IMPROVISATORY CITY PERFORMANCE AND RELATIONAL ART: VANCOUVER, CRAWLING, WEEPING, BETTING

by

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Abstract

This analysis of the performance and installation project *Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting* (2014) is a case study of improvisation and creativity in environmentally engaged relational art. I argue for the politically transformative possibility inherent in the unfolding of material-semiotic and affective relations of improvised performance events. VCWB uses stories and bodies to engage historical colonial power and the structures that give form to our experiences of urban cultural geographies. Focusing on the centrality of the body to creativity (and drawing on Manning 2009), I connect participatory performance in the city to the Deleuzian notion of a body-becoming; a sensing, moving, and thinking body that is always in a process of re-identification and re-articulation in reciprocal relation with the environment.

Central to VCWB’s form of improvisatory relational art are concepts of generosity and co-responsibility, which are used to create caring reciprocal relations between performer-participants and the environment. I argue VCWB prompts and sustains a relation of antagonism (following Bishop 2004) in its experimental performances. A multiplicity of historical affective associations and encounters with landscape, presented in narrative and other works, challenge participants to confront difference, dislocation, and uncertainty, producing movement and ‘dialogue.’ I use the term spaces of possibility to describe relations in which frictions become creative taking-off points for movement and thought. VCWB street performances highlight the antagonism and possibility that is inevitable to unpredictable encounter in a lively world.

VCWB’s particular form of art making is processual, generative, and its affects proliferative. In using the example of VCWB’s non-representational mapmaking I expand the scope of improvised performance in the city to consider how gatherings in moments recompose places in novel material-semiotic and affective relations.
Preface

This Master’s thesis is an original work based on research conducted by the author in 2014 and 2015.

Original works of David McIntosh and Chris Bose provide a large portion of the data used in this analysis, including stories from the book *Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting* (Bose and McIntosh 2014), and David McIntosh’s *Invocation* (2014), a previously unpublished work quoted and analyzed in detail in section 3.

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1. Prologue: Maps

To think topologically is to think dynamically: it is to situate the movement of thought at its transformational vector, deforming it into its potential. When we rerender the form static, when we stop the process, we are shortchanging the experience. (Manning 2009:170)

_Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting_ is the name of the poetry chapter book featuring 12 stories written by artists David McIntosh and Chris Bose. They are detailed stories of people, sites and happenings, but they are not just a dictation of history. They are poetic imaginings and affective reflections on city experience and memory, composed as supporting texts for a series of walking performances in Vancouver called walking projects, which occurred as part of a larger project called _Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting_ (VCWB) in winter 2014. The small, plain paperback was published in partnership between battery opera performance and the artist-run centre UNIT/PITT Projects. McIntosh and Bose each wrote six of the stories, appearing alternately throughout the book, based upon their own experiences in the city. The result pairs the distinct voices of a white man with several generations of family history in Vancouver and a First Nations man of Kamloops who has traveled between the two cities throughout life. The stories often read as journeys, reflecting their authors’ creative process of walking familiar routes to visit old haunts in the city. The narratives thus present the reader with a series of pathways and maps, tracing Bose and McIntosh’s “separate trajectories” (battery opera performance 2015) through a city itself fractiously composed by recent colonial delineations of territory and older practices and traditions of place making. Echoing his poetry during a personal communication, Bose remarked, “Vancouver has this really dark history that seeps into the ground. And people hear it on a certain level, and relive it, or are a part of it… It’s a dark city” (Bose 2015).
For some there is a feeling that sustains in the city’s ever-changing landscape,¹ its “ground” still “teeming with artifacts” (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np) of the lifeways this land has supported, the city continuously razed and built over with the shining facades of new investment. Bose produced a series of small black and white illustrations that appear at the beginning of each story. They are low-budget reproductions with notebook bindings still visible on some edges, featuring buildings, mountains, crows on power lines, and also phantoms, weapons and drug paraphernalia—traces of a life between Kamloops and Vancouver. They hint at the changing landscape, the power and privilege riding in city structures, and fear and danger lurking within a “glittering…international city” (Bose 2015). In conjunction with the stories they accompany, Bose’s illustrations have been referred to as “maps.” As dynamic improvisatory events, walking projects are the culmination of this unconventional conception of the map. They are created in ‘movements of thought’ of the kind artist, dancer and philosopher Erin Manning describes at this section’s opening.

“Maps” is also the header for the book’s preface. It begins with an excerpt about European colonial mapping and place naming, followed by a comment from co-author McIntosh that sets the tone for the book and the VCWB project as a whole. It asks the reader to consider the politics of land or territory (belonging to whom?), and to consider how these stories, as traces of deeply particular experiences that make up life lived in place, sit in relation to colonial conquest and the science, wealth and power of imperial place making (cf. Anderson 1983).

Stories such as Strathcona Park Eagles (Bose and McIntosh 2014) are populated with details about the Vancouver landscape, the specifics of its street names, public and cultural institutions, and architecture. Featured for example are Vancouver Specials, a common house

¹ Akin to the feeling that rides in and moves bodies (Manning 2009), the environment carries atmospheric sensations or affects that authors such as Kathleen Stewart (2007, 2013, 2014) have likened to an electric charge.
design in East Vancouver and a hallmark of 1960s and 1970s residential expansion in the city. More than mere object or artifact, these are lived materials\(^2\) whose affective relationships with story narrators are told in gritty details of memory and emotional association. The landscape calls forth such affective traces for the writers as they walk the city, an experience they intended to pass to audience-participants during walking projects.\(^3\)

More than mere reflections on a person’s everyday experience, the stories index sociopolitical and material conditions of life in Vancouver, the lasting legacy of colonial land dispossession and cultural and material disenfranchisement, the resource economies that have shaped Vancouver’s development, and a built urban environment inflected with the power of transnational prospecting and investment. *Strathcona Park Eagles* probes the history of public parkland, its controlled leisure space once a squatting ground for the unemployed (Bose and McIntosh 2014). In another story called *Glad Tidings*, Vancouver Specials conjure for the narrator a bifurcated association of privilege and prosperity with risk, danger and impermanence.

The maps created by the project’s performance events clearly were not maps in the Cartesian sense, a calculated and gridded view from above (Casey 2005). VCWB’s artist-participants did not follow such a horizontal-vertical grid to read place as representation.\(^4\) Following the provocative suggestion of the painter Francis Bacon, Manning might relate VCWB’s walking maps to a “diagram” (2009:10). Rather than a reduction of experience to theory and to stasis, here diagram means something else. Diagrams to Manning (2009:10) are not complete or settled compositions but express “tendencies for [the] actualization” of movement

\(^{2}\) I borrow from Tim Ingold (2010, 2013, 2015) and others who figure materiality as lively, inherently processual, and bound up with experience and perception.

\(^{3}\) Walking projects echo in a number of ways the Situationist International’s study of psychogeography and the related practice of dérive (Debord 2006[1957]).

