

The Rhubarb Festival Office Hours

August 13, 5-6PM ET, on Zoom

Meeting notes recorded by Aidan Morishita-Miki

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Clayton Lee: 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.

Theresa Cutknife: Hi, I'm Theresa, one of the Rhubarb curators. Thank you for being here.

Vanden Boomen: Hi, I'm Vanden, also living in Tkaronto. I'm a multidisciplinary artist and on the Rhubarb curatorial collective.

[Participant introductions]

Context for the call (+ Q&A)

CL: Rhubarb is an experimental festival that's been going on at Buddies for 42 years. This is my second year as Festival Director - Theresa and Vanden were curators last year too. We are working in a process of collective curation. When first applying, I had ongoing discomfort around taking on power (as an asian cis-male) in this moment, and interest in having more people at the table. There's a desire to decenter myself while also shepherding a process. Last year there were four curators - Vanden Boomen, Theresa Cutknife, Claudia Edwards, and Victoria Mata. The process of choosing the folks was through local organizations. A lot of people aren't paid for their labour, and this was important, so I reached out to four organizations in the city whose work I thought was radical or formally experimental to contribute both a curator fee and a curator - these were Aluna Theatre, FADO Performance Art Centre, Native Earth Performing Arts, and Workman Arts. The 2020 festival was the last thing at Buddies before COVID hit. This year, we put together a mission statement as a way of to communicate our vision, and for the sake of documentation

[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.

Q&A

Q: I'm conveying something from Shaista Latif. She's posted a couple of videos and sent e-mails that have gone unanswered. How will those be addressed?

CL: Shaista posted a video last Monday. I reached out this Monday to let her know about the office hours, and they were posted publicly on Tuesday. We have since sent some e-mails back and forth, and I received one this morning that I still need to respond to. We're using the platform of the office hours as a channel of accountability and transparency.

Q: Concerns around restorative justice are being brought up. There's also concern that Rhubarb is doing the dirty work of the institution. I understand that office hours are a place for the ongoing discussion, but can we expect answers to the questions?

CL: Yes, if you have questions we can get into them.

Note: these questions are returned to at the end of the meeting (pp 5-6 in this document).

Q: I'm Interested in the fact that you're looking for proposals from artists specifically. If you're not interested in a project proposal, are you looking for pre-formed collectives, or people who are game to work together?

CL: This is a super valid question, and we'll get to it when we discuss the submissions more specifically.

Submission process (+ Q&A):

CL: We are creating a performative publication. What that means is very up in the air, but will be activated by the kind of submissions received. At the start of the pandemic, we saw people move into the online context quite quickly, and this wasn't necessarily a seamless transition. Often the work wasn't grounded in a digital context, and rather was recreating the status quo in a digital space. We were interested in using the moment as an opportunity to respond to the state of the industry, and how work is being made. It's partly about not wanting to have a digital thing. And thinking about how to still have this festival, and allocate artist fees.

Folks will dream up a project along with the curators. We're thinking about how we allow artists to develop in the context of Canada or Toronto, where you often need a project idea before you can get the money, and then are tied to it, even if the idea changes. So we're proposing a model of submissions where people are talking about themselves, introducing themselves, and then potentially meeting with the curators for interviews. Before, Rhubarb would fall into this "step" method of Toronto theatre, where artists would create a piece at Rhubarb, and then seek to show it elsewhere. We're hoping to shift from project focus to something that allows artists to develop their practice.

Q&A

Q: I'm wondering about meritocracy, and asking artists to pitch themselves "as artists" within this context. What is the system or criteria being used to evaluate submissions and choose a cohort of artists?

CL: All the curators around the table are interested in different things, so we're looking for different things in reading artists' statements (I'm interested in formal experiments and responding to contexts). We're all coming from our own angles. We'll identify artists that we want to have longer conversations with, and see what possibilities lie within that. Does that answer your question?

