



## **“What is this New Moment?” The Art of Urgency in *This Now, More Than Ever***

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### Abstract

#### **“What is this New Moment?” The Art of Urgency in *This Now, More Than Ever***

Since November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the political atmosphere in the West has become pressurized by the American election, Brexit, and Trudeau’s approval of the Trans Mountain pipeline. It is as though events have multiplied with increasing speed, lodging the present between the wake of current politics and questioning what could be next. This presentation, in a focussed study of the exhibition *This Now, More Than Ever* (shown at SFU Galleries in February 2017), attempts to name this present, *this now*, asking with curators Melanie O’Brian and Stephen Collis: *What is this new moment and what is the capacity to mobilize within it?* Understanding that contemporary art houses a range of possibilities, O’Brian and Collis worked quickly to generate a response from the arts community to measure and connect the call to action. As the present moment slants towards a fearsome politics, I suggest this motivation towards an alternative demonstrates the range of expression engendered from what appears as a new political bottom.

### Introduction:

There was a tonal change the morning of November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. This was not because the event of the American election threatened to collapse the otherwise liberal political machine, but instead it symbolically marked the ascendance of right-wing populism after a slow but steady acceleration since September 11<sup>th</sup>, beginning with the creep of increased cultures of surveillance, military invasions into international territory, natural disasters, corporate and governmental threats to the environment, police brutality and ongoing racism, sexism, and

homophobia. The US election results threatened the world with fascism and so things seemed bleak as many alternative voices waited fearfully for something impending. In this paper, I address the wake of the disaster by asking what enables art to face the aftermath? What can be generated while or when we wring our collective hands. This idea is extended by the exhibition *This Now, More than Ever*, installed at SFU Gallery in Vancouver from February-March 2017, (Figure I) organized and curated by Melanie O’Brian and Stephen Collis. In their curatorial statement O’Brian and Collis emphasize the “tilt of the time toward disaster” to ask what else can be contained by the present. Although the term *disaster* tenders a vision of decimation – a feeling of political ‘bottoming out’ that many shared – this post-election period also carried a dynamism that prompted many to action in a variety of ways, suggesting that the bottom can be vitally productive.

*This Now, More than Ever* was part of a current of international and local quick-fire responses to the January 20<sup>th</sup> American presidential inauguration date. Across the US, multiple arts institutions organized the #J20artstrike where several art venues and individual workers across the country shut down in protest or organized accessible alternative community programming. At the College Arts Association Congress in New York last February, I attended a panel discussion organized by Occupy Museums entitled Sense of Emergency, attended by thinkers and workers across the arts to discuss how to target their resistance; there was a series of “woke shops” ran by Seth Kim Cohen of the Chicago Arts Institute; and an art historians march at Trump Towers that took place during the conference, among multiple individual interventions. At the same time, in Vancouver, SFU professor Roxanne Panchasi (a contributor to *This Now, More than Ever*) swiftly organized Un-Auguration day where university and community members gathered in large numbers and shared creative responses, a convergence that

accompanied the Spectres of Fascism Free School (community “teach-ins” across the city running in partial organization from Collis), and this exhibition which hosted an open discussion with participants in lieu of a typical opening event.

The need to unite the community and attend to the moment with urgency lie at the center of these counteractivities and focusses *This Now, More than Ever* in form and content. Artists were invited to participate, and with quick turnaround, submit their pieces by email to be printed digitally. The show went up in the satellite gallery space at the SFU campus in Burnaby, a site now used predominantly as a research space. Works were unframed, untitled or marked, and fixed temporarily to the wall. The works themselves represented this haphazard and temporary state, many speaking specifically to the present by isolating the moment as event. Adrienne Callender’s *9/election* both eerily and playfully uses text to title this period. Urban Subjects, *Bagged Letters* (see Figure II, installation view, fourth from left), photograph the covered letters of the Trump Tower Construction in downtown Vancouver, loosely recalling imagery of the hooded prisoner from Abu Graibh. There was a variety of text-based works: A Marina Roy illustrated letter from Professor John O’Brian to his graduate students explaining a decision to boycott travel to the US (Figure III, installation view, centre). O’Brian writes, “Worms are crawling out of the ground all over America. I prefer not to crawl with them.” Rosemary Heather, a writer for Canadian Art wrote “Nasty”, accompanied by an image of Elizabeth Zvonar’s sculptural collage *The Spectre, The Serpent, The Ghost, The Thief*, 2013) (Figure II, installation view, fifth from left). Trump’s remarks against his opponent (and all women in general) became a timely colloquialism that Heather writes “personifies the idea of an embodied threat.” Finally, in his essay, “In Fascism the nightmare of childhood has come true,” Professor Samir Gandesha recounts the activities of his afternoon on January 20<sup>th</sup> – a charged day that

included reflecting on Adorno's damaged life and reading passages of Marx to the packed audience at Un-Auguration Day – and weaves this day with memories of his grandfather, expelled from Uganda by the dictator Idi Amin. Gandesha clusters the past with the present in his description of “now”:

I crave a drink today because now, as the sun sets, and the darkness comes flooding in, as I feel myself relaxing, the inherent gravity of our own catastrophic *now* begins, slowly to sink in. The edge needs to be caressed.