\(^{4}\) This calls to mind Michel de Certeau’s (1984:91) explication of the everyday practice and knowing of urban environments—the pragmatic relational acts of “ordinary practitioners of the city”—contra the totalizing representation of the administrator’s city map.
and thought. The diagram of an artwork is the way we feel and experience its expression, rather than the way we ‘read’ an artwork’s representation. “[Diagrams] must remain intensities-in-the-making, force fields for future thought” (Manning 2009:10). This describes the relationality and contingency of VCWB’s walking projects, and in turn, their inherent productive possibility.

Against the horizontal and the vertical lines of the grid of organization, Deleuze and Guattari pose the diagonal. Every artist ‘knows intuitively’ that the diagonal is a line of movement and instability. It is easy to lie horizontally or stand vertically, but very much harder to orientate yourself diagonally. Attempt this and you will fall! In the schema of the grid of organization, creation is the mutant line, the diagonal. It detaches itself from ‘the task of representing a world’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:296). For Deleuze, the work of art can leave the domain of representation in order to become experience. (Bolt 2004:48)

Creating these “maps” in performance means working with movement or “line[s] of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:204) that take off diagonally, feeling the way in the opacity of disorder and uncertainty rather than drawing a connecting line between ordered, pre-plotted points (Bolt 2004; Casey 2005; Ingold 2015; Manning 2009). The diagonal line is an apt expression for approaching the material world not as an ordered set of linear narratives, universal laws, or neat categorizations, but as alive and “rich” in its unpredictability and possibility (Crouch 2010; Thrift 2004:123). Scholars of the material and affective in worldmaking and creativity describe life approached from this unsettled, “in-between” (Ingold 2015:147), “fuzzy” (Bolt 2004:125), or “awkward” (Thrift 2004:123) position or space. Relational art projects (Bishop 2004, 2006; Bourriaud 2002) are created by improvising ‘subjects’ operating in this space, experiencing life as a series of contingent events and incommensurate perspectives and stories (cf. Connerton 2011; Rosaldo 1980). VCWB’s maps are an exemplification of art and improvisatory performance as alternate approaches to our material worlds and histories. Fundamentally this is also an alternative conception of politics acknowledging an ever-present potential for new trajectories (Manning 2009; Thrift 2004).
2. Studying *Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting*

What happens when we make art? In this paper I focus on the social materiality of performance events and “techniques of relation” (Manning 2009:41) as a palpable form. I argue that VCWB carries the qualities of non-representational\(^5\) or experiential art, and focus on the role of the body in improvised performance events. These events participate in moving and shaping environment, thought, and social relation. For this I draw from a body of literature whose project is, firstly, to shift dualistic ‘subject-object’ conceptions of human-nonhuman relations by way of reworked understandings of materiality.\(^6\) The environment is a lively world of “things” that flow and become in ever-shifting “meshworks” of significant connection (Ingold 2013:25, 132). A second and related project I take up is to describe the constitutive relationship between the thinking-moving body, affect, and environment, pointing to the political possibility inherent in art’s creativity (Manning 2009). Both relate to philosophical propositions for movement and variation over stasis and stabilization, to the unpredictability and possibility of thoughts that move in the body’s feeling and ‘force’ for action (Bolt 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Ingold 2015; Manning 2009).

My analysis also gives voice to art historians and critics who have assessed the place of the human participant in art projects inspired by Minimalism and site-specific art (Casey 2005; Kwon 1997), the “blurring of art and life” in avant-garde “Happenings” (Kaprow 1968, 2003), institutional critique and related “neo-avant garde” shifts in practice supported by the artist-run centre (Jackson 2011; Kwon 1997:86; Shaw 1991; Wallace 1991), and finally, recent

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\(^5\) My use of the term non-representational is influenced by artist-philosopher Barbara Bolt’s (2004) book on the performative materiality of art making. The term also supports affective or material-semiotic theorizations of landscape and materiality (Crouch 2010; Stewart 2013, 2014).

\(^6\) Bruno Latour’s (2005) *Reassembling the Social* and proposition via ANT that the world ‘gathers’ in momentary configurations has been a major influence in such reworked understandings of materiality, a focus also in the wide-ranging works of geographers such as Nigel Thrift or anthropologists such as Kathleen Stewart or Tim Ingold.
experiments in participatory or “relational” art (Bishop 2004, 2006; Bourriaud 2002; Jackson 2011). Critical discussions of the politics of experimental installation and performance art are instructive (Bishop 2004; Jackson 2011). I follow these thinkers in building the critical point that VCWB employed a productive antagonism (Bishop 2004; Deutsche 1996) in confronting participants with a juxtaposition of distinct storied/embodied positionalities and contextualizing frames for Vancouver’s past and present. VCWB intentionally produced moments and feelings of dislocation and a struggle to assimilate incommensurable experience. Participants were enrolled in creating performance events, reacting and corresponding (Ingold 2013, 2015) in the friction (Tsing 2005)\(^7\) of improvised and unpredictable encounter in the city.

The walking projects were just one piece of a multi-disciplinary project bringing together storytelling, drinking, and improvised music and dance. For seven weeks VCWB offered three types of performances on different days of the week. Walking projects on Saturday afternoons began at UNIT/PITT Projects, an artist-run centre currently located in Vancouver’s Chinatown. UNIT/PITT also hosted VCWB performances in its gallery on Thursday and Friday evenings. All events were free to attend, funded by the BC Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Vancouver, and The Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation. The UNIT/PITT’s mandate is reflective of early alternative arts organizations such as Intermedia (1967-1972), whose member artists sought to expand the purview of art beyond object-based and ‘white cube’ fine arts gallery practices to include “practices associated with the media, social activism and art education” (Shaw 1991:86). Intermedia is representative of a wider movement of institutional critique in the mid 20\(^{th}\) century. Inspired by the avant-garde, these artists worked to blur the boundaries between art and life and realize art’s potential for impact in society (Shaw 1991). Intermedia held

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\(^7\) Anna Tsing’s (2005) famous account holds that attention to ‘friction,’ occurring where incommensurable practices and ways of knowing make contact, is constructive and revealing.
accessibility and democratic access to the means of art making as an ideal, and their projects were characterized by interdisciplinarity, collaborative creation, and an emphasis on process over final product (Wallace 1991; Shaw 1991).

Created to be participatory for audiences and demonstrating a high engagement with “street-level” (McIntosh 2014b) activity, VCWB challenged typical parameters of theatre and fine art exhibit practices. The project’s interdisciplinary approach produced a milieu with a unique set of productive parameters, or what Manning (2009:219) may call “enabling constraints” that shape art-producing relational contexts. The enabling constraint could be used simply to describe everyday improvised relations that create lived realities, but I employ its specialized resonance in this paper to help describe the creative force of art making using the body. VCWB events came together in “generous” (McIntosh 2014a,b) spaces of play and experimentation. Invited artists and audience-participants shared co-responsibility for events unfolding, a relation I expand to involve the material environments that contextualize and ‘modulate’ (Manning 2009:2) events.

