



You are going to have real art here too, right?

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Abstract

This paper explores the thresholds surrounding accessibility in artistic practices while reflecting upon the use of oddness as a method to invite speculation. By utilizing my own artistic practice and performative process to analyze and contextualize access and oddities, I begin to question who such art is made for (specifically when considering spaces beyond the gallery and institution) and how such work is experienced. I begin by dwelling on a question asked by my mom during my MFA thesis exhibition (the title question of this paper) as a tipping point in my own practice when considering how methods of oddness and the mildly ridiculous can create spaces for attainable conversations with art.

Keywords: Accessibility, Oddness, Performative Practice

‘You are going to have real art here too, right?’ my mom asked as she walked into the gallery where I recently defended my MFA thesis exhibition. I looked around at the folded and crumpled images, the assemblages of prints, and the various fragments that adorned the walls that disrupt the possibility of completed narratives and responded, ‘this is real art, mom.’ I dismissed the comment in the moment as I assume what she really meant was, ‘where are all the landscapes and portraits?’ But as years passed, I find myself coming back to her question.

This notion of ‘real art’ is not really where my mind wanders when thinking through what she meant. It dwells in the larger discourse of accessibility and inclusivity that was implied—a tipping point between attainable conversations with art versus barriers created through something that was once referred to me as ‘smart art.’ As I continue to make things that exists within gallery walls and speak and write for conferences and journals, I have been asking myself more and more: who cares and who is this intended for? In all honesty there are plenty of people who do care, but there are also plenty more who don’t, and at that time, my mom seemed to be one of them.

I recently participated in a public art conference and during the question period of a panel discussion, an unknown-to-me audience member asked, ‘it’s great that we talk about these conversations here, but how do we do this elsewhere?’ For me this question implied, how do we simultaneously acknowledge the important role of galleries, conferences, and institutions while also moving beyond these privileged spaces too? Now, there are plenty of artist, curators, and thinkers who do just this. They have cracked an ever changing and fluid threshold of accessibility, inclusivity, and impact, making their ideas linger in the minds of others. Bubbling up to the surface beyond the initial experience and encounter and oftentimes, taking their work outside the gallery too. In these instances, change perhaps is made: change in the way as to how one may think and act, change in what one will do. Now, revisiting the title question of this paper, there was (and is) an ongoing need for me to dwell on this tipping point in my own practice further. A need that isn’t solved just once and repeated, but one that will be in constant flux, requiring an urgency of care and attention, again and again.

As a faculty member in studio art who assigns readings for discussion and reflection, I tell my students that when they read theory not to fret over the difficulties—often found in the rabbit holes of references and complex language—they will inevitably face when reading through the pages. They may fall back on the false realization that they are not ‘smart enough’ to

understand what is being shared, but in actuality, the texts are often written in a way that denies a level of accessibility—and that is the author’s fault, not theirs. It is then my responsibility to not only teach how to decode and be critical of these texts but also to ensure that to critique is not dependent on one’s ability to first decode.

Thinking back to my mom’s question I realized this expectation of decoding was true of me too. I needed to do better. I needed to better reflect upon and prioritize the tipping *points* (not one point but many) of access within my practice. This is to say that it is not enough for me to only consider how my work is created for and propelled by the gallery and institutions I am privileged to take part in (as an artist and educator) but rather placing the emphasis on how my practice in its wholeness should be an open-ended invitation to the larger community and in between spaces that the gallery and institutions are a small part of.

I would like to share a highlight of my artistic career—a moment of unexpected, contemplative, and speculative conversation that occurred in one of these in between spaces (a sidewalk in a suburban area). This highlight was not an exhibition, a grant, or anything I was often taught to glorify. It wasn’t a piece of artwork. It was a text, or more specifically, a response to it. The text I wrote was an analysis on my performative process of learning to care for, to care about, and to converse with other-than-human things (using a stone as an example) in my art practice. And the response to it was from—you guessed it—my mom. She read it and told me she loved it, as a mother would. But this highlight comes when she went for a walk later that day and how my performative process lingered with her and was unexpectedly practiced by my mom. As she travelled down the sidewalk not far from her home, she kicked a stone. She stopped. She looked at the stone. She said hello! She talked with the stone, thinking where it may have been before, what it was doing, and where it may go next. As she continued her walk these thoughts followed along with other conversations too. When she got home, she called to tell me about the things she noticed, the things she said, and the things shared between her and these stones.