Q: It's exciting to think about developing practice, but how do marginalized artists advocate themselves "as artists" without a project? Often the way to have access if you're unknown is to bring forth a great idea. I'm intrigued by this chicken and egg situation.

CL: The current model is a chicken, and our attempt to change it is the egg. Or the other way around. The questions are super valid. How do we as artists gain access into a system? There's a legibility to the system because we're in it. The submission process is not about what you've done, it's about your ideas, and what you are thinking about. Questions in the submission try to address this - what are questions you are asking in your work?, what is the lineage of your practice?, etc. You can't remove artistic achievement from it, but we're attempting to understand how artists function to move forward to an interview process to see what projects can manifest in our time together.

Q: I've been somewhat project-oriented in the past but open to challenging that. The work that I'm interested in doing involves some collaboration, and I'm thinking about fellow art-makers to work with. At this point, I'm the main person (no formal collective relationship). Should those other people submit separately? I'm not sure if I want to be in a lead artist role.

CL: I would suggest to apply on your own, and answer the questions as *you* would. There's no assumption that that project will be figured out on the first meeting. When we talk and meet we can dream up the possibilities.

Q: Is it like match-making artists then? If it's process-forward? I dig process and I am fascinated by collaboration. I'm especially thinking about the deadline and the dreamwork that is happening.

CL: I love matchmaking when it comes to curation. There's an element of this that I'm curious about. But not just that. We're trying to ground it in the individual needs of the artist. An artist could come alone and continue that way, but as the process moves forward, it might emerge that you want to meet with or work with a person. One idea/example is for an artist to propose imaginary performances and have an illustrator illustrate them. You wouldn't have to come with an illustrator in mind, that's something we can figure out together as we produce.

Q: On the producing note, you've proposed changing the funding model for this year. How does that work? Will resources be distributed as the process goes on, since we don't know the projects from the outset?

CL: Previously it was a \$300 per artist fee. We're moving towards a per project fee of at least \$1000, which is scary because we don't know what the projects are. The reason to move to this model is to raise the amount. If there are much larger projects (10-20 people, for example), then this can be negotiated, but we're also trying to create a situation where people are paid better, and more equitably across the board.

Q: It's an artist application, but the funding is per project.

CL: We're trying to pay artists more, and in as equal a way as possible. And being as transparent as we can in those processes while recognizing that things may come up.

With regards to the framing as a performative publication, there's a version in which half of the projects are printed in book form, and half are interventions in the physical book. How are we recreating Rhubarb, and how do we see the artists' fingerprints in the book? We've thought about ripped-out pages, post-it notes, a drag cover of the book as possible interventions. It's an attempt to open up the possibilities for artists working in performance who are switching format to a printed medium.

Q: I wasn't sure what performative publication meant, so I'm interested to see that it's actually a book. Are you thinking of distributing it digitally, or having a limited printed edition available in person at Buddies and other sites?

C: The current thought is a limited edition printed book, with each copy physically intervened with. Instead of buying a ticket to Rhubarb, the book can be purchased and picked up or delivered to you. I'm not saying never, but there's resistance to the digital. A printed page has a different feel, and in this time when so much is online, we're interested in evoking a more physical experience.

Q: Do you have a publisher in mind for Rhubarb? I ask because my day-job is to be a literary publisher for a Black queer feminist press based in Toronto — has distribution been considered?

CL: We've thought about it, but there's still lots to be determined.

Q: I'm working on a project that uses audio storytelling/digital stories. In the call you talked about audio walks and audiobooks. In a printed medium, how are these other forms available? And what's the accessibility of a physical/visual document?

CL: The audiobook came out of an initial discussion of our dream version of the book. There is maybe a version where we have audio-describers describing the whole book. We're not closed off to any possibilities at this point. There's an interesting question around how you recontextualize audio or video into a physical book. Part of the reason to call it a performative publication is because the ideal form is a book, but it could be scaled depending on funding (Heritage, e.g.), to a poster, zine, etc. We're not grounding work in anything definitive right now because we don't have clarity on money.