VCWB was about exploring a multiplicity of place experience in full recognition of dark realities of past and present that haunt like ghosts—colonization, politics of land ownership and governance, economic speculation, a real estate boom and gentrification, wealth disparity and the spatialization of poverty in Vancouver, institutionalized racism, the grip of legal and illegal substances and addiction—all of which carry felt social, material and affective consequences. Walking a contestable line between art and life, VCWB was not a theatrical distraction outside of settler colonial and spatial politics of Vancouver, but reacted to the above described conditions to create anew within this milieu. Antagonism in the meeting of distinct frames of reference and subject positionalities gave rise to contingent relations I refer to throughout this paper as spaces
of possibility. Events were proliferative, giving rise to reshaped and novel affective relations with the city. VCWB performances are a case study for thinking the social-material construction of urban cultural geographies, and more widely to figuring a process of ‘worlding.’

I gathered information about VCWB during and after the project using participatory methods. I support my analysis with reflections on my own experiences during the VCWB events, which took place at UNIT/PITT Projects in Vancouver, British Columbia from January 17 to March 1, 2014. During the months of January and February 2014, I attended walking projects as well as Witching Hour and Bob’s Salon performances on Thursday and Friday evenings. I conducted interviews with co-creators and contributors in summer 2014, experimenting once with a group conversation interview of four participants including myself. My intention with the group was to create an environment for generative conversation sparked in interaction between colleagues. We pushed the boundaries of the qualitative social science interview in re-jigging the traditional space of the interview event. It became a process of creation somewhat akin to improvised performances, producing some striking reflections included throughout this paper. The book *Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting*, as well as online promotional content for the project, and telephone and email communications with David McIntosh and Chris Bose, are also referenced throughout my analysis.

2.1 The Body and Battery Opera Performance

Our bodies are always central to our experience, in both artistic practice and everyday life (cf. Connerton 2011). VCWB events strove to work with the ways our bodies know and relate to environments to get inside of the feeling of a place. Beyond a visual spectacle of dancing bodies for passive audiences, the performance relied upon the actions of everyone and everything present to create the event. Ingold’s (2013, 2015) “correspondence” is a useful concept for
envisioning this process as it describes making something together as a temporal unfolding of caring reciprocal relations between beings and materials.

Issues of power and personhood are at the centre of VCWB’s examination of Vancouver’s environmental and cultural history. The body was its mode of exploring inter-scalar relationships between persons and the environment and between selves or ‘subjects’ and institutional structures. First person narratives are marked positionings, opening the way for evocative moments of realization as participants examine self, other, and societal structures. This critical impetus arose in part from McIntosh’s awareness of his position of power. His contributions to the project are a critical window on the privileged experience of white and middle class people in the city and beg consideration of a legacy of colonial power carried by white ‘settler’ descendents in Canada. They also indicate the profound depth of individual experience and the ways place experience is haunted by dark personal histories. Bose’s stories speak from a position of much less privilege, signaling the racial and economic structural violence faced by aboriginal males in British Columbia. His stories evidence the influence of structural power on a body’s physical transit through geographical and institutional space, as well as the ongoing complexity of identity formation.

My coming-of-age was in Vancouver from when I was nine until 17, and a lot of crazy things happened in that time…I was bouncing back and forth. I wasn’t just in Vancouver for an extended period of time, I was coming up [to Kamloops], I was going there, I was going all over the place. I was ping-ponging across the country because—and it’s still the same today—Government agencies are trying to take kids away from their parents and this and that. (Bose 2015)

In performance activities, VCWB participants experimented with carrying these narratives into different registers of personal experience and emplacement. Walking project performers selected stories to work with that personally resonated with their own histories (Bose 2015).
David McIntosh and dancer/choreographer Lee Su-Feh founded battery opera performance in 1995. Su-Feh and McIntosh’s mission statement for battery opera illuminates inspiration for the body as a central medium in VCWB’s exploration of Vancouver geography and settler colonial politics:

The work of battery opera interrogates the contemporary body as a site of intersecting and displaced cultures, histories and habits. Underlying the practice of battery opera is a dynamic dialogue and mutual attraction between opposing tensions, an exchange that is sensitive to the nuances of power and influence in the socio-political history we have inherited. Inherent in this dialogue is a search for language that both embraces and frees us from the assumptions of traditional performance structures.

Battery opera celebrates the power of the human body to transform space, time and perception; a body that is at once fragile and powerful; a body that breathes, speaks, sings, thinks, moves, dances. (battery opera performance 2015)

VCWB’s exploration of story and embodied city experience is informed by battery opera’s recognition of the multiplicity of experience people carry and its focus on the role of historical and socio-political structures in shaping bodies and ‘subjects.’ The desire to transcend ‘traditional performance structures’ is wholeheartedly enacted in VCWB activities.

Battery opera’s assertion that bodies are powerful and transformative is particularly important. The body’s participation in VCWB improvisations relies on “incipient movement” (Manning 2009:6) that builds in the body prior to conscious awareness. Individual thoughts and acts are critical generative sites sparked within wider networks of relation. “Concept[s] in the making” (Manning 2009:223) generate a body’s movements, expressions or articulations in space. The individual body is generative in the process of language articulation and crystallization, exercising a power to shape how worlds are known, described, and experienced.

The body participates in “movements of thought” (Manning 2009:7). In all of this the term ‘embodiment’ faces some speculation and criticism: Some scholars reject its inference of encapsulation and stasis and work with the notion of the becoming body instead. Ontology as a
concept worked with in the same realm has similarly given way to ‘ontogenesis’ or even “anthropogenesis” (Ingold 2015:120), the always in the “in-between” (Ingold 2015:147) process of a body’s perpetual movement, connection, and transformation.

2.2 Alcohol

Bring your ghosts, bring your body, have a drink and take your chances. Join the conversation about this city, your place, our past and its spirits – both the ones that stubbornly linger, and the ones that enable forgetting. (battery opera performance 2015)

The literal and figurative role of alcohol in VCWB deserves dedicated comment. Alcohol is an everyday substance that links us to a shared common experience. Nevertheless we build unique relationships to alcohol, and in this project it is seen as a critical vehicle to place imaginings and individual embodied positionings in VCWB activities.

