

## What Are Our Supports? A Conversation with Joni Low

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# WHAT ARE OUR SUPPORTS? A CONVERSATION WITH JONI LOW

**Karen Henry**

*What Are Our Supports?* was a series of artist's projects in public space in Vancouver during 2018, curated by Joni Low and co-presented by Or Gallery and Richmond Art Gallery.<sup>1</sup> Five artist groups addressed this question of supports amidst current conditions of environmental, social, political and economic precarity. Germaine Koh, Aron Louis Cohen and Russell Gordon; Emily Neufeld and Cease Wyss; S F Ho and Elisa Ferrari; DRIL Art Collective with Elisa Ferrari, John Brennan, Justin Patterson, and Michele Helen Mackenzie; and Andrew Lee, Khan Lee and Francis Cruz responded with sensory-rich projects, approaching art in public space as a form of research, experimentation, incidental encounters and collective learning with unexpected publics.

**Francis Cruz, Andrew Lee and Khan Lee, *The People's Salon*, 2018.**  
Hairstylist equipment, flag, polaroid camera, light and sound.  
Photo: Michael Love.

**Karen Henry** **This project asks a big question. Right now, so much is in flux; there is insecurity at every level. The last few years have been unsettled in relation to power and representation in public space, with growing extremes of wealth and poverty, and now with the COVID-19 pandemic and the twin crises in social and racial justice. This has led to urgent demands for change in policing and to the dismantling of public statues commemorating racist histories. Your project took place before these crises but seems prescient. In Vancouver this past summer, this anger toward what has traditionally been celebrated is focused on a statue of Gassy Jack, a big-talking saloon owner who had two Squamish wives, the second being the 12-year-old niece of his first wife. What prompted you to explore this question of what is supported in public space?**

**Joni Low** Though we hadn't anticipated the question's resonance today, these conditions were present when the project's idea first began in 2016. The spatial practices of artists in Vancouver, many of whom work collectively, were the inspiration: I admired their tenacity in engaging everyday politics in intimate ways, often outside gallery contexts. How do they interrupt a capitalist culture of individualism, competition, progress, profit, scarcity

and (paradoxically) waste—the structures and processes we've inherited that are *not sustainable*? How do they draw attention to support—in a city with rampant urban development, an overheated real estate market, gig economies and affordability crises that displace so many? How do they make perceptible the material, relational, temporary and ongoing supports that are foundational—yet often overlooked? I thought of friendship as an artistic medium, and of the *crucial* yet often invisible supportive labour in contemporary art—those continuously working behind the scenes to make different kinds of representation possible.

The book that jelled these questions for me was Celine Condorelli's *Support Structures*, “a manual for what bears, sustains, and props; for those things that encourage, care for, and assist; for that which advocates, articulates... stands behind, frames, and maintains:... for those things that give support.”<sup>2</sup> It immediately resonated with these artists' practices. The book asks to be read as a construction site and a proposition for future action, examining support structures that elude representation: “Can we refocus our attention to thinking through the lens of support?...[F]oregrounding support also proposes to understand production through forms of mediation and interface towards the making of place, which does not produce objects but *relationships to context*.”<sup>3</sup>



TRANSFORMATION



MAINTENANCE



Germaine Koh and Aron Louis Cohen, with Russell Gordon, *Afterlives (currency)*, 2018. Aluminum, copper, smelter, heat. Photo 1: Michael Love; photos 2, 3, 4 : Joni Low.

**Why did you choose this park and its particular audiences?**

**JL** We chose Cathedral Square Park—an outdated downtown park built for Expo '86 with a stage and overhang (whose Plexiglas was removed to prevent overnight sleepers underneath). Its fountain is also a support structure: a cooling system for BC Hydro's underground substation. The park hosts a wide intersection of publics, from folx living in tents, students, luncheoners, business professionals, cyclists, and people getting high. Across from the park, luxury condominiums have now been built, an old brick youth hostel closed, and Amazon will move into the old Post Office down the road. I wanted artists to interrogate and experiment within these conditions.

**In Vancouver, development has determined the most substantial public art budgets, but the City also commissions artist-initiated projects and supports non-profit art**

**organizations to produce public art projects. Germaine Koh's *Boothy*, the "venue" for your artist projects, received funding from the Public Art Boost, a two-year initiative to fund commissions for artists, increase the impact of art in public space and reach diverse audiences. What were the initial supports and limitations for the project? Did each project operate autonomously or did the artists work together? Did you discover new supports for art in the process—from the public, for example?**

**JL** The funding enabled us to do the project—which we are grateful for. Yet we're also aware that previous City governments are largely responsible for the developer-driven city building that created our affordability crises and the strains on social support systems. *And* that some of this public amenity funding is re-directed towards arts and culture as a form of "rebalancing." So our responses exist within these lived contradictions.

