

ACTIVISM AND AESTHETIC PRACTICES

ELIZABETH CHITTY AND PATRICK MAHON



ELIZABETH CHITTY

Streaming Twelve [installation view], 2014

Is your work meant to be understood as a form of activism? Can you talk about your role as an artist in terms of activism and politics?

E: Because I see any work as completed by the viewer's subjective reception of it, I tend to not have an opinion on how my work is meant to be understood; I have artistic intent in what I set out to do. With *Streaming Twelve*, I am communicating my fascination with the cultural geography of the Twelve Mile Creek, the main waterway where I live, with the intent that, for the viewer, this engagement with place will awaken or strengthen emotional, intellectual, sensorial and aesthetic responses that enliven everyday life. I also believe that this engagement is the basis of participatory democracy (because when we are disengaged we don't participate) and that therefore it is possible that art can support or even motivate political change-making. To extend this logic, the vividness art brings to life could be regarded as a means to an end, but I am firmly a both/and person – therefore art is an end in itself as well as a means to varied ends, including the political. Therefore, my work could be and could not be a form of activism.

I tend toward a narrow definition of "activist art," which is that it represents a polemic and posits a position or strategy, which *Streaming Twelve* does not. (As an aside, in life I have tended to be uneasy with being called an activist out of a concern that I haven't done enough to earn the label, but I accept it at this stage simply because others describe me in that way.)

P: The word *activism* might be thought by some people as invoking a "means-ends" type of engagement whereby the artist or cultural practitioner engages in strategies that are intended to elicit direct responses or outcomes. I'm certainly not opposed to this sort of activity in culture, but as a way of thinking about my practice, it's limiting. I think that a "poetics," which operates in all art in some form or another, needs to be understood to figure within the toolkit of the so-called activist artist. So, I like the possibility of expanding the idea of activism in artistic contexts to include practices that take seriously the role of the artist in social and political life and discourse, but do so in ways that foreground *aesthetic* engagement. So, a practice that is predicated on addressing urgent problems or preoccupations, but does so by insinuating itself into public "discussions" in novel and even subtle ways, can for me be considered as an activist one. As such, in my work as an artist I choose to respond to some of the contemporary questions that perplex us, but I try to do so in ways that enlarge the field of inquiry and even usefully complicate the ways we talk about the moment in which we find ourselves and about our options.

To be specific, in *The Source*, my work features three "shipwreck"-inspired wall structures. I purposefully made these to appear as strange entities caught between "destruction and becoming." In this way, I am hoping to utilize a Benjaminian form of allegory: addressing the ruins of the past, of modernity, in a way that also proposes an imagined – if perhaps precarious – future.

How do you link your aesthetic strategies and choices within your “politics” as an artist?

E: Here are two specific examples from *Streaming Twelve*. I determined very early on that I wanted to take the global issue regarding the concept of ownership of water and apply it to the local. Early research and the tangle of public entities governing hydroelectric power led me to the concept of governance. Because the number one issue in my personal politics is the necessity of changing the relationship between First Nations and settlers, it was a matter of personal integrity that I include the treaty governing our region. I wanted it spoken in an Indigenous language party to the treaty as a way of addressing problematics of voice. (The process of choosing the Nanfan Treaty and getting it translated into Mohawk is itself a story of issues around colonialization.) Audio-mixing decisions among the three audio streams were entirely aesthetic and done intuitively in the studio. (They were the sound of electricity being generated at DeCew Generating Station #1, the spoken annual report excerpts and the spoken treaty.)

The archival video is cut to a fast tempo and a 4/4 beat, and the verbatim text from the annual reports of the Ontario Hydro-Electric Commission for 1942-44 (Legal and Right-of-Way and Hydraulic Engineering section excerpts) is spoken to a basic rock beat. I don't expect that this detail is experienced or even evident to the listener and viewer, but these methods build “texture” into documentary sources with the intention that it make the “dry” content more accessible to a broad public. I have continually struggled with the divide between my aesthetic interests and accessibility for a non-specialist public. I find this politic more difficult to label than politics around water or First Nations issues, for example. It is by no means a simple matter of “democratic” versus not.

P: While I'm sympathetic to the kinds of art practices where strategies are determined according to the dictates of a project and its specific conceptual or political intentions, my work doesn't function like that. I want it to register as operating in a way that is accountable to some of the “traditional” aspects of aesthetic discourse and practice (including insofar as such terms as *beauty* and even *taste* can be talked about critically

in our times), so that viewers can locate what I'm doing against a backdrop that includes ideas about the long-standing roles of artists in societies. I'm strongly committed to the idea that artists have a distinct and important job to do as citizens – not a job that is in any sense “superior” to that of other citizens, certainly – and I want the terms of my engagement to be recognized as the very terms that artists have historically been expert in handling (visual representation, mimesis, etc.). This means that I try to produce my work in a way that fits within a category that values “expressive art,” but in such a manner that the expression is directed toward a public with an expectation of art as requiring some form of engagement and, ideally, a *response*. I think of this as a political gesture in itself, one that implicitly demands a relationship with an “other.”

Are there other themes that are important to you?

E: I have almost always worked from my lived experience as opposed to specifically artistic frames, and there are many and varied themes in my work. The most “activist” work I have made is probably *Song for a Blue Moon* (2004 performance), which had peace and non-violence as its theme. *Streaming Twelve* is third in a series of works about the North Niagara watershed. The second, *Distance of Their Mouths* (2011 performance), interpolated personal narrative into the landscape of the numbered creeks, disrupting the convention of the land as something to be viewed and consumed. While that is a theoretical and even political position, the work was largely driven by the deep grief I was living through.

I would choose my spiritual practice as the spinal column of my life; more than my politics, however, they are intertwined. How I live my life and make my work have always been interdisciplinary, both in the relationship among artistic disciplines and regarding the content silos of thought human beings create in order to be in this chaotic world.

P: In the essay I wrote that appears in this publication, I have addressed themes regarding the “pictorial,” and “time,” and also “colour” and “apology.” These are all significant to my own practice as an artist and, I think, resonate broadly within *The Source* as an exhibition.



PATRICK MAHON

Exquisite Corpse Water Drawing Book [detail], 2013-14

Produced with artists: Caroline Boileau, Sheila Butler, Sean Caulfield, Chris Down, Sara Hartland-Rowe, William Noah, Allison Norlen, Ben Reeves, Diana Thorneycroft, and Colette Urban.

Handmade accordion-folded book with twelve panels and cloth binding, mixed media, dimensions variable.