Bodies and material worlds are envisioned as mutually constitutive in this project, and the consumption of substances such as food or alcohol are part of a body’s continual identification and becoming (Jackson 2011). Our experiences with alcohol shape memories and affective relationships as well as perceptions of individual and place identities. McIntosh and Bose made alcohol an active participant in VCWB, writing it into their personal stories and including the drinking of beer and wine in all three types of performances. The type of alcohol consumed in a story or during a performance is an identifier that links bodies with conditions such as urban struggle and poverty (often associated with beer), or affluence and leisure (wine). Stories published in the book or shared during VCWB events point to the ways alcoholic substances have supported harmful relationships with institutions and urban life. Drinking during performances played with VCWB’s lines of systemic critique (land ownership and the market, institutionalized substance dependency and abuse) and incited participants to think through alcohol’s role in the invention of selves and our relationships with the world.
The production and consumption of alcohol are interwoven with British Columbia’s history. VCWB explored alcohol’s connection to land ownership in tasting activities as part of performances. Bob’s Salon participants mused on affective connections between flavours, earth and memory and collectively produced ‘tasting notes’ to be used in improvised music and dance. Sometimes stories told or ideas shared around the alcohol of the evening referenced the conversion of BC land to vineyards, and the ways this has shaped stories told about the land’s history and geography. The group’s ideas often highlighted a saturation of vineyard marketing language in the public consciousness.

The promotional statement for VCWB excerpted at this section’s opening ties the social consumption of alcohol in the project together with its broader theme of collective place memory. It also plays with a dual notion of spirit, both evoking the traces of memory and feeling that reside in bodies-knowing-places, and implicating the numbing affect of alcohol in shaping how bodies retain or recollect. Memory is not presumed to be solid or truthful: our experiences of the city are as real as we make and imagine them. Bose and McIntosh’s stories—their “reports and boundaries” (battery opera performance 2015)—do not seek validation as truth so much as a place in a collection of frayed fragments. They call attention to the contingency of reality, the fallibility of delineating lines and the stabilizing representations they compose as maps.

2.3 The Installation

In constructing our environment we not only house the body, we build modes of embodied experience and thought. This is a micropolitics in the making that in turn fashions us: we refit the body for new forms of life, cross-dressing its self-expressive potentials. (Manning 2009:2-3)

At the beginning of the project’s seven weeks, the gallery walls of the UNIT/PITT were blank in anticipation of contributors who would visit to build the installation. The installation was a palimpsestic process, as images and words were layered, usually during performances,
using spray paint, acrylic paint, stencils and markers. Several of the chapter books were also installed hanging from the walls using bare wooden pegs and string. Reminiscent of a surveyor’s tools for dividing and demarcating territory, these materials are suggestive.

Bose provided the foundational piece for the installation. It is a mural spanning the three walls inspired by his train-hopping journeys between Kamloops to Vancouver as a teenager. The mural is a visual expression of his unique relationship to Vancouver, albeit a transitory one shaped by journeys into and out of the city throughout life. Trees and mountains on the right side of the room give way in gradation to a cluster of high-rise towers on the left. Bose ran away from home in Kamloops at 16 years old and went to Vancouver. His parents, of Secwepemc and N’laka’pamux heritage, met in the Residential School system. Bose connected a difficult family life and childhood to controlling and assimilative federal aboriginal policy. He described alcoholism as a coping method for the damage done to families and communities by Residential Schools, perhaps the most insidious piece of the Canadian government’s assimilative policy toward aboriginal peoples during the 19th and 20th centuries (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

Bose lives in Kamloops now and runs the Arbor Collective, a gallery and multi-artistic educational space for youth Aboriginal artists. His works in poetry, street art, and new media are reflections on colonial and environmental histories and politics, referencing the ways structures of power shape environmental, personal and familial histories. Stories in the book rehash some of Bose’s experiences as a teenager and young adult struggling to survive in the city. In a personal communication he explained that creating this installation was a kind of “revenge” or an act of “justice” in society (Bose 2015).

It just felt good. Revenge, justice… I could tell a story of my coming from up here in Kamloops, running away down into Vancouver into this descent…
[The Kamloops side of the mural] was kind of more primal… it was forest and mountain pictographs, and then as it descends into the city it changes… I painted everything gold and copper and silver, because it was this illusion of money and wealth and opportunity… (Bose 2015)

But such wealth is attained only by certain privilege. His personal experience leaving a “small town” for the “bright lights” of the “big city” brought no reward. “Nothing happened, nothing changed” (Bose 2015). Bose’s frustration at the disparity of socio-economic experience in Vancouver is apparent in contrast between the two sides of the mural. This statement from Bose about the piece was part of VCWB’s online presence:

So, the allegory for this piece is, my story, and thousands of others in the aboriginal community, you leave home, your territory, a bad situation, an abusive one and end up in vancity, homeless, on the streets, and generally fucked. But you go through the forests, the clear cuts, the fires, the mountains and your heart is strong and your desire to change your life guides you, but as you descend into the city, full of promise and hope, gold, silver and copper buildings and wealth everywhere, you realize it's in the hands of the few and you don't have a plan and get swallowed up in the teeth of the city, the monster, the machine. (battery opera performance 2015)

Bose’s artist statement floats amidst a wash of stories intentionally juxtaposed in VCWB. Each new piece of the installation layered upon Bose’s foundation added to the depth of perspective, providing another unique voice or vector. I argue here that each piece is a “trace” (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006:109) referencing, though not in an indexical or categorical fashion, some element of a larger amorphous whole that is place experience. George Marcus and Fernando Calzadilla (2006) have used non-representational notions of trace and evocation to describe creating and performing the installation The Market From Here (1997). The installation was part of the Artists in Trance series at Rice University in Houston, Texas, a practical experimentation probing relationships between artistic and anthropological method. These terms are useful in describing the participatory creation and experience of VCWB’s installation at the UNIT/PITT. Each trace experienced in VCWB was a potential taking-off point for participant thought and action.
Creating the installation or “animating the space” (McIntosh 2014a) was a primary focus of Witching Hour performances, during which visitors watched from the sidewalk. During Bob’s Salons, conversely, participants helped to write “booze notes” (battery opera performance 2015) on the walls with markers: “At angles it can have a sheen. Is it an oasis? Yeah. … Smells of a certain version of nature and also a business. Disparity viewed while getting shit faced and a lingering finish all the way to Chilliwack.” These lines followed the contours of Bose’s painted trees and buildings. Over the seven weeks the gallery floor also filled with the detritus of raucous evenings of dance and drinking. Beyond props for performances in the making, these remains became provocations for future performances, prompting participant thought, action and relation in the space. McIntosh had filmed Witching Hour performances and decided to edit them together into a short video.8

It was fun to process the material and find some similarities, perhaps space induced…. I'm thinking fire and warmth or the absence of, shelter and ceremony—traces of those. And the graffiti being a marker and a provocation... plus ghosts. (McIntosh 2014d)

The installation was a contemplative place for depictions of experience, memories, poetic reflections, and cultural figures and icons of Vancouver. Artists Take5, Esper, and Gone Fishin were invited to paint during a Witching Hour performance headed by Cease Wyss, a Skwxumesh media artist. Two large pieces resembled street art that can be found all around the city. Including graffiti-style art in a gallery installation themed on life in Vancouver made a strong statement that simultaneously critiqued and shifted the role of the fine art institution. Graffiti in the gallery was one way VCWB participated in a tradition of institutional critique echoing avant-garde efforts to elide a constructed division between the spaces of art and life (Kwon 1997).

