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No Small Matter: Micromuseums as Critical Institutions

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What is Critical Curating?
Qu'est-ce que le commissariat engagé ?

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Article abstract

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In his essay "Valéry Proust Museum" (1952), Theodor Adorno famously compares museums to mausoleums, arguing that museums house objects that are "in the process of dying." As such, they are disconnected from "the needs of the present" and little more than hoards. He also argues that the influence of the museum is such that viewing art and objects therein becomes habitual, with the result that precious objects shown outside of museums appear out of place and cheapened by the garishness of less-than-pristine surroundings.[1] Perhaps most damningly of all, Adorno writes firmly that museums "neutralize culture," thus rendering their political potential null and void.[2]

Over the decades that followed the publication of Adorno's essay, an entire field of critical museum studies has developed, and its criticisms have been resisted and embraced by cultural institutions. Museums were wrenched open to groups that had previously been unwelcome, and an outward looking emphasis on education, and subsequently on community connection, replaced the focus on collecting. In recent years, even establishment museums have turned their attention to contemporary issues, opening their archives to rapid-response collecting, and taking stances on controversial issues.[3] Interventionist curatorial projects have brought even the dullest (and most dead?) of collections to life. Adorno likely would not recognize museums today.

Nevertheless, the accusation that museums neutralize political culture remains a key concern for many critics. Mel Evans of Liberate Tate, for example, points out that museums greenwash the environmental records of fossil fuel companies when they accept sponsorships and funding from them.[4] Andrea Fraser argues that museums are little more than appendages of the ultra-wealthy, with Boards made up primarily of members of the "1%," who guide museums according to their own self-interest.[5] In Canada and elsewhere, museums have been subject to many sophisticated critiques, which reveal that their improvements have not gone far enough, and that the structures of power inherent within such cultural institutions—supposedly unsettled by the post-colonial politics of the last decade—remain largely intact.[6] Many of these assessments point obviously or obliquely to the fact that museums are more than the sum of their visible parts. Museums, and particularly large-scale populist museums, are tied to networks of public funding and private sponsorship, urban planning, federal, provincial, and municipal cultural policy, and so on. Even as established museums move to open their collections, to deal with their histories, and to institute innovative programming,

1. Theodor Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967),175–77. Adorno's essay was translated into English in 1967, but it was originally written between 1952 and 1954.

they are constrained by forces that are often beyond their control. This is true even of artist-run centres, which, though much more flexible in terms of programming and ability to respond to current events, are nonetheless stymied by administrative loads and taxing labour conditions.[7] Such critiques raise several questions: What possibilities are opened by scaling down the size of museums to the point where they can effectively remove themselves from the weight of day-to-day operations? What potentials emerge when small size allows innovative forms of curating to take place outside of typical funding models? How can those who feel blocked or hindered by establishment museums use the form of the museum against itself to create oppositional or critical spaces? Is it possible that small size can, in fact, enliven rather than neutralize or deaden cultural materials?

In this article, we examine three "micromuseums" that have strategically used aspects of authoritative museum culture to create institutions that run counter to accepted museum norms. We define micromuseums as tiny (usually one room) institutions that are run by individuals or small groups, that do not participate in government funding programs or seek private sponsorships, but that nonetheless imitate or echo certain recognizable aspects of museum culture.[8] The Strathcona Art Gallery (*The STAG*), which opened in 2010 in the Strathcona neighbourhood of East Vancouver, was established by artists and organizers Gabriel Salomon and Aja Rose Bond, and emerged in answer to the question, "What resources do we have and how can those be shared with our various communities?"[9] In 2012, *The STAG* was reconfigured as *The STAG Library*, thus changing its focus from art projects to lending books and ephemera to the community.[10] In 2010, the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) opened in the Toronto garage of artists Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell; they describe this undertaking as "a response, a process, a site, a protest, an outcry, an exhibition, a performance, an economy, a conceptual framework, a place, and an opportunity."[11] The Museum of Fear and Wonder, which opened in 2017 in Bergen, Alberta, is a collaborative project of artist Jude Griebel and anthropologist Brendan Griebel that works within the tradition of the rural novelty museum to "highlight the psychological and narrative qualities of objects."[12] Although these three museums are quite different in scope and areas of focus, they are all located in Canada; they all have mandates geared towards critical encounters with traditional museum practices; and they all illustrate the critical potential of small spaces and tiny museums. We analyze them chronologically, looking at how each engages with community, marginality, radical intervention, and curatorial strategy. All do so in inventive ways necessitated by sparse funding and limited space, which leads them to adopt what Bond and Salomon refer to as praxis based on "informality and big ideas."[13] With the FAG leading the way, each of these spaces has unsettled and challenged received models of funding, hosting, and organizing exhibitions. Notably, they were all established by artists and operate simultaneously as art projects and museums, a detail that we spend some time unpacking later in the article. Our approach, however, is not to romanticize tiny, privately run institutions, and we also carefully analyze the limits of curatorial strategies built on personal investment (both monetary and time) and operating outside of traditional funding structures, often with extremely limited resources.

2. *Ibid.*, 175–77.

3. See, for example, the 2017 reinstallation of part of the permanent collection at MoMA (NYC) to include work by artists from countries affected by the Trump government "Travel Ban."

