

Review of *Disgruntled: Other Art*, an e-book on grunt gallery's 30th anniversary

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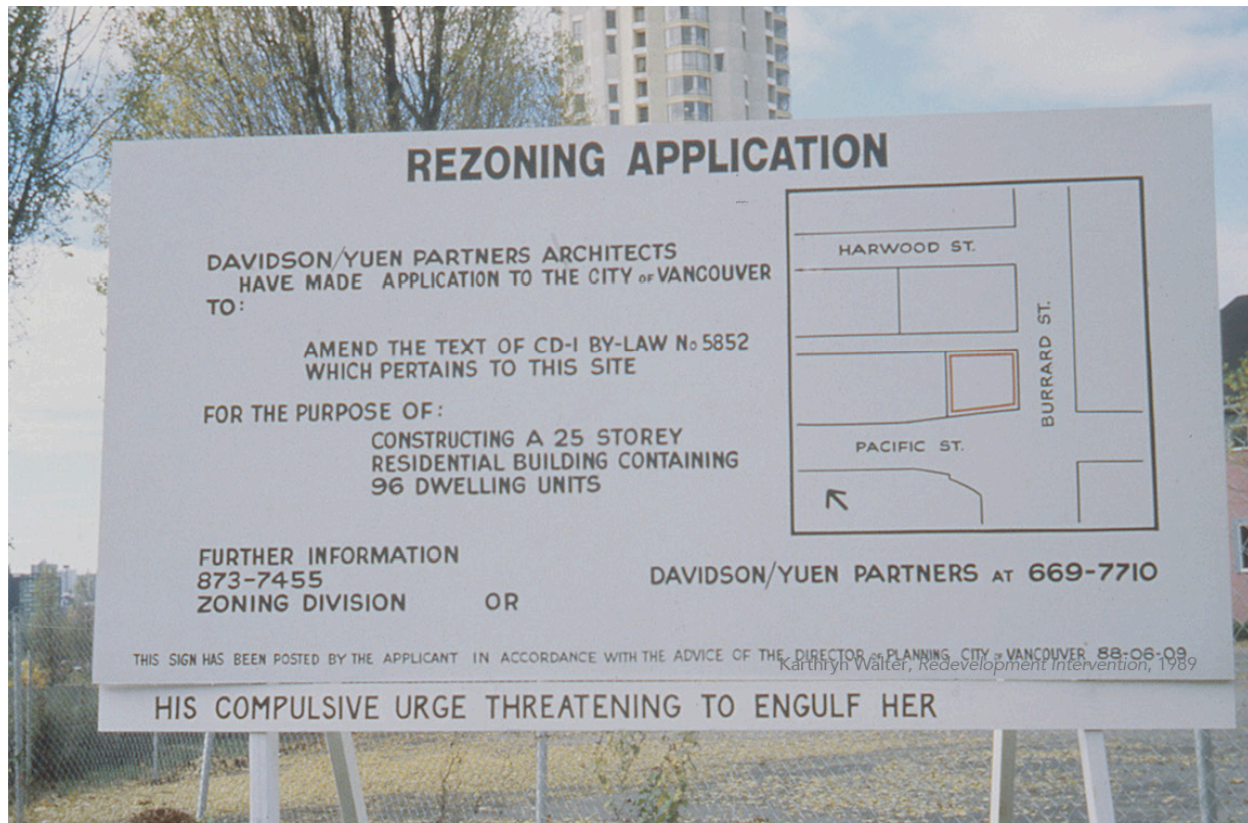
Grunt gallery, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2014, is an artist-run centre known for its astute innovation, its keen anticipation of the shifting currents of contemporary Canadian art practice, a fierce commitment to inclusion of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, and its deep roots in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood and Vancouver's arts community. Grunt has remained at the leading edge of Canada's distinctive artist-run centre culture, providing support for emerging and established artists and facilitating an environment that encourages artists to take risks in their work. It is particularly well known as a centre for Vancouver's vibrant performance art scene, although the gallery has exhibited a remarkable range of artistic mediums over the years from painting and sculpture to ceramics, mixed-media installations and media art. In recognition of their 30th anniversary, grunt released its first eBook, *Disgruntled: Other Art*. Available as a free download, *Disgruntled* is a selection of thirty publications, ten from each decade of its history. This remarkable compilation serves as social memory, oral history, artist reflection, and art criticism. Chosen by Hillary Wood, a founding member of grunt, and Audrey MacDonald, a new volunteer who works in grunt's archives, these selected publications reveal the rich history and dynamic social fabric of the gallery. Through interviews, critical essays, storytelling and poetry, this eBook demonstrates the diverse ways in which artists and scholars talk about art. In this review I analyze several themes that emerge throughout the writings in *Disgruntled* and that reflect the ways in which grunt gallery has made an impact on Canadian contemporary art practice and artist-run centre culture.