As part of a larger argument for the constitutive or ontogenetic (Ingold 2015) relationship between bodies and worlds, Manning (2009:2) has demonstrated that bodily “action, perception

and conception” can be “modulated from the environmental side.” As in Manning and collaborators’ Sense Lab⁹ projects with a body’s movement, material and technological apparatus, and space, VCWB’s processual visual and material production of its installation in and as performance is illustrative of this process. Ideas, memories and gestures populate places just as they take in and are given form by their surrounds. The movement of this process is conveyed with concepts of gathering or “in-gathering” (Ingold 2010, 2015; Latour 2005; Manning 2009:46), especially useful terms for visualizing the participatory materialization of a performance event in time and space. In all of its social and material activity, the UNIT/PITT became a generative space of gathering that did more than represent Vancouver experiences or document the project itself. It became a social hub and a site of mutually constitutive relation between imagination and material world (Bolt 2004).¹⁰

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⁹ Erin Manning, Brian Massumi and other Sense Lab members conducted the event “Housing the Body–Dressing the Environment” as part of a larger series of collaborative experimentations entitled Technologies of Lived Abstraction (Manning 2009:1-2).

¹⁰ Bolt (2004:148) argues that art is more than static visualization of the world as we know it; that its production is performed “in relations in and between matter.” In other words, “the work of art is a materializing practice.”
3. ‘Bring your Body, Bring your Spirits’: Improv Congregations

Going to a Bob’s Salon performance, I walk through Chinatown, dark and closed for the night, until I reach the old building UNIT/PITT has recently moved into. There is a wooden front step up to its makeshift spring-hinged door, surrounded by a glass front window bearing scissor gates half pulled back. I hear the laughter and the buzz and shuffling of perhaps a dozen people. The creaky door snaps shut behind me as I enter a small square room, drafty with high ceilings and unfinished looking, still under renovation. A space heater is set up in the corner out of the way. A garage-like atmosphere is common to late 20th century to present experimental installation and relational art projects, the “laboratory” atmosphere reflecting a do-it-yourself sensibility (Bishop 2004). The space is almost a nod to Allan Kaprow’s avant-garde Happenings of the 1950s and 60s, which occurred in warehouses and other found spaces in New York, Los Angeles and Boston (Kaprow 1968). Speakers in the corner play light jazz. On another night it could be an equally tasteful string quartet droning in somber composition.

Keith Higgins is the Executive Director of UNIT/PITT Projects and an established figure in Vancouver socially and politically engaged art.11 Tonight he is milling with the steadily growing crowd while his colleague Brynn McNab, office and building manager of the UNIT/PITT from 2013 to 2015, runs a small cash bar.

Following a ceremonial welcome to his guests, our host David McIntosh opens several bottles of a Riesling produced near Kelowna in a winery called Tantalus. He walks around the room pouring it into mason jars held out by the guests. We are told to smell, look at, and taste the wine. A semi-circle formation begins to form facing the band’s assembled and waiting instruments. Some people sit cross-legged along the room’s perimeter. Soon a special guest,

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11 Higgins is a progressive leader in the Vancouver art world with a rich history in visual art and publishing. He is founder, board member or contributor to an array of organizations including Artspeak and a Vancouver chapter of the west coast arts publisher Publication Studio.
local artist Henry Tsang, takes a seat in the centre of the room. He begins to read a story about his upbringing in Vancouver as the child of Chinese parents who immigrated to Canada. He hints at the relationship between food, place, affect, and memory, remembering an evening his mother prepared a “western meal” of roast beef for his family, served “complete with (western) wine,” a bottle of 1980 Black Tower Riesling (Tsang 2015). At the end of his reading he surprises his audience with a 1980 bottle of Black Tower, which he opens and passes around the room. It has turned red with age and gives off a syrupy aroma, the strong smell of fermentation a trace of the affect of time’s passing and the distortion of memory.

Next McIntosh invites participants to call out words and phrases evoked by the wine and the reading, and he writes them with marker on the gallery walls. These will be tonight’s improvisational themes: “Immigrant Baby daycare bleached breast beloved; tastes like a headache; it’s a liminal space spinal fluid.” The band begins to play, improvising interpretations of the first, second and third phrases the room has collectively produced. Three dancers’ bodies move in the centre of the space. They use their bodies to communicate all they have taken in this evening, and they work playfully together, corresponding with each other’s movements. The musicians also watch the dancers and their bodies are occasionally pulled into the fray. The audience becomes part of the sounds and the sights and the movement too, interacting with the performers. Musicians and dancers somehow mutually agree upon an ending point for each improvisational segment. Our host calls for a few minutes’ break before the performers begin their interpretation of the next theme. Even while the event is filled with playfulness and joviality, the performers take their task of interpretation seriously. They mingle afterwards to discuss the performance and to compare ideas. The floor of the gallery is scuffed and littered, not least with the remnants of the wine tasted, beer cans, and bottles. Instruments are packed away.
and the room slowly empties of guests. They are invited to come back tomorrow, to drop by any
time in the afternoon, to be taken for a stroll and a story.

3.1 Invocation

At the beginning of a Bob’s Salon evening a charismatic performer in a suit summoned
the crowd to gather around before reciting a special contextualizing monologue. “Let’s
congregate,” he would begin, thanking his audience for meeting him at this location,
“In Vancouver British Columbia, on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and
Tsleil-Waututh Nations.” He would let his welcome sink in before continuing, “I’d also like to
acknowledge my ancestors”—whom are the region’s European colonial ‘settlers’—

For the rape / The murder / The alcohol / The projection of power / The police / Real
estate speculation / The gated communities / Resource extraction / The recreational
opportunities. (McIntosh 2014c)

His audience may have stood slack-jawed (I can only recall that I did) at this abrupt shift in tone
as he continued,

…No matter how much emotional or spiritual damage I may have inherited / Materially /
On a global scale / I’ve got it pretty good / I can afford to be a little more generous. Can I
get an Amen? An Amen for Generosity… (McIntosh 2014c)

