

## **The Rhubarb Festival Office Hours**

September 2, 2020, 7-8PM ET, on Zoom

Meeting notes recorded by Jacqueline Costa

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### **Introductions:**

**Clayton Lee (he/him):** Welcome everyone. Hopefully you're here for the Rhubarb Festival Office Hours. If not, whatever I guess you can stay if you like. I'd like to acknowledge 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):** Tanisi Hello! I'm Theresa Cutknife and I'm one of the three people of the curatorial collective. I'm so happy for everyone to be here and excited for the session. My pronouns are she/her.

**Vanden Boomen (he/they):** Hi everybody I'm the third curator of the curatorial collective. My name is Vanden or Van. I'm excited to be here, and can't wait to hear your questions. My pronouns are they/he.

**CL:** I speak very quickly, so please let me know either verbally or in the chat (I won't be offended) and I'll try to slow down. I'll start by providing context, then I'll open the floor for questions, then direct it to the call for submissions this year, followed by another opportunity for questions.

[Participant introductions]

### **Context:**

**CL:** This is my second year as Rhubarb Festival Director. I applied for the job in January 2019. At that time Toronto was going through a change in artistic leadership, and it felt discomfort as a cis, queer, male applying for a position of power, so I applied with a curatorial collective in mind. I reached out to local organizations in the city that I believe in/find interesting, and I asked them to choose a curator that was politically radical and formally of interest, whatever that means, and provide their fee as well. Each organization (Workman Arts, Native Earth Performing Arts, Aluna Theatre, and FADO Performance Art Centre) chose one person. Last year we also had Claudia Edwards and Victoria Mata, now we're arriving at year 2 where we're continuing with this model and Vanden Boomen and Theresa Cutknife are continuing with us for the festival. The reason why there's a mission statement on the call for submissions page is to document the work that we've been doing from the past year and a half. I'll read that out loud now.

[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 focus of this meeting is Rhubarb and not specifically Buddies. So if anyone has any questions about what I've just said, the floor is open.

[No questions.]

## **Performative Publication Information:**

**CL:** We are creating a performative publication, also known as 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.

As an example, one of the things we have talked about is that half the artists in the festival would be contributing to content in the book, and the other half offering physical interventions onto the book. Whatever came to mind. This isn't to say this it's the final format but is something we dreamed about in the initial stage, about how do we experience live performance through the book. We wanted to also offer a switch in process. The grant system in the country/province is a project-based thing, where they're applying with projects that are already well in progress, and we're interested in what it meant to have artists not do that, and actually come up with a project specific to the context of the festival. That was something that led the process last year,

and is leading us this year in a different way where instead of asking artists to be project focused, they're putting themselves forward. This ideally centres the artist. We have been asking folks to write an artist statement, and we have some guiding questions on the website to guide your artist statement. The idea is if you have an interest in the prompt and want to do something, we want to hear from you. If you don't, then you shouldn't apply. It's also to see what working with you might look like. We want to have a conversation with you as an artist over the next 6 months together. And by together I mean you're working and we're asking questions.

Anything to add? [No.]

I'd like to open up to questions.

## **Q&A**

*Q: I've been following the process and I've looked at the questions/prompts that we could answer in what we send to you. And the one thing I wasn't clear on is how to get images to you. I was intending to do that via google docs.*

**CL:** Yep that's perfect. You can upload all the images to a google drive folder, and share the link to that folder with us.

*Q: The photos aren't geared to the call itself, but more geared to who I am and what I'm doing.*

**CL:** We do encourage you to think about what you might want to do for the publication, have some ideas in the seed phase, ready for our upcoming interviews. The contributions to the book don't need to be elaborate (though they can be). Part of the reason we wanted to move away from the project proposal is because you're not getting paid to come up with that page of writing/work. We want you to talk about yourself, and then if/when we choose to work with you, we can work on developing a project proposal.