4. Mel Evans, *Art Wash: Big Oil and the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Pluto Press, 2015).

5. Andrea Fraser, "There's No Place Like Home: The 1 % C'est Moi," *continent* 2.3 (2012): 186–201, http://continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/108 (accessed August 9, 2018).

6. Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

7. See AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," in *Museums By Artists*, eds. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983); cheyanne turions, "Thinking Again About Artist-Run Culture," *cheyanne turions: Dialogue Around Curatorial Practice*, October 14, 2014, https://cheyanneturions.wordpress.com/2014/10/14/thinking-again-about-artist-run-culture (accessed August 9, 2018). The authors would also like to thank Christina Battle for drawing our attention to issues of labour in ARC culture.

8. In this article, we use the terms micromuseum and micro-institution interchangeably.

9. Gabriel Salomon, "Closing Doors: Reflections on Contemporary Art, Social Space, and the Domestic," *Breach* 3 (December 2015), 2.

10. In 2013, *The STAG* reconfigured itself again in the project Brew Pub, a collaboration between *The STAG*, cheyanne turions, Gina Badger, and Eric Emory, which took place in Toronto at MoCCA.

11. Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue quoted in Amber Christensen, Lauren Fournier, Daniella Sanader, "A Speculative Manifesto for the Feminist Art Fair International: An Interview with Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue of the Feminist Art Gallery," in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, ed. Heather Davis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 257.

12. The Museum of Fear and Wonder, www.fearandwonder.ca/about (accessed September 6, 2017).

13. *The STAG*, http://thestrathconaartgallery.tumblr.com (accessed August 29, 2017).

Though micromuseums date from the 1950s and possibly much earlier, there appears to have been an increase in such projects from the late 1990s to the present.[14] Literature on small and micro-institutions is sparse.[15] In 2016, Fiona Candlin attempted to define the parameters of micromuseums. Her recent publication *Micromuseology* is arguably the most significant study to date focusing on small, independent museums.[16] In it, Candlin argues that the study of micromuseums has the potential to revolutionize the field of museum studies by generating new perspectives on current debates and reconceiving notions of museum curating. Candlin addresses a number of the major tenets of contemporary museum studies, and compares how they apply to both major museums and micromuseums. For example, while major museums are public institutions, micromuseums are often located in private homes and blur the boundary between the public and domestic spheres. As noted at the outset of this article, major museums are often accused of being akin to mausoleums where "dead" objects are stored, whereas Candlin argues that micromuseums instil a sense of vitality and continued usefulness in their collections. Candlin also contrasts major museums, currently mandated to present exhibits in such a way as to represent the interests of myriad groups, with micromuseums, where curators have full autonomy to display collections according to their own desires or in support of specific communities. The curatorial strategies of clutter and excess employed by micromuseums also stand in contrast to larger museums' continued focus on singular objects of importance.

In keeping with Candlin's definitions, the majority of such institutions are what the popular website *Atlas Obscura* calls "wonderfully specific museums": near obsessive collections of objects such as water cans, toilet seats, medical instruments, wireless radios, and so on, which are cared for by passionate individuals, and which have been opened to the public.[17] While we largely agree with Candlin's assessment of how micromuseums function, our study differs in two important ways. First, we are keenly aware of a number of micromuseums—key among them the Interference Archive in Brooklyn, New York; the pop-up Museum of Capitalism in Los Angeles; the Gynocratic Art Gallery in Fredericton; and the Museum of Canadian Human Rights Violations at Shoal Lake Nation 40 (Manitoba)—that are specifically organized as radical alternatives to establishment museums.[18] Second, we find one particular type of micromuseum to be curiously absent from Candlin's analysis: museums made by artists.[19] The micromuseums we examine, which use a variety of terms to describe themselves, tend to imagine themselves as *both* artworks and institutions.

It is important to see micromuseums established by artists as categorically distinct from projects that involve artists working as curators in already established museums. While curatorial interventions by artists into institutions—such as Fred Wilson's renowned project *Mining the Museum*, Iris Haussler's parafictional environments, or DisplayCult and Mark Dion's cabinets of curiosity, among others—are drawing increasing attention from museum studies scholars, the impetus for such projects is quite distinct from those that forfeit the institutional relationship altogether. In fact, though this article draws upon the scholarship pertaining to "artists as curators," the three micromuseums analyzed fit more comfortably within the existing literature on institutions.[20] As Alison Green writes, "It is … more and more common to

14. Nigel Prince, drawing on the work of Sarah Pierce, notes that artists have been curating since at least the eighteenth century. Nigel Prince, "Foreword," in *The Artist as Curator*, ed. Celina Jeffery (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2015), 1. As noted in this article, however, we distinguish institutions established by artists from artists working as curators in institutions, and date an uptick in the former to the twentieth century.

15. In addition to Candlin, see also Hugh Cheape, "'Charms Against Witchcraft': Magic and Mischief in Museum Collections," in *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland*, eds. Julian Goodare, Lauren Martin, and Joyce Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 227–48; Helen Cornish, "The Life of the Death of 'The Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin': Storytelling around the Museum of Witchcraft," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 22, 1 (2013), 79–97; Hunter Davies, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum of Baked Beans: My Search for Britain's Maddest Museums* (London: Virgin Publishing, 2010); Gabriel Levine, "The Museum of Everyday Life: Vernacular Objects and (Extra)ordinary Affects," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 4, 1(October 2015): 364–390; Lianne McTavish, "The Torrington Gopher Hole Museum: A Model Institution," *Museums and the Past: Constructing Historical Consciousness*, eds. Viviane Gosselin and Phaedra Livingston (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 60–77; Orhan Pamuk, "Small Museums," *New York Times Style Magazine*, March 20, 2014, http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/small-museums/?_r=1 (accessed August 9, 2018).

16. Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

17. Molly McBride Jacobson, "Lists: The Ultimate List of Wonderfully Specific Museums," *Atlas Obscura*, www.atlasobscura.com/lists/the-ultimate-list-of-wonderfully-specific-museums (accessed August 9, 2018).

18. We would also like to mention the Bookcase Micromuseum and Lending Library, a micro-institution established by Kirsty Roberston in 2013 with the purpose of intervening in the sanctity of an academic office at a university. Helen Gregory was Associate Director of the Bookcase from 2016 to 2017 and curated the exhibition *Natural HiSTORIES*. It was from that collaboration that this article emerged.

19. Even in the case study of the Bakelite Museum in Williton,

see an artist's working practice include, or even be predominated by, the making of exhibitions."[21] Yet this growth has, for the most part, taken place *within* the art world, and within existing museums, galleries, biennales, or art fairs. Interestingly, the importance of *not* being a part of existing institutions was key to all three projects examined here, but this very significance paradoxically led us back to literature on institutions.

As our article will make clear, some of those establishing micromuseums consider themselves to be curators, while others actively resist that label. In a special issue devoted to critical curating, this seems worthy of comment. What is most apparent is that the artists analyzed in this article turn their backs on institutional curating, particularly as it is associated with the art system and market, with star power, or with what David Balzer has referred to as "curationism" (or "curating" as a defining element of twenty-first century life). The work undertaken by these artists does, however, seem to bring to life the etymological roots of curating in the Latin *curare* or to care—to care for objects or communities—a history that Balzer argues is still present in some forms of curatorial labour.[22] We thus suggest that what is happening in our three case studies is a form of critical curating that might resist the term "curator," while nonetheless taking critical curating or critical caring as a starting point. This positions the institution as something to be actively reimagined, rather than subverted.

In writing about three Canadian micro-institutions, we must acknowledge artist-run-centre (ARC) culture as our inspiration. Most of those running the tiny and ephemeral museums and galleries we examine have experience working in ARCs, artist collaborations, or establishment museums. As curator cheyanne turions points out, ARC culture originally distinguished itself from museum culture by eschewing historicization and emphasizing experimentation.[23] She argues that, as ARCs in the 1960s and 1970s were themselves oppositional institutions, they were able to mount a form of institutional critique that paralleled and presaged the interventionist work later undertaken by artists such as Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson in the 1980s and 1990s.[24] ARC culture was profoundly influential, providing the physical and symbolic context for political and politicized visual culture in Canada from the late 1960s to the 1990s.

As turions reminds us, however, "The political, economic and social climate of [today] bears only slight resemblances to 1967."[25] Recalling AA Bronson's pivotal article on ARCs, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," she notes that ARC culture is not timeless and that it may even have become stagnant. Deirdre Logue agrees with turions' assessment, and prefers to position the FAG against ARC culture. In Logue's words, the latter "worked as an alternative for twenty of its thirty-five years but during the last fifteen years organizations have experienced stasis. They are profoundly dependent and risk averse and they lack spontaneity."[26] turions concludes: "What might a reconfiguration of that landscape look like?"[27] The answer is obviously a complex one, but, at their heart, *The STAG* and the FAG seek to shake up the very essence of museum and ARC culture through a reworking and undoing of institutional politics. Meanwhile, the Museum of Fear and Wonder takes a less political stance towards other institutional forms. Instead, it revels in the visual and psychological pleasure of subverting museum collection and display practices by marrying them to the aesthetics of theatre sets, natural history dioramas, and, to a lesser degree, sideshows and dime museums.

Somerset, UK, whose curator trained both at Goldsmiths College and the Royal College of Art, Candlin merely provides some historic precedent through a discussion of cabinets of curiosity and their relationship to surrealist collections. She does not position the Bakelite Museum within a more contemporary genre of museums created by artists. See Candlin, *Micromuseology*, 131–138.

20. See, for example, Alexander Alberro, et al., *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology* (Köln: Waleter König, 2018); Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and The Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018); Celina Jeffery, ed. *The Artist as Curator* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2015).

21. Green, *When Artists Curate*, 8.

22. David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World And Everything Else* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2014).

23. turions, "Thinking Again About Artist-Run Culture."

24. For further context on institutional critique and the history of artists' interventions into museum collections and strategies, see *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009); and James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

25. turions, "Thinking Again About Artist-Run Culture."

26. Logue, "A Speculative Manifesto."

27. turions, "Thinking Again About Artist Run Culture."