With some humour the monologue was originally referred to as the “White Man’s Prayer”
(McIntosh 2014b). It is McIntosh’s version of a First Nations protocol for opening an event, in
which land, people, and history are acknowledged and guests thank their hosts. “I wanted to
personalize the protocol, just to acknowledge the reality of my ancestors too. Without telling you
what to think about that,” he explained (McIntosh 2014a). It is self positioning statement from a
white person who is curating a project featuring First Nations artists. “…For me it’s important to
reveal my place in that context,” he explained. “…[I’m] separating my world from the world of
the storytellers” (McIntosh 2014a). Used during Bob’s Salon its title became “Invocation,”
which is a more apt expression of its performative intentionality: its ability to invoke traces of place experience and collective memory, to implicate those present in the history of the place, and to call upon witnesses to vocalize an affirmation. The title carries an overt spiritual reference, and in this section I connect the Invocation to religious notions of congregation (gathering, ritual and ceremony) and co-responsibility (generosity, openness, engagement) that shaped the relation during gallery performances. The Invocation is also operative in VCWB’s institutional and societal critique, pointing to deeply seated fractures in the formation place history and identity. In addition to an implicit critique of proselytizing and culturally assimilative practices of colonial conquest, it lists social, environmental and economic injustices that have shaped the city’s development. It also responds to local discursive currents surrounding settler-aboriginal relations in British Columbia and the push for “reconciliation” and reparations for damages done in colonization. The concept of generosity is central to the Invocation’s response to these issues. Proposing generosity prompts co-responsibility to the performance event as a form of dialogue, unsettling presumptions that an apology alone serves to repair cultural and spiritual damage and bring closure to grievances. In short, the Invocation is a significant bundle of meaning and performative action that structured the relation between participants, a relational “enabling constraint” (Manning 2009: 219) through which the event could unfold.

Reflecting on one’s personal position within larger structures was an underlying goal in all storytelling throughout VCWB. McIntosh’s self-positioning and contextualizing of the space was demonstrative for participants. How participants may see themselves implicated in this matrix is unpredictable, however, and McIntosh (2014b) casually explained that participants

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12 The term has been popularized by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), a component of the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) Settlement Agreement. The TRC gathered statements from survivors and intergenerational survivors. Now at completion of its five-year mandate, the TRC has recently published a summary report of findings.
could “choose to go there,” or “put [themselves] in a different place” instead. All of this has the ability to impact the material-affective shape of the space. Here I focus on the direction of McIntosh’s performative and positioning utterances and the ways they worked to construct and crystallize a particular space of relation.

So that was kind of the impetus for that… and ceremony… and these things are all in the room now… acknowledged in the room. It’s on unceded territory, I’m a white guy, my ancestors whom I loved, because [laughing] you can’t help it, and this is the reality of my presence here tonight. (McIntosh 2014a)

The relationship between aboriginal peoples and the Canadian government is shaded by centuries of policies for the dispossession and relocation of people from their lands and a regime of assimilation and “cultural genocide” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015:1) enacted by way of the Indian Residential School system. British Columbia’s history of colonial land settlement is unique in Canada in that few treaties were signed in the province, and public recognition that much of the province occupies unceded territory has made for complex disputes over land and resource development and has been a catalyst in social and political movements. In summer 2014, Vancouver City Council gave its first official statement that the city occupies unceded territory of three First Nations (Meiszner 2014).

In addition to its reference to land ownership, the Invocation takes inspiration from contemporary discourses of reconciliation and apology. These terms have gained considerable attention from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada events, and prior to this federal undertaking, Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s infamous apology in 2008 to former students of the Indian Residential School system (Government of Canada 2010). Bose’s responses to these events include the new media installation The Apology, exhibited at UNIT/PITT Projects,13 and the video work Savage Heathen for the exhibition Witnesses: Art and

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13 December 2011 and January 2012, as part of the UNIT/PITT Projects series Ill Repute.
Canada’s Indian Residential Schools in 2013.\textsuperscript{14} But Bose has concerns about the way his other artist responses to Residential Schools have been glamorized by big art business. Reflecting on the career success resulting from *The Apology* in particular, he explained,

> [For art events] I was put up in fancy hotels in Vancouver... I would look down on the streets that I was homeless in... I felt hypocritical, I felt horrible... I felt like I was starting to capitalize on the pain of my parents and 90,000 others. (Bose 2015)

Bose has turned his focus to pro-bono and community art projects, grant-funded and free to attend projects such as VCWB, and to working with aboriginal youth artists at the Arbor Collective in Kamloops.

VCWB’s provocative improvisatory performance engages with popular everyday discourses of trauma, reconciliation, and acknowledgment. The Invocation introduces a critical antagonism in asking: What is the productive result of an apology?

> For me, where do you go with that? Because apologies are not very useful to people, right? Or to conversations, really. When you apologize, can you have a conversation? So I thought we could just be generous. We could acknowledge that there’s been some theft and murder. So let’s try to be generous for tonight. (McIntosh 2014a)

In its request for an ‘Amen!’ for generosity, the Invocation incites action. Some were shocked by the words and could not reply.

> People think they know what you’re talking about and then all of a sudden it gets shifted... You think you know where you are in a city or a place, and then it’s shifted [into] another context. But it’s not an accusation. I’m welcoming you as an equal, so I’m also implicating you in my shift. And then I would say, ‘Well let’s just try to be a little bit more generous’... All those things are still in their head when they say Amen. They’re not really sure what they said Amen to, and they think about that for the rest of the night. (McIntosh 2014b)

An act of dislocation had occurred for participants expecting the welcoming words to be mere bland formality. Instead they were confronted with blunt statements about British Columbia’s colonial history. As McIntosh explains in the excerpt above, this was not intended to be

\textsuperscript{14} Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, September to December 2013.
accusatory. It was an invitation to step back from the precipice of uncertainty and negativity created by those words, perhaps even to reclaim some power by vocalizing a fresh intention. In this utterance the group states a collective intention to create a generous in the space, to be caring and co-responsible for this event despite an apparent lack of constructive ways forward. If we have reached an impasse with apology, how can we create new movements of thought?

3.2 The Congregation and Relational Art

Following the Invocation another ritual began. Narrow sheets of cream-coloured paper were passed around the room, printed with lyrics to a song entitled The Smell of Blood. While striking me as odd at the time, in retrospect this turn in the evening’s opening ceremony was an appropriate complement to the monologue preceding it. The invitation to sing together was received with good humour by willing guests. McIntosh headed the congregation again, instructing the group to sing along in complement to his lead. The affect of booming voices filling the room in a grim, almost medieval tone was quasi-religious.

Well, it’s like a hymn, right? Because he presented as if he was a pastor leading his flock, and he presented it as if it was a… a church-type ceremony. Because he asked everybody to sing with him as well. (Tsang 2014)

Tsang and other contributors picked up on the semi-parodic replication of a religious service created in the weekly “ritual” of the Invocation and the hymn (Khakpour 2014). The Smell of Blood compounded the affects of the first ritual. Performing the song created a similar mixed affect of welcome and gathering alongside uneasy feelings of dislocation and critical doubt.

Even while it playfully poked at religious practice, the hymn effectively drew upon affective qualities of congregation to orient the group toward a common goal. In Victor Turner’s (1969) famous phrase, these rituals helped to manufacture “communitas.” The term describes a shared feeling of camaraderie that washes through a group engaged in a collective activity,
sometimes with great consequence to the unfolding of events and how they are felt and perceived. Communitas arises in a bounded and delimited event, or what Turner has termed a ‘liminal space.’ It is a reprieve or reversion from the ordinary for a limited time and a response to wider societal structures. As host of these congregations, McIntosh carried his guests to this kind of space with his impish character and boisterous and ironic sense of humour. His rituals transformed the gallery to a participatory space of play, role reversals, and the unusual.