Emily Neufeld with Cease Wyss Huckleberry, *common place*, 2018. Hemlock, salal, licorice fern, oxalis, soil, sound. Photos 1, 3: Michael Love; Photo 2: Joni Low.





S F Ho with Elisa Ferrari, *Outer Plexus*, 2018. Plastic tent, plants, surveillance camera, binaural sound. Photo 1: S F Ho; photo 2: Joni Low; photo 3: Michael Love.

Through this, we commissioned Germaine's *Home Made Home: Boothy*, the projects' "container"—itself a coy commentary on the limitations of affordable space in this city.<sup>4</sup> A small, moveable and convertible aluminum structure designed to create public points for exchange resembling a 1950s telephone booth—*Boothy* is "smart," with solar-powered and flexible interfaces, something an individual could potentially sleep in. Its kit-of-parts approach allows multiple identities and transformations, which the artists emphasized in wonderful ways. Koh's object-based works act as platforms to support incidental social scenarios, connecting the conceptual aspects of her practice to the relational—I see her practice being that *bridge*.

The artists' initial supports included an autonomous production budget, artist fees, and wages for time on-site. As projects launched consecutively in Koh's *Boothy*, there were definitely overlaps between groups through resource sharing and building upon previous expressions, like a musical score. Sonic elements were a constant throughout: Emily Neufeld and T'uy't'atnat Cease Wyss' *common place*—an Indigenous ecosystem installed in the booth with an accompanying soundtrack of forest birds—was followed by S F Ho's *Outer Plexus*—with Elisa Ferrari's binaural recording of EMF frequencies surrounding the substation. Ho transformed the booth into a surveillance portal, alerting us to invisible networks and interconnections in public space. DRIL Art Collective's *Regrounding the Footnotes*—a stained-glass light box of frottage drawings from the surrounding built environment—invited a sonic response from Elisa and John Brennan, Justin Patterson and Michelle Helen Mackenzie, who remixed sonic rubbings of area surfaces with nearby church bells. Andrew Lee, Khan Lee and Francis Cruz' *The People's Salon*, which offered free haircuts to the public as forms of care and trust, closed with a sound and light performance that drew a large crowd, including priests from the adjacent church. We did everything the artists envisioned: for *Afterlives (currency)*, Germaine Koh, Aron Louis Cohen and Russell Gordon set up

a smelter to transform the public's electronic aluminum and copper waste into coins, posing questions on value, waste and speculative futures.

The artists supported each other, creating a shared spirit and ongoing conversations. Germaine visited each project and helped with *Boothy*'s tech support; Or Gallery stored it and facilitated outreach and administration; Richmond Art Gallery helped with events and social media. Wider public support arrived in unexpected ways—the most energizing being conversations with passersby and visitors. The projects showed how artists work together, through mutual-aid, improvisation and a critically-engaged "pleasure activism," to imagine different possible futures and ways of being together.

#### Can you expand on the term "pleasure activism"?

**JL** Yes! It's from adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, which I was reading during the project's run. brown is a social justice facilitator, emergent strategist, doula, healer, and pleasure activist with strong roots in black feminist theory and Octavia Butler's writings. Exploding the myth that changing the world is just another form of work, she says: "Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy... Ultimately, [it] is us learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet."<sup>5</sup> Her focus on therapeutics, care for self and others, empowerment, and creating positive patterns in our everyday lives in a way that is *at once political*, is compelling. What are our unrealized desires? How might following them take us to new places in our collective consciousness? I feel that the *Supports* projects did this in different ways, subverting dominant everyday patterns even if temporarily.



DRIL Art Collective, with sonic response by John Brennan, Elisa Ferrari, Michelle Helen Mackenzie, Justin Patterson, *Re-grounding the Footnotes*, 2018. Oil stick, paper, photographic transparencies, light, sound. Photos: Michael Love.

**Vancouver declared itself a City of Reconciliation in 2014 and committed to raising awareness of the First Nations as foundational to this place, and to including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətal (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations in future city planning. Can you share more about the Indigenous histories and ways of being that were part of your project?**