When *The STAG* opened in 2010, the idea was to create a project from resources already at hand, with the goal of nurturing and sustaining a community in Strathcona, where it was located in the home of artists and organizers Gabriel Salomon and Aja Rose Bond. Exhibitions, meals, artist residencies, performances, and events took place in the space, and, over time, the line between domestic living space and art space grew ever hazier. After two years, Salomon and Bond paused the project and revisited its mandate. As a result, the artist residencies came to an end, and the project was reconfigured as *The STAG Library*, | **fig. 1** | a micro-lending institution that used "the thousands of books, magazines, zines, comics, records, CDs, cassettes and miscellany" that were already present in the house, but had not yet been recognized as a potential resource.[28] *The STAG* project ended in 2014, and the library itself scattered after Bond and Salomon left Vancouver for California.

As the impetus for *The STAG* grew from the question, What could grow from what already existed?, it largely avoided monetary exchange. Bond and Salomon took the anarchist principle of mutual aid as a starting point and organizing principle, and, as such, they were highly aware of the forms of "domestic, affective, and feminized" labour that would be demanded of an artist-residency/gallery/library built on exchange and sharing.

> "We felt that these labour[s], which we often put under the umbrella of hospitality, were intensely valued by our guests and in many ways either reciprocated directly or through other energetic exchanges. We took so much pleasure out of the experience of the project that it hardly felt selfless. We also did our best to structure *The STAG* in ways that made those labours tenable and sustainable."[29]

This begs the question: Is pleasurable labour measured differently from that which is merely physically or mentally taxing? In the case of *The STAG*, the answer changed over time. What was at first enjoyable, became increasingly extractive as the project developed. In response to this shift, *The STAG* was given an expiration date. The project thus acknowledged that the price of non-monetary forms of labour is often cumulative and charged to the body rather than to a bank account. When galleries close down they are seen to have failed, even if struggling to continue exacts a toll. Shutting down *The STAG Library* as a purposeful final gesture, as well as configuring the project as finite from (nearly) the beginning, challenged the idea that permanence and stability equals success, while also allowing the availability of funds to enhance rather than determine the kinds of projects Salomon and Bond were able to undertake.[30]

As will become clear in the discussion of each case study, funding is a constant issue. Most micromuseums eschew public granting systems, in no small part because the criteria for grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and other such public agencies do not apply to these board-less, ephemeral, and often unstaffed "institutions." The decision not to apply for grants is, however, often a conscious one. Writing in 1983, artist AA Bronson infamously called bureaucracy "the curse of the artist run space," and described ARC culture as both "poetic aspiration and the idealisation of the obsessed" and also "empirical reality and the anti-poetic *per se*."[31] His famous text "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat" is often cited when cultural workers want to describe the crushing of experimentation through filling out forms, writing letters, answering phones, and descending into a constant dance of accommodation

28. *Ibid*.
29. *Ibid*.
30. Salomon, "Closing Doors."
31. Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat."

Figure 1. *The STAG Library*, the launch of *About a Bicycle*, September 23, 2013. Photo courtesy of Gabriel Salomon.

Figure 2. Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, FAG Banners, ongoing since 2010. Photo: Cat O'Neil.

Figure 3. The Anatomical Display at the Museum of Fear and Wonder explores the history of understanding and representing the human body, 2017. Photo courtesy of Brendan and Jude Griebel.

with funding bodies, even though they understand the social good that comes from the availability of public funds for arts and culture.

Precarious, uneven, and absent funding structures are a key characteristic of micromuseums, one that distinguishes them from establishment institutions and ARC culture. Though turning away from public funds seems a relatively minor concern given the scale of these institutions, it actually represents a profound reworking of ARC culture for the twenty-first century. Thus, micro-institutions run on donations, on monies accessed through stable jobs elsewhere, or through innovative forms of sharing and exchange. Although micromuseums are occasionally profit seeking, we have chosen to focus on projects that take the question of what it means to work outside of typical funding structures seriously. *The STAG*, for example, was structured mainly around the principle of mutual aid, and relied on exchanges of goods and services, bartering, and sharing to instantiate its community-based logic. While Bond and Salomon did apply for two very small grants (in the region of $100, with one using funds gathered through a community meal), Salomon writes, "We didn't want how we used the space to be driven by what funding sources were willing to support, [we didn't want to] be dependent upon or delayed by those funding sources."[32] They purposely set up *The STAG* to be involved in as little monetary exchange as possible, but noted that, by necessity, it was subsidized through paid work elsewhere. "It wasn't that money itself was taboo, but rather that it has an outsized influence on what people do—or don't do—in their artistic practice."[33]

The FAG faced a similar quandary. Mitchell and Logue believed it was essential to pay artists, and while they encouraged donations to the FAG, they also spent a lot of their own money. They saw this as part of the project: "It doesn't make our privilege any less problematic, but it does put our privilege into some practical, tangible use for a project."[34] However, money eventually became a burden as funds dried up, and those who had participated in the early stages of the project could not be relied on for permanent support. Rather than seeing this as an eternal roadblock, funding—or the lack thereof—became an enabling part of their project(s), as it necessitated new and different ways of thinking about institutional culture.[35]

Funding also influences the scope of micromuseums. When asked about what microinstitutions can provide that larger institutions cannot, Salomon immediately said "intimacy." In his words, "Small, intimate spaces and interactions can't be scaled up without either failing or becoming something different."[36] Projects such as *The STAG* can work "against the metrics of audience size and headcounts," as a way of reversing the elitism of traditional museums.[37] To be clear, participating in the projects organized by *The STAG* was an experience open to only a small number of people, many of them from carefully selected or self-selected groups. By their very nature, the small and ephemeral projects underlying these micromuseums are exclusive, but that exclusivity tends to emerge for groups that are actively marginalized, or for whom not all spaces are safe or welcoming.