Community engagement, inclusion, innovation, cutting edge artistic practice, and political critiques are predominant themes throughout *Disgruntled* and are hallmark characteristics of the exhibition practices and curatorial decisions at the gallery. Many scholars and artists remark upon the open and welcoming community feel of grunt—a characteristic deeply woven into the fabric of

the space, which began in the storefront/apartment of one its founding members and manifested in the centrality of the kitchen at both its original and current locations. Grunt gallery members fondly recall how artists would gather around the kitchen table drinking coffee and talking art and social politics for hours. Although the kitchen space at grunt was remodeled into a media lab in 2011, this practice of dialogue around the kitchen is so central to the ethos of the gallery that the media lab was named "gruntKitchen" and the series of events organized to celebrate their 30th anniversary was titled "Brew". Grunt also commissioned artist Julia Feyrer to explore the archives in relation to the grunt kitchen to create an installation and performance piece entitled *Kitchen*. Audrey MacDonald, an editor of *Disgruntled*, succinctly captures the feel of the gallery: "grunt is an inviting and unpretentious space that isn't afraid to ruffle feathers." (15)

Organized chronologically, *Disgruntled* provides a useful timeline of key events throughout their history as a frame to the writings featured within each section. That these writings include interviews with artists as well as critical essays is particularly valuable given that the knowledge and perspectives reflected in the artist interviews is often not accessible in other sources. The elegant design by eBook intern, Renee Mok, captures a rich visual record through the display of photographic documentation from each exhibit analyzed in the selected writings. The selected writings have previously only been available in grunt's physical archives and are being made available for the first time in a digital format in *Disgruntled*. At the end of each text there are short biographies of the artists featured, including updates on the artists' careers and practices. *Disgruntled* demonstrates a chronological shift in the type of work exhibited at grunt—notably the strong presence of performance art and media work beginning in the decade 1994–2004. Yet the art work in the gallery's earlier years also resonates across time, speaking to issues that continue to haunt Vancouver, namely gentrification and redevelopment. Kathryn Walter's *Redevelopment Intervention* project, enacted in 1988 and exhibited in 1989, is as timely today as it was in 1988 as persistent

condo development continues to alter the landscape of Mount Pleasant in Vancouver. Writing in 1989, founding member and director Glenn Alteen remarked, "The work appropriated phrases expressing male dominance from Harlequin Romance novels and placed them under development permit signs in the streets of Vancouver.



Kathryn Walters, *Redevelopment Intervention: His Compulsive Urge Threatened to Engulf Her*, Mixed Media, 1989

Although subtle, the interventions were very effective in raising consciousness of underlying nuances of dominance connected with redevelopment. ...Vancouver is in the midst of a redevelopment boom that affects all of us. For lower income people, including artists, it often means eviction and dislocation." (39) The inclusion of this writing about Walter's *Redevelopment Intervention* is a timely reminder of the way in which the lives of artists and artist-run centres have been impacted by economic forces shaping urban development. Having Walter's artwork included in *Disgruntled* is valuable for artists and scholars who want to understand how artists have responded to and resisted the shifting urban landscapes and capitalist commercial expansion around them.

