

# DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University  
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## Welcome

*An Institute for Curatorial Inquiry*  
14–19 August 2022

## SPEAKER

Emelie Chhangur, Director and Curator, Agnes Etherington Art Centre

## TRANSCRIPT

**Emelie Chhangur:** Good morning, everyone and welcome to Agnes! For those of you visiting us from further afield, welcome also to Kingston. My name is Emelie Chhangur, I'm an artist and contemporary art curator. I am also the Director and Curator of Agnes.

As we begin this weeklong engagement with each other and this place, I want to acknowledge that we are gathered here on the territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat and home to many members of the Metis nation. Referred to in Treaty 57 as land acquired in the 1783 Crawford purchase, Kingston is a complex place, its histories deeply entangled. Situated at the mouths of many rivers and lakes, including Lake Ontario, makes Kingston subject to the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, a covenant between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Three Fires Confederacy, and other allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources in and around the Great Lakes. Kingston was—and still is—a place of passage and of gathering. And while some of its troubling colonial history as the first capital of the Dominion of Canada may still be stuck in its built structures, I like to think of *culture* here as unbounded, flowing through Kingston, like its many rivers and waterways; *full* of energy like the limestone that underpins so much of its landscape. It is by following this flow and energy that I hope Agnes finds her institutional commitments, that our programming is connected to the land on which we are situated, and that our work here creates the possibilities to collectively imagine new futurities.

Indeed, this Institute for Curatorial Inquiry is a moment for reflection *and* projection. Certainly, at Agnes, it's a threshold moment, which is quite intense, marking the mid-way point before we close our facility at the end of this year.

As we pack our 17 000-object collection in preparation for our move off site this year, we work collaboratively with an architectural team through an iterative and community engaged design process to build Agnes Reimagined. It is through this process that we take advantage of the unprecedented opportunity to rethink museological practices by literally building alternative architectures that restructure them, ensuring our new building won't be container for old systems but a proposition for new ideas.

This Institute for Curatorial Inquiry is propelling this experimentation and prototyping new possibilities as we move through the week and consider alternative modalities of practice, following loose lines of connection that take shape around conversations and that tentacle out into

performances, workshops, read-ins and other, more informal, opportunities that we hope facilitate professional and personal connections that persist well beyond the time frame of this gathering.

We also hope this institute is the beginning of an ongoing and long-term engagement you will have with Agnes: you have been invited here because we want you to be part of our transformation; we deeply respect the change-making leadership your work is manifesting. Your contributions over this week will have an impact on our institutional practice as we stay open to how changes in the field itself inform the kind of architectures required to paradigmatically shift the future of museums. This process-based approach to museum building is no longer about bringing a practice to bear on the institution to transform it from within, a practice I used to call in-reach, rather, it is about making the institution itself a practice. In other words, at Agnes, we are proposing that a building is built around an entirely different ethos for new museological practice to emerge from it. Agnes Reimagined is thus a long-term, institutionally engaged project, with architecture as its medium and the curatorial as its methodology.

As we move through the week together, circuitous pathways take us through networks and portals, across geographies and displacements, and inch toward other temporalities and atmospheres that help us erode systems of categorization and separation, transform institutional limitations that hold onto the past and gatekeep the future, and take seriously what really is at stake to ensure the museums of the future are living and breathing entities poised to inhabit the world as it is rightfully changing.

Or, in the SALAD BOWL schema put forth by our artist and curator hosts at the Feminist Art Residency on Friday, as we escape temporarily the confines of the institution proper, not unlike the co-conspiring protagonists, fan and basket, in Chin-In Chen's poem, *recombinant*, that we read later this week: let's challenge the curatorial conventions we have inherited by white supremacist frameworks and advance decolonizing conversations and respectful relations that ensure our work is polyvocal and community-centred!

But, unless we are prepared to let the museum itself rot, it will not be by escaping to a nearby farm that ensures our museums are sites of participatory world-making, an algorithmic remodelling perhaps, a theme that runs through our day on Tuesday. We must also get to the heart of the institution's matter, even if dematerialized, by approaching even our metadata with new curatorial fermentation that breaks down the codes of singularities, re-rooting new growth in multiplicity. I mean, the farm does teach us something deeply important about diversity and the risks of monoculture. Monocultural museums will eventually just die.

But this is precisely why we need to inhabit, or perhaps re-inhabit, the complexities of inherited legacies through, for instance the inter-dimensionality of Wednesday's propositions, positing different lineages that thrive far away from the linear. From accounting for objects that have been displaced and/or lost to effectively working to account for inherited inequities in dedicated space, funding and human resources that structurally privilege certain styles, genres, systems of beauty and even artists from one locality over another, as museum workers, we might emerge, poised to stay in an *Exit Through the Back Door Laughing*. Though like the hand processed eco film currently

cooking up on Agnes's front lawn, new kinds of images might emerge or not. This is a risk one assumes when one takes experimentation seriously.

It is not by accident that today begins *Along the Way*, in medias res, so to speak, to ground us in methodologies of land-based creative processes and reciprocal collaboration, activated by re-traveling, re-connecting, and re-telling and nurtured by mossy kinds of relations.

From this point of view, even the artist's studio becomes an important site of multi-generational love, and materials become mediums channelling the land. Thinking along a continuum, we speculate on how ongoing collection care can be a loving undoing and critically reflect on what it means to have artworks become part of an art museum. Fresh air, after all, leads to rich dreams! Maybe even transgressive ones that work upon the ego of the art museum itself.

And so, it is radical care that guides our approach to being responsible arts workers through a manifesto and call to action that unfolds and underscores our collective work throughout the duration of this institute.

To return to architecture for a moment and the work of Agnes Reimagined, which is also a kind of exit as much as it is also a return. I have been wondering how to create, from the ground up, a yes institution, no longer beholden to outmoded rules which do not serve the social, pedagogical and civic function of a changing museum, especially one that cares about other matters other than itself. These concerns come into focus on Thursday when we turn our attention to indeterminacy and emergent processes that put pressure on institutional practices and new curatorial pedagogies: new kinds of dreaming abound!

How can we move away from a reliance on default excuses like our "hands are tied" or "we would love to but it's impossible because of security requirements" or even feeling beholden to old protocols that are incommensurable with the communities we seek to engage? For this to happen, we must consider curating structures, not just artworks or themes. It means radically rethinking security perimeters! So that they facilitate agency not restriction, of visitors and objects themselves. It means going back to the source and starting again. It means creating spaces of freedom by returning to the vernacular, in our case, for instance, by returning the Etherington House back into its origins as a home and creating a live-in artist residency upstairs and a community facing hub downstairs. In doing so, we hope to make hospitality the guiding institutional ethos of Agnes Reimagined and take up Agnes Etherington's original bequest of her home to Queen's in order to, and I quote "further the cause of art and community." What does that mean in the 21st century? It means creating spaces that are sovereign and autonomous, for instance creating new kinds of spaces for the proper care, ceremony, feeding sounding and dancing of ancestors who reside here at Agnes beyond their wishes. What will this look like and what will these spaces do to our institutional practices? I hope this Institute inquires for the curatorial something beyond representation and begins to work on what the curatorial can do to institute otherwise.

I want to thank our beloved collaborators and partners, whose commitments to transformation we share and over the course of planning this institute, whose engagement we have cherished:

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Thank you and I hope you have a wonderful week everyone!

xo

Emelie Chhangur