Yet in a way, this particular *now* is an *Unheimlich* now; it is, at once strange and familiar. These forms of *now* heighten the tone of anxiety, demonstrate the frustration with the political moment, and show the present as something we have already dreamed of and waited for. This *nowness* is poised on the head of a pin, a hill with the steepest incline that drops away.

Some submissions remain future focussed. There is the tongue in cheek nature of Michael Turner's personal ad for one moment, seeking the next:

Personal: Eurasian moment with chronic neo-liberal distention looking to disembody, turn time into space. Of variable means, prone to malaise but never lazy, and a heart – OMG! A heart that is large and getting larger! If you are worldwide, sustainable, intentional and metaphysical, could we meet, start over?

Turner's *Personal* (2017), while double playing the meaning of the term, illustrates the kind of desperate hope that lies in the one who is finally motivated to place the personal ad. Indeed, one must have been looking with futility for some time. This heart this moment seeks has a tall order, it must have the capacity to grow, thus to continue, to push the moment ahead. Even as this moment hovers on that pin, Turner begs for it to find the dynamism it needs to stretch, and thus become a moment with duration, or rather, a moment that endures.

Roxanne Panchasi's piece, *L'avenir ne contiendra que ce que nous y mettrons maintenant* (*The Future will only hold what we put into it now*) (Figure IV) considers this idea

from a different perspective. Panchasi's saturated image of the far-right President of the French National Front, Marine Le Pen, casting a ballot, carries the emblazoned slogan from 1968 that envisions present time as a precarious container. There is a sense of foreboding as Panchasi positions the present on the heels of Trump's election and points it towards the French election. This image of Le Pen voting, imagines the politician appropriating the counter-slogan with delight while voting for herself. There remains the potential of the statement that celebrates action *in the moment*, mixed with a cautionary forewarning in the figure of the ballot box, reminding us that a variety of actions compose the future.

These efforts to distil the now point to a kind of irony in the act of historicizing the present. This is pointed out in Clint Burnham's contribution, "Net-work: So", a stream of consciousness critique written on an iPhone that points to the trend, at the time, in liberal media to mine any existing cultural objects for reasons, predictions, help of any kind in thinking ("resisting") Trump. Burnham describes this need to historicize as an impossible imperative. Among the versions of the present in this show, appears the need to land on the time – to name it as such – however, O'Brian and Collis mitigate this through the ephemeral nature of the works. These digital printouts speak to the present in all its fleeting qualities, easily disposed sheets of paper are then composed together as so many versions of passing time existing at once. The show deemphasizes the materiality of the art, instead creating a gestalt paper house, where the works lean upon another, each to fill the moment out and make it whole before it fades away.

This gesture away from materiality recasts the collective as primary, situating the politics of *This Now, More than Ever* in the commons of the arts community. During the opening week of the show, contributors and gallery guests met in the space for an afternoon of group readings and community dialogue. If understood alongside the efforts of the American #j20artstrike, the

question arises of how, if at all possible, can art provide a space to resist, or to “strike back” as the case may be, understanding that contemporary art and artists effect a wide range of aims that are not limited to speaking back to politics. How does art give expression to the spirit of resistance? In the case of *This Now*, these temporal and temporary works combine in force to demonstrate a counter will. In conversation, Melanie O’Brian reflected that although they did not leave the with a detailed plan for action, as a group they were grateful for the opportunity to assemble, demonstrating that the value of an exhibition such as this lay outside the field of tactics, and instead in the process of bodies gathering to dream them.

Whereas participation is central to political action, in the context of this show, I highlight the gathering of bodies as a public, joined in mutual conative striving, where affect provides the navigating force. My thinking is informed by a Spinozan tradition that defines the body in terms of its capacity to affect and be affected. In the *Ethics* (1677/2000), when material bodies encounter each other, their capacities rise as they combine to form a more powerful whole (Deleuze, 1988, 19). In her book, *Vibrant Matter* (2009), Jane Bennett mobilizes a Spinozist approach from John Dewey, to demonstrate the affective, embodied nature of the political ecosystem. In Bennett’s model, the public becomes a unified group of singular bodies that become bound to each other in the experience of shared harm, or a shared problem (Bennett, 2009, 100). These bodies draw together to form a public when they are aggravated by a problem. It is a provocation that initiates the swarm, as bodies draw close and engage to restore their power. In practice, publics are neither permanent, nor deliberate, but instead multivarious clusters that rise and fall as they gain and lose momentum. Bennett remarks that in this clustering event, all kinds of bodies may join forces, the effects of which need not necessarily be political,

instead only some bodies are actually capable of making the association necessary to translate this clustering into what she terms as a “task force.” (ibid.)

