

The Rhubarb Festival Office Hours

August 25, 2020, 2-3PM ET, on Zoom

Meeting notes recorded by Jacqueline Costa

Published on August 26

Introductions:

Clayton Lee (he/him): Hi everyone, thanks for coming. If you're here presumably you're here for the Rhubarb office hours. I'll give a rough outline for the shape of the next hour. You can leave whenever you want but this is the shape. In a minute we will go around and introduce ourselves if you feel comfortable, if you don't feel comfortable you don't have to. I'll go through the context of the curatorial collective, mission statement, then open the floor for questions on that front, and then directly into the performative publication and then questions for that. Thanks for being here everyone. I want to start by acknowledging that I'm living and working on stolen land, on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and the Anishnaabe, and treaty territory of the Mississauga of the Credit. My name is Clayton Lee and I'm the Rhubarb Festival Director. My pronouns are he/him.

Theresa Cutknife (she/her): Hi, my name is Theresa, I'm one of the Rhubarb Curatorial Collective. I'm mixed First Nations Cree and Puerto Rican queer artist. So happy to have you here for office hours.

Vanden Boomen (he/they): Hi, I'm Vanden, the other curator. I'm a trans white masc artist and I'm excited to meet all of you too and hear all of your good questions!

[Participant introductions]

Context:

CL: This is my second year as Rhubarb Festival Director. I applied in 2019, and there were ongoing conversations I had about whether or not to apply to start with. It felt like Toronto was going through a change in artistic leadership, and it felt discomfort as a cis, queer, Chinese male applying for a position of power, so I applied with a curatorial collective in mind. I wanted to approach the festival in a way that removed me from the centre and invited other folks into the fold. When I got the job, the ways in which I went ahead to find the four curators that we had last year was that I really wanted to prioritize that they'd get paid, and the Buddies financial model didn't support that last year. So I reached out to local organizations in the city that I believe in/find interesting, and I asked them to choose a curator. These organizations were Workman Arts, Native Earth Performing Arts, Aluna Theatre, and FADO Performance Art Centre. I asked them to choose people who were of formal interest and curatorially radical, and they were responsible for choosing/paying the curators. That's how we ended up with Vanden Boomen, Theresa Cutknife, Claudia Edwards, and Victoria Mata, and this year we are continuing with Theresa and Vanden. As part of our process this year we wanted to provide

documentation and communicate our vision, so that's how we came up with this mission statement.

[Clayton reads the mission statement, copied below]

Mission Statement:

Solitary leadership is long-obsolete; the Rhubarb curatorial collective ushers in a new path forward, an experiment in radical governance that thrives with continual growth. Our model of collective leadership is intentionally horizontal, democratic, and discussion-based, where the director and co-curators share equal decision-making power. Transparency, accountability, flexibility, responsiveness, and artistic integrity are our key collective values. Our mission will continue to adapt based on the community's needs, and our team and institutional supports will continue to return to it, to hold each other in accountability and transformation.

Tania Bruguera paid homage to Audre Lorde's seminal text when she wrote that "art is not a luxury." If neither art nor poetry are luxuries, then they are necessary means for survival, for changing the status quo. The Rhubarb Festival is annually produced by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, and aims to critically engage with the gaps, by: seeking diverse representation in our leadership; drawing voices from the periphery into the centre; emphasizing process over product and providing ongoing supports, in resistance to elitism; learning from call-ins and grassroots social movements; and visioning beyond professional development, forging a community of care.

The intention of these office hours is to demystify the call for submissions we had this year and answer questions about our process as they come up, specifically about Rhubarb not about Buddies as a whole. If any questions arise about the process or the festival I'm happy to answer them now, or we can move on to the rest of the call. You can use the chat function if you like.

[No questions at this time].

Performative Publication Information:

CL: We are creating a performative publication. This is a fancy way of saying 'a book'. We had this idea in April during COVID, and I hadn't left my house in many weeks and was living with my grandma, and felt like so many performance-based organizations were transposing directly the work they do in-person to an online context, which felt like a betrayal of the rich context of the work we do, and also an adherence to the status quo. This project came out of wanting to have a festival where we're able to pay artist fees, as a priority, but not have a festival where we try to have it in-person and wave 2 of COVID happens, we panic and do an online thing. So we landed on this idea of a physical performative publication as an experiment to attempt to capture the experience of live performance/Rhubarb itself. What this means in actuality, we have no idea. The purpose of the call for submissions that we have is to invite artists forward so we can dream up a publication together and to understand what the limits of that are/can be, in hopefully interesting/rich/radical ways.

Theresa or Vanden do you have anything to add?

[No].