Artist and scholar Alexander Provan argues that artist-run institutions are an important component within civil society, declaring that "if artist-run institutions are to matter, they must endeavor to speak as, and to, citizens." (Provan 2013:117) Grunt has always addressed social issues related to inclusion and belonging, particularly with regard to its support of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds whose work was not being exhibited in other Vancouver venues. Whether through exhibition of the delicate, minimalist sculptures of Outsider artist Louis Gunnlaugson, whose art work director Glenn Alteen discovered in an East Vancouver convenience store, or the paintings and sculptural installations of Adrian Stimson in *Holding Our Breath* exploring the role of First Nations, Inuit and Métis soldiers in the Canadian military, or Carel Moiseiwitsch's drawings, photographs, journals and found objects of everyday life in Occupied Palestine, *Disgruntled* showcases the various ways in which the curatorial decisions of grunt gallery have encouraged and facilitated dialogue around Canadian citizenship, politics and global connections. Grunt has certainly fostered spaces for intercultural dialogue as they have always been inclusive of feminist, Outsider, First Nations, queer, and immigrant artists. Hillary Wood articulates this core tenet in her introduction, acknowledging, "grunt didn't start with a particular goal in mind, but with a single idea to support marginalized artists whose work didn't quite fit into established galleries." (10)

Grunt gallery was one of the first venues in Vancouver to consistently exhibit contemporary First Nations artists, and a number of prominent artists—Lawrence Paul Yuxwelputun, Rebecca Belmore, Nadia Myre, Dana Claxton, and Sonny Assu, just to name a few—as well as numerous emerging artists have exhibited within the gallery. One of the most highly successful recent exhibits of contemporary First Nations art, *Beat Nation*, began as an online exhibit commissioned in 2008 by grunt and co-curated by Skeena Reece and Tania Willard. *Beat Nation* was then expanded and installed in the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2012, co-curated by Tania Willard and Kathleen Ritter, and toured at national art gallery and museum venues across Canada between 2012 and 2014. This is just

one of many examples of grunt gallery's commitment to supporting First Nations artists and curators. This is also evident in *Disgruntled*, as seven out of the ten selections for the years 2004-2014 feature First Nations artists and scholars. The prominence of First Nations art within this decade is no surprise given the centrality of First Nations art to grunt's exhibition calendar as well as the presence of First Nations and Métis curators-in-residence during this time. That grunt has nurtured and supported the careers of First Nations curators such as Daina Warren, Tania Willard, Peter Morin and Skeena Reece, who have gone on to serve in curatorial capacities at other Canadian art institutions including the National Gallery of Canada, Urban Shaman Gallery, Open Space, and Kamloops Art Gallery, speaks to grunt's determination to see not only their own artist-run centre become more inclusive of First Nations art and voices, but also to make a structural difference in fighting for other Canadian arts institutions to be inclusive of First Nations contemporary art and curatorial practice.

One of the strongest aspects of *Disgruntled* is its exploration of the nature and dimensions of performance art, and in particular its attention to the unique history of First Nations performance art at grunt gallery. Artists' interrogations of the nature of the practice of performance art are immensely valuable here. A highlight for me is the particularly apt and witty poem by artist Paul Wong, entitled "Various Dimensions of Performance Art," which tacks back and forth between the perspective of the performance artist and the audience with lines such as "I didn't get it/Did you understand it?" and "What do you think?/I don't know what happened" and "I'm really a painter/This was my first performance" or "This is my last performance/Never again/I'm glad it's over." I was particularly struck by how this poem captured the evasive efforts to define and articulate the boundaries of the genre of performance art as well as capturing the varying audience attempts at interpretation. I wondered if this poem was composed of lines Paul Wong, a prominent performance and video artist, has overheard throughout his career and in dialogue with his fellow

artists. Wong's poem is visually juxtaposed with photographs and images of various performance art works exhibited over the years at the gallery—a perfect accompaniment given the prominence of performance art at grunt throughout its thirty-year history. In another entry Margaret Dragu also questions the boundaries of performance art, even conducting interviews with fellow artists in an effort to examine the limits of what can be defined as performance art. Dragu asserts, "Performance art is inherently anti-consumer, anti-capitalist, and anti-art market. It is ephemeral and non-product...You cannot sell something that cannot be possessed. This makes performance art the pariah of the art market." (221) This also makes performance art a genre uniquely suited to the artist-run centre, institutions themselves that are non-commercial and outside of the art market.