Bennett’s model is useful for thinking of the clustering of publics that rise over timely issues such as the post-Trump aftermath, and help to show these groupings as ranging in duration, with a peak intensity that recedes as the public fades. The question bears, what forms of accumulation may these publics have if, in their temporary states, their primary work is focussed to increase the capacity of the harmed body. Is the public’s motivation towards that of an immediate fix? Given that I write this paper well after Trump has taken office, and we have already paid witness to an abuse of power, the effects of which are too numerous to name, we can agree there is no such thing as an immediate fix, and the carry forward of political action is difficult to name in this period. However, activating a Spinozist model allows us to pause on the generative capacity of the encounter between bodies, emphasizing that an affirmative combination of bodies (this is an encounter that increases capacities rather than diminishes them) results in a new whole that Spinoza calls transformation, something that is incorporeal and extra to the event. The compound of affirmative relations increases the body’s ability to act as it strives toward this greater state, which, as Deleuze explains in *Spinoza Practical Philosophy* (1988), can be interpreted as a form of freedom. He writes, “[we] are free when [we] come into possession of [our] power of acting[.]” (Deleuze, 1988, 70). In the case study of *This Now, More than Ever*, the public rising in response to the problem of Trump provides an example of this mode of freedom, as bodies converge to express their capacity to act.

Although the temporal focus of the show and the specificity of its contents may come to date the exhibition’s politics, the unique nature of the responses lie in the works’ use of temporality. The exhibition is uncompromisingly lodged within its present, occurring, to borrow

from Rosie Braidotti, “somewhere between the no longer and the not yet.” (2011, 203) For Braidotti, this is the time when activism can be active, in oscillation between temporal binaries, at once informed by the past, yet future focussed. Paraphrasing Adrienne Rich, Braidotti writes that we must “think ‘in spite of the times’ and hence ‘out of my time’,” thus to transform the present condition into future possibility. (2011, 202-203) The question becomes how to resist the violence of the present moment while also engaging with it so that it can become productive of something else. (Braidotti, 2011, 268)

The change that is longed for requires a moment of pause – to survey the debris, to reimagine how the aftermath might become something other than the effects of collapse. Carol Sawyer’s Untitled (Figure V) work contains this imperative. Sawyer’s piece was the only contribution not submitted digitally, instead the artist provided instructions for the work’s creation. Appearing as a protest sign propped up in the corner of the gallery, it reads, “Would everyone please just calm down and be quiet for a minute?” The work’s form, clearly in reference to the rise of post-election protest, is juxtaposed by the sign’s unique call to slow action. These instructions to “calm down” may read at first as counterintuitive or apolitical. Indeed, there is likely no better time to be angry and move quickly, but is it possible to imagine this as a call to a more activated stillness? I read Sawyer’s work as a directive for strategic nonaction, a move toward slowness at a time when politics are accelerated. As I said in my introduction, the aftermath provides us a vision of decimation, but pausing may allow us to experience the period of collapse with equal feelings of expectation, anticipation and deliberation. Thus to ‘calm down’ begs us to become aware of the present, and observe it in its multitude, to identify the potential that becomes apparent after the event, but before we’ve had the chance to act. This is a moment of reflective politics.



I am reminded of Benjamin's critique of Marx in "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "Marx said that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps things are very different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which the human race travelling in the train applies the emergency brake."<sup>1</sup> Benjamin imagines the travellers pulling the brake to avoid hurling the train into further disaster, but what happens after the brake is thrown? When the train slows and another direction is pondered? Pulling the break recasts the light on the present, the moment of contemplation, generative because it bears the capacities of the present along with the sensations of anxiety, expectation, and the desire to continue. *This Now, More than Ever* is an invitation to pause, the exhibitions' works show the ground after the event and the range of available politics contained by the present.

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Yani Kong is SSHRC Doctoral Fellow of contemporary art history and theory, at the School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University. Kong is the managing editor for the *Comparative Media Arts Journal*, and an instructor in art history, communication and visual culture fields. Her current project theorizes that encounters with contemporary art of emergency and aftermath may demonstrate deep interconnections between viewers, art works and the events they are born of, highlighting the present – though it may appear disastrous – as a site of potential.

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<sup>1</sup> From Benjamin's preparatory notes to "On the Concept of History", which does not appear in the final versions of the document.