We wanted to move the submission process away from one that was project-based, to more of an artist-centred or artist-forward one. In the past people have submitted projects that they've been working on, which is the basis of many grants in Canada. What we'd like to do is talk about you as artists and hopefully hook into things and want to move forward where we start to imagine with you what your contribution to the publication could be, so that's how this submission process is working.

I'd like to open up to questions now, and thank you again for being here.

Q&A

Q: I have a question about what the developmental process might look like in collaboration with the theatre. It sounds like potentially there's room for the festival to be created with the artists that are going to be a part of it, but i'm curious if you have any other ideas about what the overall process/festival might look like.

CL: Good question. In our current heart of hearts regarding how the process and product will look, we're envisioning that half the projects will be in the book itself, be it as published text/drawings/images, whatever we want, and the other 'half' (I say half, but it can be nearly any percentage) will be physical interventions on a number of the books. So say we're printing 1000 books by mid-January, the other half of the artists would add a physical intervention onto some of those publications--dressing the books in costumes, ripping out pages, adding sticky notes. Whatever comes together in a rich way that allows the artists who are doing the physical interventions to respond to the context of the book.

This is responding to something that I found with Rhubarb last year--everyone is so focused on their own projects they hardly have a chance to see how their project lives in relationship to other works. This gives them a chance to respond to other artists' work. The idea is that when the audience receives the book there are these physical touches of liveness on it. How do we enact this live experience? Multiple voices and fingerprints physically manifesting the version you receive.

Q: That made a lot of sense. Having that call and response is giving me a clear idea. My question is is there anything in particular you think would be helpful for you to know about us as artists? It's a beautiful wide invitation but what might be helpful for you to know, if we have to make choices about what we might say?

CL: That's a good question and I think we purposely - the question we have in the artistic practice portion of the application, is for you to give us as many avenues for us to hop onto. My interests are about formal experiments and contextual responses; not to say that you should be interested in this, because please don't change your interest for my sake, but present yourself in as many forms/avenues as you wish, for us to sink our teeth into. Framing this as an artistic statement is to say, how are you providing us with an abundance of self, in one space? If you were focused on a project it would be about that one thing, but in this way it's for you to be just as expansive talking about yourself. And for us it opens the door to talk to you. If you're applying it's because you're interested in this prompt. If you're not interested in making a book, why are you applying?

Q: if i'm getting this right, the book will be one thing, and will it be created by the Rhubarb team, in terms of putting it together? Or will it be a decision among the artists, the form that this book will take?

CL: In my heart of hearts, it is in total collaboration with all the artists. To be realistic what will likely happen, in our individual conversations we will start to formalize what the publication will actually look like. I'm saying book right now because it's easy to visualize, but it could be a series of posters, it could be a photocopied page 1000 times, it could be one big sign. It is also funding-dependent, because we don't find out about our funding until September.

Q: Where can I find info/bios of the curatorial team on the Buddies site?

CL: I feel like my bio would have been in the news release from when I was hired a year ago, I don't know Theresa and Vanden if you have bios available online.

TC: I can find a bio that I have, I can't think about where one would be right now.

CL: I think what we could do is add them to the website. Not right after the meeting, but in the coming days.

Q: It would be great for transparency to know who you are as artists, as we're being asked for that to apply!

CL: Of course, that makes a lot of sense.

VB: We appreciate that!

Q: The objective of this publication is to talk about process and not necessarily about how we work towards a product; is that right?

CL: I don't necessarily think so, if that makes sense? I think we're always working in a process, and the product will provide evidence of that, but it doesn't need to speak towards process in such a specific way if that makes sense. It can very easily be small ephemera built out of a work that you create. It could be (I always give horrendous ideas in the context of these office hours so please excuse me) if you want to have a conversation with an artist in a zoom call, transcribe it and put it in a book. Or if it were something you were interested in in a physical form and wanted to include.

Q: So it could be a score, and how that score could be translated into different images/composite sort of thing? Could it be something that came out of the process of the score?

CL: Absolutely. It would warrant a larger conversation about how it lives in the scope of everything beside it, but that's absolutely one of the realms of possibility. We talked about having an audio component of the book where we have audio describers describe portions of the book, or commission/engage an illustrator to draw performance descriptions. That could live in the world of someone taking a score that you made and turning it into a composite of drawings.

Q: Would a described show be like a script/narrative from an audience point of view or from a certain viewpoint?

CL: It totally could. I think my own appetite for a script is not as high, but this proposal ‘could it be described from an audience’s point of view’ is interesting to talk about in your own practice and in the context of this process.

Q: Could it be like how casting affects character and vice versa in this time of trying to decolonialize, for example?