*Q: One of the images I'm including is a score. A score for me is a collage of different images to guide me in my performance. That might be in reference to what you were talking about. If we do get accepted and there is a conversation about what we might be doing for the proposal, I'd also be interested in getting in touch with Jacqueline (Buddies' Technical Director) about how to accomplish what could be done, technically.*

**CL:** I don't know if Jacqueline will be involved in the early stages, we will have a graphic designer available for those kinds of conversations, but we also will have a technical team available to help execute any physical interventions, as a specific strategy to make sure people are getting paid, at this time of financial uncertainty for a lot of people--artists and technicians.

*Q: Following through that, I did manage to find somewhere that last year you funded the horizontal curation by seeking organizations and then they gave you both a curator and a grant, right? So now this is three of you, and I'm wondering about how this is now being funded since it's not the same process as last year. I managed to see some of last year's festival, so I'm wondering what you know so far about how you're going to be proceeding--more so if the three of you have worked together before and if you have ideas for how you'll shepherd the project. How is it going to shift from last year? Mostly this is coming from knowing that when I was*

*working for this festival, without speaking for the festival, my general sense was that it was very hard to fund process-based work and was considered impossible to do, and the main strategy for doing it was to focus on the artists as already accomplished and so guaranteed to deliver a good finished product. I'm very interested in this shift that has shifted both of those things, to process and attempting to eliminate selecting a bunch of polished artist products that have been able to guarantee that product coming from this money. I'm interested that those things, at least in the intention, are already set to be shifted and having the intention before would not necessarily have meant those things could have shifted before. Between last year and this year, the question is how is funding going to work, and thoughts on creating a community of care and if it's a necessary means of survival, what that means? Stuff other than funding, for me, but funding has always been a snap point. I'm not sure if this makes any sense.*

**CL:** What you said makes total sense, so thank you for articulating. The first question was about the funding for the curators, which I'll speak to now. Last year, each of the organizations paid Buddies who paid \$1500 for the curators, and this year they're doing that again and Buddies is topping that off with an additional \$500 for a total of \$2000. What I'm working toward is where Buddies can afford to pay everyone outright, but I'm working on it incrementally--increasing the amount that Buddies pays year over year, to slowly get used to building this into their budget and move away from relying on these other organizations to fund them. There are challenges to the amount of organizations who can afford \$1500 to pay a curator, there are many organizations that don't have the funds but do have the people.

Your second question was around process/product/community of care. I'll say a few things and let Vanden and Theresa add, and let me know if it makes sense. The shift I wanted from pre-Clayton as the Director of the Festival, and Clayton as the Director of the Festival, is to move away from product driven things. There's a funny ladder of steps in Toronto of how to actually become a successful theatre artist. The pattern I was seeing is: you'd have a show you'd present at Rhubarb, then Summerworks, then get into Luminato or whatever. This was the track lots of people were taking. I want to resist that--we want to use Rhubarb as a moment for artists to develop as artists, instead of for artists to develop work. The question of how are we shepherding that, is always in process. I think each artist presents a different set of needs, depending on where they are on their artistic adventure/path of suffering; so how do we as curators respond to these different needs? One simple thing last year was we asked people about artists that interested them. After we made the selection one of the artists, for instance, told us that she loved Jess Dobkins' work and what we did was we made Jess Dobkins her mentor. We tried to meet the artists where they are. So we ground our work in you.

*Q: I want to make sure this is clear, without wanting to attribute that to any other one particular voice, it isn't me expressing concern about how do we have a particular product, but at my time with the festival, when one was figuring out ways to fund... you've found a way to fund people to do process, and at the time it was believed that the only way to fund process was by marketing the artists as existing products, and that was a way to be given money because people knew what to expect, to give you the money. That's not my preference, and I want to make sure that's clear. I don't have concerns about how we will be sure of our product, but that was a concern of those in a position to provide funds. For me, I find that I don't have any interest in commenting about anybody in particular, but what you described as this ladder process, was very much happening. And this emphasis on product took precedence over community, etc. how you're*

*attempting to solve the problem of funding being seen as the reasons why things couldn't be done differently.*