Is there something naively optimistic in the idea that creating a gathering space of ‘generosity’ could clear the impasse created in the instant of apology, as McIntosh has suggested? Would instigating dialogue or conversation make up for an inability to reconcile multiple and opposing positions, histories, and cultural logics? The voices in VCWB conversations seemed to speak past each other. Awareness of this creates the friction that is foundational to the VCWB book of stories, which speak from the disparate positions occupied by the two men. Each of the other contributors (of readings, paintings, or dance) added to the multiplicity, populating this project with voices inflected by many more racial, gendered, political and national identifiers. There were authors and artists who are women, members of different First Nations, or first- and second-generation immigrants from China, Guatemala, and Iran. The din of voices signaled the tremendous scope of experience all knotted together (Ingold 2015) within the city that VCWB was so intent to explore. Here, then, conversation was not so much an ideal to be reached, but a series of frictions prompted and sustained.

VCWB’s participatory congregations connect with avant-garde artistic movements that minimize the authorial role of the artist and draw upon the collective, relational aspects of art making, often towards performing some critique of wider societal conditions. Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002) description of this movement of experimental participatory art in Relational
Aesthetics has been critiqued as an uncritical celebration of interactivity and artistic collaboration (Bishop 2004, 2006). Celebrating relationality for its own sake undercuts the work’s potential for critique and political transformation, Bishop has argued (2004). An illusion of unity and harmony amongst audience-participants of VCWB, drawn together under the quasi-religious goal of ‘generosity’ to produce an interlude of positive affect, does little to expose and problematize unequal distributions of power.

Bishop (2004) has also described experimental installations that do succeed in this regard. “Marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging,” they sustain “a tension among viewers, participants and context” (Bishop 2004:70). VCWB gatherings worked toward positive affect, but they also introduced undeniable tension to events in confronting interconnected issues of social, economic and environmental injustice, and the contentious issue of apology.

It’s not just saying ‘I want to acknowledge that I stole this’…Basically that your ancestors had this stolen from [them]. It’s different saying ‘I want to acknowledge that my ancestors stole this, and I’m not giving it back.’ Because that’s the reality. I find that interesting, how that affects a place and a city. (McIntosh 2014a)

McIntosh suggests VCWB could act as a barometer for the city’s collective memory and the current shape or dynamic of its social and cultural relations. Language used in the Invocation signaled a link between the event and wider structures of power, emplacing and contextualizing these gatherings within difficult realities. Ben Brown is one of the performers who could not vocalize an Amen in response to the Invocation. But he described the way the Invocation’s “heavy…thematic material” would “seep in” anyway, inciting him to ask himself how these ideas sit with him as he performs (Brown 2014). Even those who remained silent still experienced the room now populated with words that could not be unsaid. “It’s an interesting choice as a performer… Where does it sit now with me this evening?” (Brown 2014). For some
the words of the Invocation resonated, sparking questions that tugged, frayed and unraveled the night’s complacent enjoyment. Social fractures were exposed and left to hang in the room, resting uneasily alongside the playful intentions of these gatherings. Thought to be a constructive way forward from a difficult place, generosity was introduced as a starting point. In creating these events participants played with and transformed generosity’s meaning.

The opening rituals affectively materialized a congregation that sparked a proliferation of effects in mood, thought and action, shaping the performance in the making. The gallery was populated by the performance of the Invocation and the hymn, and by Bose’s mural depiction of the chasm separating landscapes of Kamloops and Vancouver, traversed in uneasy journey. Visuals, materials and actions transformed the gallery into a space for exploring the affects of a place historically shaped by colonial relations. In the next section I continue to describe how generosity enabled a material-affective transformation of the gallery. Reimagining the constitutive elements of material worlds makes way for discussion of art making that transcends mere representation to become experience.
4. A Generous Space

I was curious about galleries as spaces…how spaces kind of contextualize what happens inside of them. (McIntosh 2014a)

McIntosh’s frequent references to shaping the affective qualities of the gallery space during performances speak to his background in theatre. However, having concluded, “Every space has its own… Different kinds of baggage, right? Presentationally and historically” (McIntosh 2014a), he intentionally evaded that institutional space in this project. For him the theatre would carry too much expectation, invoking familiar formal parameters and creating a rigidity that would not support the experimental tone of VCWB. The gallery of the artist-run centre, on the other hand, was more of a “blank space” (McIntosh 2014a) to which he felt no disciplinary obligation. Both Bose and Higgins however are more immersed in the practicing visual art world, and would have met the process differently. Regardless of each collaborator’s individual attitudes toward the institution, developing VCWB’s installation and performance space required navigating the financial and disciplinary discursive constraints of the local art milieu. The selection of an artist-run centre in the Downtown East Side speaks to the site-specific¹⁵ and interdisciplinary aims of the project, which included a decidedly resistant stance to commercial performance. In this section I describe how VCWB cultivated a generous space at the UNIT/PITT in its connected goals of interdisciplinarity, accessibility, co-responsibility, and experimentalism. These became a set of “enabling constraints” (Manning 2009:219) for VCWB’s particular creative form. Physically manifest, VCWB’s form comes to life in relations that generate performance events. Bodies shaped spaces, relationships, and ideas, their

¹⁵ Kwon’s (1997) delineation of site-specific art of the 1960s and 1970s has connected renewed interest in site and context to critiques of art’s institutional and cultural frameworks, frequently but not exclusively embedded in the physical spaces of institutions such as the gallery. These challenges to the “‘innocence’ of space” equally unsettled the notion’s “accompanying presumption of a universal viewing subject” (Kwon 1997:87).
impromptu connections spanning across beings, materials, and the locations that give events context.

4.1 Interdisciplinarity

We were creating sort of a new space… It just felt like there was room to make that space open and interesting. (McIntosh 2014a)

People working in many different areas of the arts contributed to VCWB. I have used the words multi-, trans-, or interdisciplinary throughout this paper without acknowledgment of the ways these terms problematically assume natural divisions between artistic forms. Even while there is an established history of projects that combine performance art, drawing and painting, music, dance, and new media, these forms continue to reference distinct discourses of technique, criticism and curation. Jackson (2011:4) has described the constitutive power of perceived divisions in artistic practice, arguing that our personal encounters with works are contingent not only on our trained awareness of “critical histories” but on the “disciplinary perceptual habits” built up by experience in particular media. McIntosh has led a varied career pursuing his own questions about the production and perception of form.