CL: Sure. We are super open to things, and want to focus on supporting select artists as much as possible and also empower each of you to envision a dream project in the time of COVID. Ideally this isn’t something that creates stress or pressure, but something simple that can be accomplished.

Q: Actually the call is more like an artist statement that has you speaking about your art in a variety of ways and then the curators will see what ways you can contribute to the publication that is going to emerge.

CL: Very true. That’s the intention.

VB: Can I add one more thing? I also think yes, talk about your art in a variety of ways but also include who your inspirations are/who prompts you to make art, and why you want to make art. We want to get to know what you do, but also who you are and how we can work with you.

TC: To jump off of that, I can’t remember if it was included in the call for this year, but last year what we included was ‘the history of your practice’ like, who is someone that is doing similar things/are you doing something completely different and there’s not someone you can refer to, but who are people right now that would have a similar kind of artistic vision/practice, to add more context. Another thing to note about development for the pieces for all the artists that are in the festival is that it is very much a collaborative process to be in communication with the collective. If an artist said that they had a really big desire to work with a particular person/artist in the community that’s something we would try to foster/help build those relationships (such as mentorships for the festivals and pairings of collaborators for each project) within the publication. This gives more context to this mission and the potential development of everyone’s projects.

Q: I’m spinning a bit—I work with a collective on a regular basis and we have a point of view, we’re about trans representation we’re about representation of people from various different backgrounds, black folx, we’re feminist, we are anti-oppression and we are definitely pro Black Lives Matter and channeling some of those things. We do film, theatre, projections of film within the theatre process, scripted pieces, a little bit of improv but mostly scripted, but it’s often informed by the collective voice. So if we’re writing about a trans woman the collective will have a say in how that role is developed. And if someone has a really strong feeling that a character isn’t represented properly we rework it. So I’m familiar with working within a collective and I feel like when I’m listening/reading the call for submissions, because it’s so different from what I’m used to seeing, I’m struggling a little bit. It’s like when you have a director and they know what

they want and they're not really giving you all the information to lead you to it. I'm not accusing you of this, but I feel like I can't see my way in. I really love Rhubarb and I've loved being a part of it but I'd like to be able to see my way in and I'm trying to get my head around what it looks like and I could use a few more words about what it could look like/be. I start to get excited about a perspective of a trans person sitting down and commenting on the representation in the publication. What interests me in some ways are where are the places that we are still trying to achieve some of these goals, because of financial or practical challenges we're not getting there. If we're doing a publication we can do things that we can't normally do. We can describe what it would be in a utopia and we can describe the frustration with what it is now, and I'm wondering how that fits with the way the collective is coming at this. It makes me worry that what I write down could exclude me. I'm curious about how to let you know about who I am in a way that's going to open doors instead of close them.

CL: It's a really good question that came up at the last office hours as well, and I don't know if I have the most satisfying answer but the kind of trajectory of your work that you're describing right now seems like a super valid way to apply to the festival. You're describing yours/your collective's many interests, and what you're saying is that I'm able to hook into a variety of different things that I'd love to talk to you more about. It's not about closing doors but hoping that the shift in this application process is freeing in a way that allows you to display your different trajectories/hopes/desires.

Q: *What is the format for the application, is it a certain number of pages or do we know that?*

CL: It's on the website, but for clarity here it's a 1000 word artistic statement and we've provided a list of questions if you need help guiding your thoughts. You can also submit support material.

Q: *I too am interested to know more about the guiding collective and the personality of this Rhubarb, if you will.*

CL: What I will say is that Theresa and Vanden and I, our interests are quite different. I come from a performance art context and that explains a lot of my quirks, and the work I'm interested in is often very informal/responsive vs narrative. I'll invite Theresa and Vanden to talk about their interests.

TC: For me I'm more theatre-based, actor/performance, both in training and my artistic practice, but also very poetic/imagistic/metaphorical type of work. I don't want to pigeonhole it into poetry/spoken word, but that is kind of more of the 'style' of things that I'm drawn to, whether it be theatre/performance art/visual art. That's not to say that if it's not within that I will cast it off.

VB: As for me, I also come from a performing background. I went to theatre school and my artistic practice has been on drag/gender performance/ gender fuckery. In particular for me, when I read applications I'm interested in all types of art/mediums, but mainly I get really excited by people who want to fuck with the status quo and anybody who is anti-institution is a friend of mine. I'm really inspired by the Riot Grrrl movement, so if you just want to talk about what you would want to see changed in the Toronto theatre scene or things you like/don't like, in your application, and that's all you tell me, that's great too. Hopefully when we get our bios up on the website it will help you get a sense of where we're all coming from and who we are.