Q: How many proposals are you thinking of accepting? If the curatorial collective interest is one of the guiding factors, what are processes you're thinking of for narrowing down decisions between yourselves? In this match-making selection process, do artists have agency in who they're working with?

CL: Artists will have agency, yes. It's an ongoing dialogue with the artists, grounded in the work and how we can best support them.

How we worked last year was two-fold. First, there's a "no-assholes" rule that gives everyone veto power. And second, each curator takes on a specific project(s) and shepherds it artistically, but goes through me (as Festival Director) around producing, financial, etc.

It's hard to give a number, but between the published projects and the interventions, we're likely looking at about twenty projects.

Q: If you apply as a collective, what's the situation with artist matchmaking?

CL: It's only if the artists want to do it.

Q: I noted that you said you'd spend a minimum of five minutes on support material for each submission. What kind of sense are you looking for from support materials?

CL: We're just trying to get a sense of your work.

Q: I am including a link to the video that Shaista shared, and have some follow-up questions:
<https://www.facebook.com/shaista.latif/videos/10157034262686503/>

- 1. How is the collective addressing the myriad of harms that current leadership has been called out for? These harms include employment violations and discrimination.*
- 2. Is the collective working to responsabilize an institution that has been harmful to BIPOC creators? It is essential that this be addressed if future efforts or publications are to be radical or amount to any change.*
- 3. A corollary to the second question; How do you balance doing a call for submissions which also addresses issues the institution has failed to respond to?*
- 4. Shaista asked for a pause and asked for a dialogue for those who encountered harm, why does the collective have a need to ignore this request and push forward. How can you talk about collaboration and call-ins when it fails to centre and support those who have been harmed previously? Shaista has collected 20 statements of harm.*
- 5. If the collective is non-hierarchical- why does the festival still recognize a director position in the curatorial collective?*
- 6. Is the curatorial team fairly compensated?*

CL: The curators are being paid \$2000 - last year's fee was \$1500. This year's it's \$1500 from the curatorial partner organizations, and a top-up of \$500 from Buddies, while still recognizing that that is not enough. There are ongoing questions around how we get institutions to change to pay people adequately for their work, and through incremental steps, and working towards making sure that these things are budgeted for.

We've been thinking of Rhubarb as a response to Buddies - sole leadership, and single AD-ship. It continues to be that. The question of a pause is an interesting one. As organizations are falling around us, which is productive, I resist the urge to have single voices saying what that is or should look like. And that's where the interest in having many voices at the table, and a multiplicity of visions. Now, we're thinking of Rhubarb as a model for Buddies and for organizations throughout the city, where folks can get paid, and can work together collaboratively. That's not to say there are no bumps, but it's slow movement towards long term change.

How do we address the harms? By trying to work within a system that is free of those harms.

Putting out a for a call for submission right now isn't in ignorance of what's happening but rather to respond to it. And also responding to COVID - I'm not in a position to throw away \$20 000 in a time when CERB is being cut. We want artist fees to be paid, and this is our way through that.

Q: There are individuals who have been harmed. We think redress is needed. Rhubarb is related to an institution that causes harm to artists of colour. The danger of "moving forward" raises the concern that Rhubarb is doing the dirty work of allowing Buddies to sweep this harm under the rug.

CL: Buddies needs to account for the harms that it has caused, and I believe that it will happen. And I'm having discussions internally to try to make sure it is. But it's not a reason to stop the work. We're continuing to have internal conversations about the multiplicity of ongoing processes, and the models we're creating. I think we need to pressure institutions by offering models for better work.

It's interesting to hear about these questions of clarity and discomfort that are coming out of the call, so thank you for all them. We're asking - how do we create an alternate future of how we create?

END OF MEETING

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**Note:* If you have concerns about the instances of harm referred to in this discussion, please reach out to the Buddies Board of Directors, who are actively working on this matter, at board@buddiesinbadtimes.com.*