**CL:** Might I offer a reframing of 'funding' to reflect 'you being selected into the festival'?

*Q: I found that it was either possible to do process/artist/care based work and not be paid, or it was possible to get funding and either be product based regarding projects of merit, or artist having already proved themselves to produce valid products. I don't know if that can be eliminated, but I'm seeing a shift in the intention to figure out a way to change the narrative. What I was up against 10 years ago was that that could not be done, you couldn't pay someone and it not be because one of those two things--product or artist of merit. I'm interested in seeing how, for me, it's okay we're trying to do this horizontal curation thing and we're trying to pay everyone. You did that somewhat last year, and I'm interested in attempting to do those things that were considered not feasible if artist fees were going to happen. Guaranteed product warrants funding.*

**CL:** I appreciate you being very specific about the time period, because I think the last 10 years makes more sense for me. We're still waiting for funding, but any artist that is doing anything for the festival, will be paid a fee. Process based work is encouraged and exciting. It's this funny question of like, what parts of the process are made visible in this book form? And one of the things we were talking about was, there are folks who have been doing grocery drives, and buying groceries for folks and giving them away, and how great would it be to give them money to do that work, and have the published ephemera/contribution to the book be just the receipt. Where the notion of product isn't as we know it, but acknowledging that there 'needs' to be some sort of physical thing to go with that, and how invisible that is is totally up to you. We're open to that convo, but it has a wide frame.

*Q: My question touches on that one as well, in the sense of going back to the community aspect of it. I'm very interested to hear more about the opportunity of engaging/learning between artists, and how that collaboration will come together to create this one book as you're talking about, and I'm wondering are these solitary streamlined things into one integrated tangible book, or is there the opportunity to have crossover and interchange with other people as you work on this project?*

**CL:** Great question. I think, in the kind of dream state moment (last week I kept using the term 'heart of hearts') everything is in collaboration with everyone, and everyone is aware of the projects as they're developing. I don't know how feasible that would be, and I think there are two parts to your question's answer. Part one, the impulse of having these physical interventions is a version of call and response, where you're aware of what's in the printed form and you can respond to that with a set of actions/new score/new piece. It's sort of an intertwinedness, but also if you identify in your application that your interest is meeting new artists and working/collaboration in that way then it's up to us to figure out how to make these all fit together. One idea is, are folks proposing an imaginary performance that an illustrator draws out? We're not fixed on anything right now, and in our 'interview' we'd like to figure out what these needs/wants are from you. And if we select you, let's come up with something to help support you. It gives me heart palpitations to think of how this might work, but it's also very interesting. How are we demonstrating care and building up this community? This is work we're really interested in doing. Does this answer your question?

*Q: There's a lot of different facets you could contribute. It seems that it's to each own person's experience that you select, and that answered my question exactly.*

**CL:** What we're looking for in the submission process is language that we as curators can hook onto, that can draw us into where your brain is at, to bring us into the interview phase, figure out what kind of rapport do we have, and how can we work together to make this experience as pleasurable and generative as possible. One of the things we had last year was people came in and knew what they wanted to do and we were there to turn on the lights and sell tickets, which, fine, if that works for you so be it. But this year we want to know who you are and how you approach projects. Not wanting this to be a project, (having a publication as the festival, the likelihood of you being able to sell this 'project' to someone else is pretty slim, but if you want to do it, good luck!). We'll support you, but it's about creating something that is made for this specific context.

*Q: You were talking about hiring an animator if that should be part of the process that evolves out of this or that you were going to be having an audiobook be part of the process. Would the hiring of an animator come out of that artist fee that we would be given or would the festival find an animator to do what we dream up?*

**CL:** It depends on the project and the scope of work. What we're trying to do is make sure we pay folks as much as possible. So ideally no it doesn't come out of the artist fee. In the illustrator example, we'd pay them \$1000 and ideally they work on multiple, smaller contributions and this be a puzzle piece for what we're doing.