CL: What Vanden touched on re: what are these disruptions of the status quo is a throughline for the three of us. What's different is the ways in which it manifests, or how we approach it. For us, this process is about a multiplicity of voices attempting to challenge and shift the status quo as much as possible. One thing I'm thinking of is how do we use this money in ways that aren't necessarily intended? Do we give someone \$1000 to spend on groceries and we just print a receipt and put the receipt in the book? I'd like for that to be a gesture of how to disrupt how grants/funding usually work, but still have it function as a program of the festival. It is as much about that process/ artistic projects and gestures of radical inclusion are really interesting.

Q: That excites me, I love hearing that. The idea of printing a receipt and being like 'there you go, there's' your product'. There are a lot of people who can't make art right now and don't know where their food is coming from right now so it's valid to me to support an artist in that way.

CL: This is born of COVID. Once CERB cuts off where does that money come from, and for us to be in a position to attempt to answer those questions and attempt to provide modest artists fees. How interesting would it be if our fall season was about generating these acts of kindness that could go a long way. Some parts of the book could be imbued with this sense of change.

Q: I got a grant to work on a play and I've been so focused on trying to find more work it's meant I haven't been focused on doing the work that I've actually been funded for. That scramble/hussle is relatable. For me, when I allowed myself to relax and sleep in and calmly go through my script, it caused a big shift. I had to relax, I had to stop. This forced mental vacation in the middle of all this has been useful in continuing to create. It's very timely to try to figure out how 'pressure will create a diamond' but there's also a certain amount of space/openness that can create as well. My mentor talks about taking breaks and coming back to it fresh. It's hard to do that during this time of 'how do I make a life' not just 'how do I make art'

CL: One of the funny things, in the many zoom meetings I've attended, when asked how I'm doing, I'm responding with 'I'm actively doing nothing as an act of civil disobedience', as a choice. How do we actually recognize the different needs of artists in this current moment, and what do those needs look like in many ways, and how do we help envision making that happen? I'm obsessed with collaborations--so are there folks you've been wanting to talk to for a long time and this is the perfect excuse, where you talk to each other and snippets of that are published, or nothing is, or screenshots of that are. How do we support working as artists first, and the thing that this looks like second? What is the fall/wintertime of dream-making and dream manifesting that we're doing? Instead of stress about having to do this book for you as artists, lets focus on how to make this as enjoyable and as generative as possible and how we can help move your practice forward.

Q: Is there a completion date you're thinking of for this publication?

CL: It is set to be given to audiences in February, because we still have this notion of 'maybe doing an in-person festival'. We're not sure what that looks like but so far we're trying to stick to the February timeline. September is application due/interviews/finding out about grant funding. October/November is when the book artists are creating, December/January is book design and print, and January is when physical interventions are done to the book. It doesn't mean you need to do something physical yourself, it can be someone to do on your behalf. If your score is

to rip out every 20th page, we can help with that, for example, to be ready for February. We'd like to pay our technicians to do some work too.

Q: *Do you have any ideas what a physical festival might look like?*

CL: For me it's a nightmare. The idea of having to see live performance again is very stressful for me. I do not want to be near anyone right now, I haven't even seen anything outside. It could look like artists activating their works somehow, in a way that feels right/not onerous. Or we could just have dinner together. The possibilities are so loose, and it feels weirdly like a last resort moment to imagine a physical thing because no offence but I don't want to see any of you in-person for a long time. I'm a masktivist, so this is my anxiety speaking. But to answer your question, in my opinion something simple and low key if it has to be in person.

VB: I'm pretty hung up on the publication. Like Clayton I can't even imagine being in person in February.

TC: I agree, the only thing I would maybe try to think about is everyone being in that physical space and physicalizing either the printed actions of their book or the artists who did some type of intervention with them, putting that in front of an audience. If it comes down to it, that can be a bigger/deeper conversation with everyone.

Q: *What if we have videos we want to put up online as part of this? I get that you want something not in person but would minor filming of monologues or poetry be an example of something that could be included?*

CL: It's definitely a longer conversation to have, especially with Theresa and Vanden. My perspective is to try to keep this as offline as possible, but I don't want to close any doors or discourage it. That's my one personal impulse.

Q: *Ok more analogue.*

CL: Ya, with the audio book being the only digital thing as an interesting/accessibility thing. (doing an audio described version of the book as the only digital trace of what we've made).

I will say I love having these office hours and being able to engage in this away. Thank you for bringing your questions, hopefully it's helpful/calaritifying. If not, email me anytime at clayton@buddiesinbadtimes.com.

Any other questions?

[None.]

Thanks to everyone for their time! Have a good Tuesday and thank you again for being here.

END OF MEETING

--