Margaret Dragu, *Improvisation for X's and O's*, grunt, 1999

Also exploring the boundaries of performance art is Aiyanna Maracle in "Performance Art and the Native Artist: An rEvolutionary Mix?" Maracle was asked by grunt gallery to curate a First Nations performance art series in 1992 and in this essay she recalls, "At the end of the series, in my eyes, the most intriguing aspect was the role that spirit and spirituality played in the creation and presentation of these works. At a number of levels, it was the realization of a new ceremony as performance." (194) She uses the example of Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew's landmark 1992 untitled performance which consisted of three tipi frames with five separate eagle feathers hung on beads suspended within the frames.¹ A plate of mud and ash was inside each tipi frame and the walls of the gallery were covered with blank newsprint. Over a constant drumbeat, Maskegon-Iskwew spoke of Native dispossession while historical imagery of the Cree people was projected onto the walls. He drew representations of ancient cave and hide paintings on the walls and sewed the eagle feathers to his chest, creating what Maracle refers to as "a new ritual of performance of piercing akin to the Sun Dance." (195) This performance ended with Maskegon-Iskwew asking the audience, "Who will work? Who will work?" and those that responded followed him to an alley outside where a moosehide was stretched across a frame and the hide was scraped clean by the audience members. Maracle noted the strong response in the community to this piece, observing, "The reactions it provoked were rather illuminating and more than interesting. They crossed a spectrum from negative to positive, whether those offering opinions had seen the performance or not. There were the Native "traditionalists" who were shocked and offended that "sacred ceremony" should be so profaned in offering it up as performance art." (195) The negotiation of the boundary between ceremony and performance has continued to be a theme in the First Nations performance art work exhibited at grunt gallery, notably in the 1999 performance piece *Ablakela* by Dana Claxton, assisted by peyote singers Verdall Primeaux and Johnny Mike, and an untitled 2003 performance by Skeena Reece in which she smashed a Volcano Woman wooden mask carved by her father. Like

Maskegon-Iskwew's 1992 performance, these two performances intensely affected audience members, instigating dialogue among artists and community members about the challenges of navigating the integration of cultural protocols, Indigenous traditions and ceremonial practice into performance art. I agree with Maracle, who argues that "With the use of performance art by contemporary Native artists, something different, something new is happening and growing. A form, a structure, deeply resonant with how we've always told story, but now with access to much higher-tech tools to create the necessary elements." (202)



Aiyyana Maracle, *Strange Fruit*, 1994.

It is significant that grunt gallery has provided a space to nurture the emergence and expression of First Nations performance art as well as explorations where artists push the limits of what this genre

can and does mean to artists with different cultural identities. *Disgruntled* provides a glimpse into the emergence of these practices and the debates and dialogues occurring in the process, which is an invaluable resource for scholars, art critics, artists and community members.

Thirty years is a long time for an artist-run centre, given the transient atmosphere and shifting economic funding sources for such organizations. Founding member Hillary Wood observes, "The proven persistence and resilience of grunt gallery is a testimony of the strength of its roots in community practice, collaboration, open-mindedness and a genuine concern for the many artists who have come through our doors. Willingness to change and adapt has played no small part." (14) There is a tradition of Canadian artist-run centres marking pivotal anniversaries with books, exhibits, collections and ephemeral archival materials documenting their histories (Abbott 2000; Douglas 2009; Edmonds 2004; Phillips 2014; Wallace 2002). *Disgruntled* is unique among these volumes in that grunt has chosen to look back over its thirty-year history through the lens of selected publications from their archives and to make this available in a digital format for free to any interested reader. This is in keeping with the ethos of grunt gallery, which has sought through various online projects, collaborations with other artist-run institutions and exhibits to "activate the archives" through community practice and artistic intervention. Audrey MacDonald remarks that "These publications, to me, tell the story of intrepid individuals pushing the boundaries of what sorts of topics should or could be on display in a gallery." (15) I couldn't agree more. This remarkable volume contains a vital history of a vibrant artist-run centre that has consistently had its finger on the pulse of cutting-edge contemporary Canadian art practice for thirty years. Anyone interested in Canadian art history, art practice as social engagement, performance art and First Nations art needs to add this eBook to their reading list. That grunt gallery has made this eBook available as a free download speaks to their deep commitment to equal access and community engagement. It is a true gift that grunt has made this rich archive accessible to all of us interested in

the intersections between identity, social issues, activism, innovative artistic practice and Canadian artist-run culture. I can't wait to see what grunt gallery has on the horizon for the next thirty years.

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¹ For a comprehensive look at the life and career of Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew see grunt gallery's online exhibit *Ghostkeeper* at <http://ghostkeeper.gruntarchives.org>

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