Like *The STAG*, the FAG emerged from a place of collaboration. Established in 2010 in the converted garage of Toronto artists Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell, the FAG was imagined from the beginning as outside of, or even in opposition to, traditional art-historical narratives and museum structures.

32. Salomon, personal communication, September 12, 2017.
33. *Ibid*.
34. Deirdre Logue, Allyson Mitchell, and Helena Reckitt, "Not at the Beginning and Not at the End: A Conversation Among," in *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, eds. Erin Silver and Amelia Jones (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 356–71.
35. Logue, *ibid*., 362.
36. Salomon, personal communication.
37. *Ibid*.

Logue and Mitchell reckon that they were looking for "art history that doesn't just regard art as something formal and solitary, but as part of a life."[38] One of the main inspirations for the FAG was a text by curator Helen Molesworth dedicated to thinking through the question, How do you curate as a feminist?[39] How do you create a lineage of lesbian, trans, feminist, and queer artists who may be both a part of, and entirely marginalized from, the mainstream art world?[40] How do you present art that might not imagine itself as, or might even actively resist, the category of "art"? The FAG focuses on the work of artists, and the way that their art can build platforms and connections through a "lived, feminist art history."[41]

The FAG, however, is not simply a gallery space for artworks unwelcome at mainstream institutions. Like *The STAG*, the FAG also carefully considers the role of hospitality and support, and cultivates mutual respect centred upon the goal of creating a space where artists and interlocutors feel welcome. These elements, often dismissed by the mainstream art world, or repackaged as "relational aesthetics," are vital to Logue and Mitchell's imagining of a space that can support feminist and queer creativity. Much like Mitchell's own artworks, the idea behind the FAG is "maximalist" and expansive, bringing together numerous overlapping concerns and ideas, but doing so, paradoxically, under the umbrella of "doing less."

Picking up this thread in a conversation with Logue and Mitchell, curator Helena Reckitt notes, "FAG is about intimacy, too. The gallery has qualities that are immersive and domestic. It's based in your back garden and you often hold events in your house, which is decorated with art, textiles, and thrift store bric-à-brac. It's the opposite of the uber-cool white cube. It's touchy-feely."[42] The space of the FAG is covered in granny blankets, and leftovers from Mitchell's artworks (often made from thrifted or recycled textiles) are piled around the domestic and gallery space. It is cluttered and homey at the same time. The assumption, however, that it is immediately welcoming is not exactly true, at least not true for everyone. Mitchell describes how some people find the lack of separation between domestic and gallery space difficult to navigate, which makes them feel like they are intruding. But Logue adds, "A 'gallery' at 'home' meant that we could feed, house, and connect people to each other and take care of other kinds of needs and experiences—ones that rely on the combination of personal, social, domestic, professional, and cultural spaces and qualities."[43] Because the FAG is in a domestic space, it is not—as is the case in Shannon Mattern's description of tiny guerrilla libraries that appear on street corners, sidewalks, and elsewhere—a reclamation of hyper-commercialized public space.[44] Rather, it opens private property to specific communities that tend to be marginalized in public space.

Mitchell and Logue consider the FAG a rogue space, but one from which they hope a new movement might emerge. They have used exhibitions, events, and the space itself to advocate for a shift away from a gendered feminism, positioning the FAG as a feminist space that "equally engages with gender, race, class, and ability," rather than simply a women's art project. As Logue notes, "It's the difference between asking for people to be feminists, versus asking for politicized people to help us problematize, troubleshoot, or figure out new strategies for being artists, activists, and politicized subjects."[45]

38. Mitchell, "Not at the Beginning," 357.

39. Helen Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MOMA, 2010), 498–513. The authors would like to thank Genevieve Flavelle for bringing this connection to our attention in her MA major research paper, "The Night Before Utopia: Queer Feminist Art Praxis at the Feminist Art Gallery," Western University, 2016.

40. Mitchell, "Not at the Beginning," 359.

41. Logue, *ibid.*, 360.

42. Reckitt, *ibid.*, 365.

43. Logue, *ibid.*, 365.

44. Shannon Mattern, "Marginalia: Little Libraries in the Urban Margins," Places (May 2012) https://placesjournal.org/article/marginalia-little-libraries-in-the-urban-margins (accessed August 9, 2018).

45. Logue, "A Speculative Manifesto," 259; and "Not at the Beginning," 366.

As both Logue and Mitchell are well versed in the demands and organizing principles of traditional museums and ARC culture, they have developed a series of alternative practices, among them "fagging it forward," which serves to find and celebrate those missing from traditional art histories. This simple, but effective strategy emerged from the events hosted by the FAG, during which guests were asked to wear a label sharing their name and also the name of a feminist/queer cultural producer who inspired them. The labels were kept and hung on the wall, potentially capturing the names and stories of those who have been erased or forgotten, but also illustrating the deep ties and networks that both arose from and continue to sustain the FAG project(s). At the same time, Logue and Mitchell resist the label "curators," preferring instead the titles "instigators, lubricators, antagonists."[46] As mentioned above, they also developed a process of "matronage"—a funding structure that relies on donations from within the community.