**JL** Reconciliation was definitely on our minds—something we are now deepening through a compendium publication of artist reflections and scholars, poets and curators’ writings. Emily Neufeld and Cease Wyss’ *common place*, which formally launched the *Supports* series, began with reimagining these lands *before* colonization and ideas of property ownership, when the local Nations cared for it as shared collective space. The artists’ indigenous ecosystem, installed directly in *Boothy*—soil, salal, red huckleberry, licorice fern and oxalis—comprised medicinal plants the First Peoples utilized. So, it began with remembering the foundations of this place, and with healing. As Cease has said, “The land owns us. The answers to our ailments can be found in the plants around us.” Holistic sensory engagement—smell, touch, sound and sight—was their way of inviting people to intimately tune into the historic knowledge systems of our life-in-common with the more-than-human. The plants made this present. This grounded the projects in a feeling of shared stewardship. S F Ho’s *Outer Plexus* also spoke to settler-immigrant reconciliation, solidarity, and the right to respectfully organize and occupy, referencing tent cities in parks, as well as recent protest imagery from both #NODAPL “Water is Life” and Vancouver Chinatown’s community-led resistance to “105 Keefer,” a condominium proposed and historically rejected in 2017.

As we are an intercultural group—Indigenous, Asian diasporic and white, from different diasporic generations and circumstances—there are certainly shared sentiments between Indigenous and non-western epistemologies that deeply connect us: the focus

on collective over individual well-being, spiritual beliefs linked with nature, and the symbolism of service and reciprocity. These projects emphasized ways of empathically connecting *beyond* the constructs of race, gender or sexual orientation that too often categorize and divide. While I appreciate that identities deeply inform perspectives, as a curator I’m also responsive to artists’ wishes as to how much this frames the work. The collective reconciliation feels to be in bringing diverse perspectives together in a way that is respectful of unceded territories, and in restoring gratitude for the under-recognized and foundational supports interwoven in public life.

**In 2015, Peter Morin, Tania Willard and Gabrielle Hill created a series of bus shelter posters based on the surrealist technique of exquisite corpse. In a later article, the artists described their approach as “disjunctive collectivity,” as a means of affirming difference and “... especially important in the context of talk about reconciliation. Reconciliation as a concept is problematic in many ways, not the least of which are the implied goals of putting our division behind us and working towards closure and a unified nation. Dissent, difference, and contestation drive the constant formation and reformation of our shared existence, our shared space ...”<sup>6</sup> How do you think projects such as yours complicate the experience of the city and contribute to reconciliation?**

**JL** I love this description of a “disjunctive collectivity.” It conjures up images of 21st century international pro-democracy protests for social, economic, racial and gender equality, for ethical governments and environmental advocacy: The Arab Spring, Occupy, Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, Dakota Pipeline Protests, The Women’s March, and many more... Occupy was criticized for not having specific demands, yet the beautiful thing about a multi-issue protest is *precisely* its disjunctiveness: revealing how intersectional the issues are and solutions need to be, in solidarity with one another,



Francis Cruz, Andrew Lee and Khan Lee, *The People's Salon*, 2018. Hairstylist equipment, flag, polaroid camera, light and sound. Photo 1: Michael Love; photo 2: Joni Low.

in non-binary ways. It is amazing to see and participate with so many publics out on the streets, coming together to vocalize, visualize and imagine a different world. The *Supports* projects are modest compared with these inspiring movements, yet they respond to these very social conditions, in the spirit of these emergent collectivities.

I see *What Are Our Supports?* as part of an incremental mindfulness: coming to experiences with a “beginner’s mind,” as Zen philosopher Shunryu Suzuki says.<sup>7</sup> I’m passionate about neurodiversity and neuroplasticity, and the belief that humans can continuously *be and shape anew* if the will is there. Art shifts habitual dynamics and entrenched thoughts, feelings and behaviour—sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually. Like any practice—artistic, athletic, meditative, social justice—it’s something one commits to over time. Temporary public art forms that are experiential, durational and process-based acknowledge how life is perpetually in-motion and disjunctive—in contrast to the static reification of colonial statues that are now being defaced and toppled. I feel that temporary forms allow space for experimentation and failure, for more perspectives all at once—complicating a singular representation of this place and the range of artistic expressions in public memory. These projects emphasized the tenor of support, care and empathy that we need more than ever today.

1. Project page: [www.richmondartgallery.org/what-are-our-supports/](http://www.richmondartgallery.org/what-are-our-supports/).
2. Céline Condorelli, *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009/2015), 6. [Online]: [bit.ly/2JFXiAt](http://bit.ly/2JFXiAt).
3. Ibid., 7.
4. See [www.richmondartgallery.org/home-made-home](http://www.richmondartgallery.org/home-made-home) and <http://homemadehome.ca>.
5. adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), 3-18.
6. The New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective, “unreconciling public art,” in *The Land We Are: Artists & Writers Unsettle The Politics of Representation*, Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall, eds. (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2015), 55.
7. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (Boston & London: Weatherhill, 1970/2005).



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**Joni Low** is an independent curator and critic whose research explores interconnection, intercultural conversations, sensory experience, public space and their attendant shifts in contemporary life.