Figure 1: In slowness a nameless space is seen, 2021

In my practice I go for a lot of walks. I dress up in home-made camouflage, looking like a comical but reflective version of my surroundings. I move slow. I try at once to be noticed and unnoticed. I kick big stones along long walks. I pick up stones to carry them in my pockets. I drag intaglio plates behind me to record ‘conversations.’ I find sit spots where I try to outwait the birds, so they no longer see me as a threat and their alarm calls return to song. And sometimes people stare. I remember when I was kicking a large stone on a walk in Kamloops, British Columbia, a couple crossed the street to avoid me, later returning to the same side I was on, looking at me in disbelief. Sometimes being odd and the performative act of process makes people turn away. And that is okay. But other times, people ask questions: ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Why are you doing it?’, and a pleasant conversation usually follows. In these instances of oddness, I am presenting myself in a manner that invites such small talk, so I prepare and participate. These performative processes are not meant to be capital ‘A’ art, rather they are an invitation to converse upon a walk, a gesture towards the tipping point of accessibility through an instance of oddness.



Figure 2: Water camouflage and conversation, 2021

One pinnacle of a public run-in with my work wasn't even a conversation intended for me but one that was overheard. I made a series of signs to be displayed outdoors during the all-night art festival *CB Nuit* in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador. I noticed a young child running between each sign and reading them aloud to his dad. His dad would ask, 'what is this one telling you?' The child replied, 'I think it is telling me to look and listen! But what do I look for, dad?' The dad responded, 'well, what is around us?' And they looked together with exaggerated gestures of hands sitting upon their brow. I assume they spied something as they seemed to stop and point. Then the child says, 'but what do I listen for?' Cupped ears and turning heads soon followed as they searched for sounds that were near. It is these instances that I cherish. Moments when I feel my work isn't trying to be 'smart' but rather providing opportunities for conversations that a young child and their father can take part in. Accessible moments of observation, slowness, and playful conversation.

When thinking about the process of viewing, participating, and becoming playful in a work about slowness I reflect on another artist's practice, Meghan Price. Particularly, her series, *Watching Rocks*, and even more specifically, a Fogo Island boulder I had the pleasure of tuning in to in June of 2018 (Price 2018). Here, I recall opening my laptop and instead of mindlessly watching a favourite sitcom, I live-streamed a boulder for hours on end. *Nothing* happened. A bird coming in and out of view, or the light conditions changing, but all in all there was stillness

and a sense of permanence. In a *CBC Spark with Nora Young* interview with Price (2017) titled *Never mind Netflix, watch this live stream of a rock instead*, listeners learn that part of what Price is thinking through during these seemingly silly, boring, comical, unchanging, unusual and static livestreams is the realization that the human concept of time becomes so insignificant in comparison to the geological time we are now asked to binge-watch, gazing into only a fraction of a slice of what that geological time may be. Within Price's project, she utilizes a tongue-and-cheek approach (a gesture towards the invitational space of oddness) to call attention to a human's anthropocentric view of time. In this work there is a tip-of-the-hat towards things that are odd enough to be noticed, but familiar enough to be approached and encountered.

By emphasizing the inherent non-sensical-ness of dressing up in home-made camouflage to look like my surroundings (so the surrounding forgets you are ever there, while simultaneously yelling out, 'here I am'), or creating signs that are read aloud and shared with one's father in mundane but potent (to me) ways, I am in a constant state of trying to create work that my mom, a child, and the gallery, conference, journal, and institution can all enter. This prioritizes my own attempts to ensure the tipping point of access exists in many forms and heights (for human and other-than human alike). As Price invites a boulder into the realm of 'reality-tv-stardom,' and I safety pin cut-out leaves to my forest camo to indicate that fall is upon me too, there is a reaching towards the mildly ridiculous to invite conversation. In this sense, this paper is both about the thresholds surrounding accessibility while also thinking towards the threshold of oddness as a method to invite speculation: to make ideas linger, to stop my mom in her tracks so she can say hello to a stone upon a walk.



Figure 3: Fall camouflage (safety-pinned leaves), 2021

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About the Author

Andrew Testa (he/him) is an artist, writer and educator working through printmaking, drawing, books, words, sounds, installations and collaborations, currently living and working in Ktaqmkuk, also known as Newfoundland. He has been awarded ArtsNL, SSHRC, a VP Grenfell Research Grant, and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation grant for his research, has exhibited nationally and internationally, and has participated in residencies and conferences across Canada. Testa recently shared his work in solo exhibitions at The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery in St. John’s, NL, and at SNAP artist-run-centre in Edmonton, AB. His recent collaboration, *Printshop in a Box*, has been awarded a Canada Council for the Arts Grant, and he has participated in collaborative residencies exploring community knowledge sharing at Union House Arts, Port Union, NL, with an upcoming stay at CASA, Lethbridge, AB. Testa is the Chair of the Board of Directors at St. Michael’s Printshop and is an Assistant Professor in printmaking at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Testa has additionally taught at Thomson Rivers University in Kamloops, BC, and at Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie, ON. He completed his BFA and MFA at York University in Toronto, ON.