The FAG also founded the Feminist Art Collection (FAC) using the strategies of fagging it forward and matronage. This expansive art collection was established as a means of addressing the exclusion of the FAG's contributors from the collections of commercial galleries and establishment museums. In turn, the increasing popularity of the FAG has given Logue, Mitchell, and their collaborators a means through which to smuggle marginalized artworks into mainstream institutions. In short, the FAG is often invited into these institutions, while the FAC artists themselves are not. Through a series of collaborations with establishment museums, such as the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Tate Modern, the FAG has set up shop in gatekeeper institutions—bringing the FAC with them—and parasitically siphoning funds from the centre to the margins by using artist and exhibition fees to pay the artists whose work forms the FAC collection.[47] Unlike the "artist as curator" projects by Wilson, Dion, and others, here, it is the micro-institution that enters the authoritative gallery. Within the space of the institutions it works with, the FAG typically sets up beneath a series of crocheted banners with slogans like, "We Can't Compete," | **fig. 2** | "We Can't Keep Up," "We Won't Keep Down," and "We Won't Compete." With these banners demarcating the space of the FAG within the institution, the aesthetics of domesticity are brought inside, and with them the work of artists other than the founders; the latter appear only as the FAG.

All of these projects extract great amounts of labour, and, like Bond and Salomon, Logue and Mitchell note that, despite the pleasures of running the FAG, "it immediately took an enormous amount of time, space, energy, money, affect."[48] Mitchell also notes that people were so enamoured with the idea of the FAG that they were asked to spend enormous amounts of time talking about it, often at the expense of hosting the activities and events that made it what it was.[49] At first, it was determined the FAG would end after five years, so that it would not become institutionalized. This idea eventually developed into another plan: the FAG would diversify by detaching itself from its physical space. Logue and Mitchell imagined garages all over Toronto and beyond becoming pop-up FAGs, hosting events, and creating a network of micro-museum nodes connected through the idea of counter-institutionalism, each working to support cultural workers who were not welcomed into establishment galleries. "FAG isn't an art gallery," Logue and Mitchell assert, "it's an

46. Logue, "Not at the Beginning," 364.
47. Mitchell, *ibid.*, 367.
48. *Ibid.*, 260.
49. *Ibid.*, 261.

idea."[50] But as an idea, the FAG did not immediately take off. Visitors and participants appreciated the community it created, but they were largely unwilling to commit to the more permanent labour of maintaining that community through the establishment of numerous satellite or echo FAGs.[51]

Having looked at two quite similar micromuseums, we will now turn our attention to a third that emerged from a different set of contexts, but that still offers perspectives on critical curating: the Museum of Fear and Wonder, which is located near Bergen, Alberta, approximately an hour northwest of Calgary. A new project conceived by artist Jude Griebel and his brother, anthropologist Brendan Griebel, the museum draws strongly on the tradition of small-town Prairie museums. As children, the Griebels often visited such museums on long drives between Saskatchewan and Alberta. Together, they situate their project within a community that includes other "offbeat, small-town museums," such as the Torrington Gopher Hole Museum. The Museum of Fear and Wonder is filled with objects that manifest an inherent unease | **fig. 3** | —even the building that houses it has a charged history, and has been located at multiple sites and served various purposes throughout its existence. Once a German internment camp, an army barracks, and a trailer park office, it is now a museum that houses a collection of psychologically complex objects. The museum may be visited by appointment only between the months of June and August, and its obscure location attracts only the most curious and committed visitors. For the Griebels, that journey is a vital part of the experience of visiting the museum, as it echoes the sense of wonder and discovery they experienced during their childhood travels. Although, in a larger urban centre, the museum would likely have a broad appeal, its current location connects it to the tradition of the Prairie museum, while also heightening a sense of curiosity through the physical journey required to get there. This is to say nothing of the prohibitive financial burden that would have been incurred had they attempted to achieve the same end in Toronto, for example.

Although the Griebels' childhood was the catalyst for their collection, the objects it contains are not for the faint of heart. The exhibition *Young Thrills*, for example, focuses specifically on the relationship between fear and childhood, as well as the power of the young mind to magnify the impact of certain objects until they assume "mythological proportions" in the memory. The Griebels have struggled with the issue of child audiences.

> Some of the objects we collect are quite visceral and rather frightening. Do we allow children or leave their viewing the collection up to the discretion of their parents? By making the museum inaccessible and more of an appointment-based viewing of a private space, we are weeding out some challenges that might arise when dealing with a large cross-section of the general public.[52]

This solution touches on the manner in which the Museum of Fear and Wonder blurs the boundary between public and private spaces, one of the primary characteristics of the micromuseum as identified by Candlin.[53] Similar to the FAG, *The STAG*, and many other micromuseums, the Museum of Fear and Wonder shares a building with the Griebels' private living quarters, although museum visitors do not have access to the living area.[54] Consequently, the boundary between public and domestic space is not blurred, but rather a product of the Griebels' control over who gains access to the museum. This challenges the

50. Mitchell and Logue, "A Speculative Manifesto," 263.

51. Logue and Mitchell also developed a Feminist Art Fair International (FAFI), which ran alongside the Toronto International Art Fair as something "more like an uprising than an exhibition"; see Deirdre, "Not at the Beginning," 368. The FAFI took place at the AGO and in satellite spaces, and showcased the works of emerging artists, artists of colour, trans people, people with disabilities, and Indigenous artists. There were no curators and no dealers. The process of a "counter-art-fair" provided both an indictment of mainstream galleries and art fairs, which deny access to many groups, and a platform from which to mount an exhibition on one's own terms. FAFI had as its aim the repurposing of institutional funds, a corollary to the FAG's promotion of a "matronage program" in which people make contributions in the name of feminism to events, projects, and shows at FAG (or to the FAC).