*Q: Right, so like I could find a way to illustrate my things or what I dream up, but some unifying factor might be helpful.*

**CL:** Cohesion isn't necessarily the goal.

*Q: You were estimating maybe 20 project/puzzle pieces that may or may not fit together, how many initial dreamer people were you trying to get together in the first place? Are you just going to see what comes in and say these 100 or these 10 people are good people to start trying to get generating with?*

**CL:** There's no magic number. Rather the number is 3 curators and 20 'projects', but even that number is so fluid. It depends on what the applications are like.

*Q: So you have no idea how many people those projects will involve?*

**CL:** In putting forward a project fee, because Rhubarb functions on a \$300 fee per artist model, and the goal with basing it per project is to pay everyone \$1000, and not have huge teams coming forward to have to split the \$1000.

*Q: What are you looking for in the question about lineage? If you could elaborate on that. I haven't had enough conversations about how that works yet.*

**CL:** Yeah, I love people knowing their lineage. There's a funny thing in this localized theatre scene where there's a memory of maybe 4 years. What we see, for example, is a show that

does well 1 year and we see tropes being repeated for the next 3 years, and then the cycle starts over. I'm interested in people who know more than the short term memory of that, and who know that the things we do come from different backgrounds. For me, a lot of my stuff was about food/feeding people, and that comes with a specific contemporary art context, and for me it's the idea that hopefully people will do the research to learn about the lineage that they don't already know, but also to give us additional pieces of information to hook into. I.e. if you were to say you're in the lineage of Rirkrit Tiravanija, I know what kind of work you do. And by naming these names it's about getting a better sense of who you are. You're not Jenny Holzer, etc. I'm naming people from performance art backgrounds because that's where I come from.

*Q: For each of you, what would your desired purpose for this manuscript or publication be, and what would your ideal dream outcome for this be? Obviously there's so much unknown, but what inspired that tangible physical thing?*

**VB:** You know when you start to follow new artists on Instagram and your newsfeed is filled with cool people making cool stuff and suddenly the act of scrolling becomes engaging or, dare I say, inspiring? I'd love for the publication to be a handheld version of that - a snapshot of new artists with new ideas and new ways of thinking about art and performance. Ideally it will be an amazing book to keep on your coffee table or in your bathroom.

**TC:** To jump off of that, for me when we were in the beginning stages of talking about everything and a desire to not have a digital festival, my hope with this book/reimagining of the festival/process, is the opportunity to show artists and the development of a different way of working for this 'new world' that we're living in (so cliché). How can we reimagine what our work looks like, how we respond to the world but in these new/imagined (or even considered old) ways of coming together. For me it's another way for artists to put their work forward in a way that they want, in this format.

**CL:** I want to have my fall spent talking about art, and talking about--god forbid let's talk about art/the possibilities for a second, form and language and all these things, I want us to have conversations about language as material, or gestures, everything. This is what my body craves right now. Second part of that is that one of the things that is harder to get into the physical festival because of tech requirements/needs, is actual responses to context. You have this festival that plops down for two weeks, and the performances that repeat and don't really change each night because of the technical restraints. I'm really interested in the ways in which we as artists can see something and are creating in response to that. This is why I talk about the call and response of the artists responding to the physical publication. We lose our sense of creation as a response to something in the immediate. I love that shit. We're not looking for elaborate, 10-piece orchestral scores, what we really want is for you as artists to be using these moments to think. There's something rich in the opportunity of responses to context that go unexplored in festival context. That's what I'm craving seeing. I want us to come to February and feel really nourished by what we've done. I want it to be as low stress as possible and feel like we did something really interesting, and for us to feel--this is cheesy--nourished by the relationships we are building/have built through this process.

If you have questions you can email me. Thanks for coming. I was feeling fatigued at the beginning of this and now I'm feeling better. These office hours feel nice, it feels like a moment where we can imagine what is possible. We are trying, as curators, to not project our own

desires onto others' needs, and these office hours feel like the moment to imagine what we're doing. Of course the applications are due on Friday so that's a real moment to imagine the possibilities! But these feel good in nice ways.

**END OF MEETING**

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