'll photocopy this and I'll make another version that has it annotated in their voice or something like that. So it makes it -
- It kind of -- It adds a bit of fun. [Laughs]

Dinah: Amazing. Thank you so much for sharing so much. We appreciate it.

Neven: You're welcome.

Dinah: So, does the exhibition itself have local connections as well? I also understand that part of the theme is -- Part of the theme was, as described on the Agnes's website, it was something about an empty art space in downtown Kingston. Are we thinking of the Artel here? Or an imagined space? So, I had to ask!

Neven: No, of course. Of course. It's explicitly stated there and also in the show that there's this local connection. I think that choice goes back to something I was just saying earlier about the way that the pandemic has upended usual circuits of the art world, you know. I remember early on, in like April, watching webinars and things by curators and people running galleries that -- I mean, while it was really a terrible situation, there was also this feeling of relief that -- I remember one curator, Clementine Delice, she said, "We no longer have the pressure of the motherships, the biennials, the commodification of the museums, the residencies, the auction houses and the art fairs. The galleries are going to have to rethink what they did. It's time to sharpen our pencils." And so I felt that I -- You know, I was in Kingston. And I wanted, as I said, this work to have some kind of traction with where I was and in this moment. And so I made an active choice to tether it to this city. And again, to transform something which I was experiencing, which is this space that I'm in right now. It's an actual space downtown. It's a studio space. It's large enough to host events and exhibitions. So I wanted that to become a condition of the work too. That I could speculate about what this place could be in the future. Maybe this is where the institute would set itself up. So if I was in a different city, I might make that explicit connections to the local place as well. But it's just because I am here that I wanted the work to behave in this very direct relationship with the Kingston. And now that it's open, I feel quite happy about that, because I feel uneasy about inviting people from out of town to come to Kingston and see my show. But I can engage with artists who I know here. And we can look at the work together and extend things from that work. So I think I'm happy that it has been kind of scaled to the situation that we're in. And we'll see how that plays out now, over

the course of the coming months. That's kind of the exciting thing about making that move is that, the show is open, but now there's like more work to do. And it kind of hangs in the balance, whether it does have traction or a kind of projective behaviour as a work. That's up to the coming months, you know?

[Music]

Andy Berg: This is an energy force -- -- coming up out of the ground.

[Background Sounds]

>> Partially buried -- -- partially exposed. It is a strong communicator. It is accessible. And it has nutrient density. It is a rather odd thing.

[Background Sounds]

>> The question is, can this repel exclusionary language? Arrogance, doomsaying, exploitation, or disempowerment?

Neven: For sure.

[Background Sounds]

Andy: If it will function of selfishness -- -- bad lighting -- -- broken hearts -- -- billionaires -- -- fascism?

[Background Sounds]

>> Tried to figure out -- -- the blame game here. Is there a blame game? We talked about it.

Neven: We spent years labouring over --

Andy: We talked about childlike wonder.

Neven: A possible construction of a realizable site.

Andy: Curiosity.

Neven: We tested out video art strategies, group visioning exercises--

Andy: Generosity.

Neven: -- and other celebrated assemblages, in hopes that they would guide our blueprints, grant applications.

Andy: We talked about efficiency.

Neven: We listened back to hours of field recordings and webinars, scrubbing through audio in search of some kind of directional...

Andy and Neven: Possible.

Andy: The unknown.

Neven: Eventually, we started to sense the presence of a constant lateral emotion, a vibe. Which at times seemed as big and as uneven, as the whole world put together.

Andy: We talked about the possibility of shape shifting.

Neven: We all consented to maintain it in us.

Andy: Strengthening -- -- and transforming.

Neven: We took to rotating simple objects in our hands; rocks, lanterns, pipes, all talking together about what we were seeing and not seeing.

Andy: When looking at this- -- spewing out water -- -- is there a blame game?

Neven: Through rounds of observation, our mediations were activity recalibrating.

Andy: Why is there so much orange?

Neven: Our knowledges.

Andy: Under this water?

Neven: Rendering social, once atomized crafts of interpretation.

Andy: What discernment can we bring today upon this scene?

Neven: Our learning is changing the very thing being learned.

Andy: The fact is, that this is sitting on top of an artesian well.

Neven: We spend sleepless nights here.

Andy: And there is a large underground river --

Neven: Transforming.

Andy: -- just above the little hill, where this pipe is.

Neven: These flows into a launch pad, a binaural habitat.

Andy: The water is rich with iron –

Neven: It's not easy to hear the currents of our reality.

Andy: -- and calcium.

Neven: Before it has happened to us.

Andy: That is why you have this beautiful orange colour today.

Neven: But it has become a necessity.

Andy: It is draining out.

Neven: A way for us.

Andy: And it is flowing into a bigger river.

Neven: To ground ourselves materially.

Andy: Which is flowing in.

Neven: In.

Andy: To.

Andy and Neven: The sea.

>> Vibe Check, episode one.

[Music]

> Special thanks to Andy Berg.

Featured Song:

Jackson Veil Panther: The Body Man (2020)