52. Jude Griebel, personal communication, September 5, 2017.

status of their museum as a truly public space. While it is open to the public, it is only within parameters established and maintained by the Griebels.

As children, the Griebels collected souvenirs to help them remember and make sense of the places where they travelled, thus demonstrating an early interest in what Susan Stewart refers to as the "capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experiences."[55] Over time, the Griebels became interested not only in the capacity of an object to evoke a memory or a moment in time, but also its power to act as a portal between two places or times.[56] Stewart describes a certain kind of souvenir object that is "mapped against the life history of an individual; it tends to be found in connection with rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage, and death) as the material sign of an abstract referent: transformation of status."[57] This compelled the Griebels to seek out remote and unusual collections, and the expansion of their own collection became the driving force behind their journeys. Having spent thirty years acquiring curious items, they have amassed a psychologically and visually challenging collection of what they refer to as "emotionally uneasy objects." Such objects include medical artefacts, Victorian wax anatomical models, ritual objects, and folk art. According to the Griebels:

> These are objects that transcend their material nature to merge with human psychology. When an object is uneasy, it resonates in either positive or negative ways. It possesses people and draws them in. This might be through the stories that it carries, its special material properties, or its place within a larger historical tradition of making. Unlike many other museums, we tend to collect or organize our objects according to their emotional properties rather than any specific typology.[58]

By creating their own museum, the Griebels have the freedom to arrange and juxtapose objects from their collection in ways that suggest narratives that derive less from the objects' original or intended use and more from the biographies and psychological residue they have accrued over time.[59] The freedom to create new narratives through the arrangement of objects is a departure from Brendan's professional experience. As an anthropologist, he has worked on major installations in large public museums, including the recent exhibit *Inuinnauyugut: We Are Inuinnait* in the Northern Voices Gallery of the Canadian Museum of Nature. When asked what he was able to achieve by working within the structure of a small, privately operated space that he could not achieve in a public museum context, he responded:

> Museums are typically institutions that hold their collections in the public trust. In doing so, they have a certain obligation to creating narratives that appeal to, and can be understood by, the widest possible range of audiences. I enjoy the educational element of working in these museums, but there is always a sense of an exhibit's ultimate narrative potential as being somehow restricted. There are many stories that cannot be told. Exhibit texts, for example, can rarely exceed 100 words, as that is the limit that most people will read. Associations between objects and text need to be articulated in a way that there is no ambiguity. The exhibit's emotional qualities are tempered so as to lessen their potential to offend, disturb or trigger.[60]

For Jude, on the other hand, the relationship between his art practice and the Museum of Fear and Wonder is more symbiotic. He thinks of the museum as a large-scale installation that shifts in an endless series of permutations as the collection is added to or exhibitions are mounted, de-installed, and re-curated. The museum thus serves as both a context for his sculptural work and a catalyst

53. See Candlin, "Open house: Rethinking the 'Public' Museum," in *Micromuseology*, 25–47, and "Open House at the Vintage Wireless Museum," *Open* 24 (2012), 92–106.

54. The Griebels occupied this portion of the building during the construction of the Museum of Fear and Wonder, but they hope at some time in the future to convert it to a residency for visiting artists and researchers.

55. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 135.

56. The Griebels explore this concept in their ongoing exhibition *Across the Divide: Materials that Speak Between Worlds*, part of the permanent installation at the Museum of Fear and Wonder.

57. Stewart, *On Longing*, 139.

58. Brendan and Jude Griebel, personal communication, September 5, 2017.

59. The notion of object biography, and the corresponding accrual of meaning that comes about through both changes of ownership and display of an object, has been extensively discussed. See, for example, Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, "Objects and the Museum," *Isis* 96 (December 2005): 559–572; Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "The Cultural Biography of Objects," *World Archaeology* 31, 2 (October 1999): 169–178; and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91.

60. Brendan and Jude Griebel, personal communcation, September 5, 2017.

for the research that informs his practice. In his words, "When grouping collections of these objects together, patterns and complicated relationships emerge that I can try and isolate in my own work."[61] The "psychological resonance" of the objects the Griebels have collected is similar to that conveyed in Jude's studio practice. Given the nature of his sculptural work, which combines figurative and natural forms in anthropomorphic assemblages, it is easy to see how curatorial strategies employed at the Museum of Fear and Wonder might manifest in future projects. One difference that Jude identifies between the museum and his art practice, however, is the contrast between the permanent structure and its collected contents and the far more transient nature of his art practice.

Creating something as permanent as the Museum of Fear and Wonder has, of course, come at some cost. As was the case with both *The STAG* and the FAG, the Griebels' museum has also been self-funded. Because of its structure—it occupies part of a private residence, there is no board of directors, and viewing is by appointment only within a limited time period—it does not align with funding initiatives that might be available to other small museums. However, the Griebels also recognize that the choice to self-fund allows them complete control over both content and direction. The challenge of self-funding is that it makes it difficult to dedicate both time and money to the development of the museum, with the consequence that it took them three years to complete the project. This long timeframe serendipitously allowed the Griebels to develop the museum's physical structure in concert with that of the collection. They were able to acquire and restore all of the museum's antique display cases from historical buildings around the Prairies. They then researched the cases' histories, thus making them just as important as the collection they hold. The museum has also been built to high professional standards and includes a climate-controlled collections room. To accomplish this, Brendan returned to school for conservation and collections management training.

The Griebels have a strong sense of responsibility and obligation for their collection, and they regard it as a set of particularly potent objects that demand to be shared. These objects are "vessels for stories, histories, and emotions that extend beyond their material selves."[62] As a reflection of their custodial relationship with the collection, Brendan makes it clear that they do not charge admission to, or profit from, the museum. And although they are interested in the history of sideshows and novelty museums, they aim to avoid any suggestion of exploitation or showmanship. In their words, "In the tradition of Prairie museums, the exhibits at the Museum of Fear and Wonder pair visual cues for truth and science with the ambiguities of myth to draw their audience into a willing state of suspended disbelief."[63] Rather than "neutralizing" the objects that they display, the Museum of Fear and Wonder aims to rescue uncomfortable objects from lives of obscurity and highlight the peculiar psychological characteristics that make them compelling. And while the Griebels do not choose to engage in cultural critique in the manner demonstrated at *The STAG* and the FAG, they do resist the curatorial constraints that characterize larger institutions, thereby reflecting the earlier roots of critical curating, if not the focus on political activism that defines its current state.

The three micromuseums examined here have significantly different content and approaches, and include an ongoing artist residency and lending library based on anarchist principles of mutual aid; a feminist and queer

61. *Ibid.*

62. Brendan Griebel, personal communication, September 28, 2017.

63. Brendan and Jude Griebel, personal communication, September 5, 2017.

project designed to provide space for marginalized artists; and a sideshow museum inspired by cabinets of curiosity with the goal of instilling wonder in visitors who travel to its remote location. And yet, all are connected through their attempts to challenge mainstream museums, either through sidelining them, using them parasitically, or actively disavowing them. The situation faced by museums in general in 2018 is much different from that analyzed by Adorno in the 1950s. Perhaps Adorno would still find that these micromuseums neutralize the objects in their displays—certainly our analysis points to the difficulties inherent in trying to use micro-institutions to unsettle their larger counterparts. And yet, arguably, all of these micromuseums enliven objects specifically through connecting them to "the needs of the present," thus disturbing habitual methods of viewing and being in museums.

The approaches described in this article seem quite different from the disavowal of institutions that took place in Europe in the late 1960s, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States through institutional critique. They also diverge from Canadian ARC culture, which developed from a desire to rework institutional culture into a communal form that would, ultimately, tie together artists working across vast distances.[64] Unlike ARCs, micromuseums are not part of an organized movement, and while individually they might broadly embrace practices of collaboration across communities, this is not their common point of departure. While, as Vincent Bonin argues, ARCs in the 1960s and 1907s "organized themselves into an informal network, forming a counter-public of peers," the opposite is largely true for micromuseums.[65] When Gabriel Salomon tried to organize a "Micro-Gallery" symposium in Vancouver in 2011, which would have drawn together a number of tiny galleries and pop-up museums that seemed to be using approaches similar to *The STAG*, there was very little enthusiasm. "I was thinking of this as a communitarian event that would help support these marginal, at times totally 'outsider' projects, and be developed from within what I was thinking of as a community of practitioners," Salmon notes. Instead, "it seemed like other people saw the invitation as an attempt to take ownership or make claims about the projects I was labeling 'Micro-Galleries' and ultimately that event never happened."[66] Salomon stumbled on an interesting quandary, but perhaps also a fundamentally important point: it is precisely because of their small size that micromuseums do not have to be all things for all people, and can be purposefully selective. This seems to be at odds with many activist movements, and indeed with a kind of critical curating that would have as its goal the opening up of elitist spaces. It could perhaps be argued that micromuseums mimic neoliberal forms, relying on individualism and entrepreneurial strategies, or that they perpetuate exclusionary aspects of mainstream museums. However, they do so from positions that are at odds with the for-profit or exposure-seeking model of the contemporary neoliberal cultural institution. One thing these three distinct micromuseums share is their complete resistance to the marketized logic currently defining most museums. Furthermore, despite their unwillingness or inability to forge a movement, they are arguably highly successful at creating local communities and support structures. In short, the practice of exit or escape from traditional institutional culture appears to offer new forms for critical curatorial practice, though these formations are by nature fragile and ephemeral. ¶

64. Vincent Bonin, "Here Bad News Always Arrives Too Late," *Filip* 16 (Spring 2012): https://fillip.ca/content/here-bad-news-always-arrives-too-late (accessed August 9, 2018).

65. *Ibid*. See especially Bonin's discussion of the complicated relationship between state and artists brought into being by ARC culture and institutional critique in Canada.

66. Gabriel Salomon, personal communication, September 12, 2017.