[My interest has always been] the examination of the congregation of a performance… And it’s been through different forms. I think there are people who a specific form really speaks to. They really express through… dance or music or through writing or through teaching… They’re animated by that form. For me it’s been a little bit outside of that. I’m animated by the perception of form… in an event. (McIntosh 2014a)

McIntosh began his career in visual arts at Emily Carr University but did not finish the program. He eventually moved to music, working as a singer “who didn’t really take music very seriously” (McIntosh 2014a). He later moved to contemporary theatre with a specific focus on dance: “I’ve been co-creator of a dance company but I’m not a recognized choreographer.” Having “always written a little bit, secretly,” the book for VCWB was an opportunity for him to work in the print
medium. This transdisciplinary trajectory has required “learn[ing] the language,” in his words, of each field (McIntosh 2014a).

Venues also tend to carry the resonance of the forms they support, shaping the presentation of works and the language used to describe them.

When you work in a milieu, you learn the language because that’s the only way to survive. [It’s an] important skill but … there is some cost to that. There is some restriction in that. Because you actually start thinking that way. (McIntosh 2014a)

His apprehension toward language upholds Jackson’s assertion that “disciplinary perceptual habits” (2011:4) matter. However, he felt no personal obligation to describe the project’s intentions in fine art language, instead focusing on how diverse participants animated the gallery space. He reasoned, “If I had tried to contextualize it I would have failed in that language, and it would’ve crippled the piece right? The possibility of that piece” (McIntosh 2014a). Participants of diverse backgrounds experimented with the collaborative creation of improvised performance events and the construction of spatial contexts—building a milieu or ecology of relation. Focused on the in-between of process, this relation was intentionally unpredictable and contingent. In interviews this was described as an “interesting space” (McIntosh 2014b) worth examining. These spaces or moments are productive hinges that send events in new directions, enabling them to transform.

What kind of transformation had occurred? Did the juxtaposition of diverse practices in VCWB congregations produce any graspable meaning? Keith Higgins took my questions to be an issue of context. These actions needed to be qualified in some way. Together we traced VCWB’s intention to gather a collection of Vancouver stories, its different voices in turn shaped by different artistic disciplines. For Higgins the term ‘experimental’ is used too liberally in
describing projects like VCWB. For the project’s experimental impetus to mean something, it needed to be driving at a question.

I think the question is really about context. So how, how are all of these intersecting approaches to things being changed by coming into contact with each other? So we see the PITT, the graffiti art, interacting with the improv performance, interacting with the music—it’s not just a random mix. We’re actually trying to discover something about a place and about a story. And I think the question is very much about how those extra layers of meaning change the original work. (Higgins 2014)

I have chosen to read his reference to the ‘original work’ loosely. It is the book of 12 stories, the Invocation, or perhaps even Bose’s mural. Any of these elements are contextualizing and positioning ‘hinges’ along which thought and action can travel. Together McIntosh and Higgins create an important conversation about context, each describing a relation that unfolds in the gallery space, describing art’s process. They examine the performance in-the-doing and the transformations that occur as different voices and practices are brought into relation. Higgins’s critical stance toward the notion of experimentation and effort to qualify the act of congregation with meaning parallels McIntosh’s concern for the ‘crippling’ effect of disciplinary jargon on VCWB’s possibility.

The cultivation of a generous space during VCWB gallery performances was an act of resistance to constraining factors of the art world: its dependence on funding structures public and private, an artist’s productive choices beholden to the art market and cultural and career capital, and the divisive ordering discourses of art history, criticism and curation. In their partnership, McIntosh, Bose and Higgins challenged practical and discursive constraints by blurring the lines between them. Higgins is perceived as a maverick in the fine art world. McIntosh explained that Higgins and his colleague Brynn McNab seemed to enliven the gallery with a dynamic energy McIntosh was seeking for VCWB. They were also willing to assume the
risk of hosting such an unusual project in the gallery. The project’s reception and outcome uncertain, it was described as a “sink or swim” decision (McIntosh 2014a).

The experimental partnership between VCWB and UNIT/PITT Projects was risky yet attractive in its potentials for striking new relational configurations. Jackson (2011) has nuanced institutional critique’s relationship to present day experimental projects. Institutional resistance, she points out, is not necessarily or singularly the marker of a project’s transgressive political efficacy. Art works that facilitate or enable us to imagine “sustainable social institutions” (Jackson 2011:14) are equally relevant to our analyses of political engagement. This is an interesting idea to consider in light of UNIT/PITT’s legacy of institutional resistance alongside its current efforts to strengthen artistic relationships and connections toward the goals of political awareness, knowledge and networks for action.

VCWB’s co-curators assumed the risks that came with a large-scale collaborative project, inviting practitioners to contribute with minimal guiding parameters. As a practicing artist and instructor at Emily Carr University, Henry Tsang brought a perceptive analysis to his experience as a storyteller for a Bob’s Salon. He described the constraints navigated by artists and curators in the competitive and business-oriented world of arts production and criticism.

There is an openness and generosity and support for the artists who are going to be participating. If anything [the instructions given consisted of] ‘Here’s the framework, I’m going to encourage you to touch base but not try to control you, and you have the stage for a certain amount of time and let’s see what happens.’ So that willingness to take risks as well as honoring the artist by just simply respecting them as somebody who presents something interesting, that shows confidence… Actually, you’re not going to invite somebody you don’t think can pull it off, right? So it’s also based on experience and connections and cultural capital. (Tsang 2014)

Tsang went on to describe VCWB as impressively expansive in the level of activity it generated amongst so many practitioners “from different disciplines” (Tsang 2014). Below I connect these goals to the people who were invited to contribute and participate in VCWB.
It was a really good blend of aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. Artists, filmmakers, dancers, musicians, poets…I got to meet some really cool people. [David] asked me who I wanted involved, the names, he got them involved. (Bose 2015)

Northwest Coast artists Cease Wyss, noted above, and Bracken Hanuse Corlett, a multimedia artist of Wuikinuxv and Klahoose heritage, were invited on Bose’s suggestion. In addition to a predictable group of “arts aficionados” (McIntosh 2014b), events attracted students, friends and family of contributors, and some who stopped into the gallery out of curiosity.

4.2 “Street-Level Integration” and Co-responsibility

I’ve always worked in the Downtown East Side in different kinds of capacities, so I’m actually very familiar with that area and its different ways. I feel like that’s the important part of the city just because of its resonance for me, and for the history of the city. So I wanted to have the work based there. (McIntosh 2014b)

VCWB carries strong thematic links to Vancouver’s Downtown East Side and to East Vancouver more widely, and many of the stories used in walking projects reference the area around the UNIT/PITT’s current location. McIntosh commented that of all his projects, VCWB had the most “street-level integration,” a result of both the highly relevant location of the gallery and performances that generated by way of a symbiotic relationship with everyday life in the city (McIntosh 2014b).

Beyond signaling an intention to experiment with interdisciplinarity, VCWB’s language of generosity extends conceptually to the plurality of bodily and institutional relations to place featured in VCWB stories and activities. Diverse relationships to Vancouver were collected and examined by way of the physical (material) and conceptual (dematerialized) spaces provided by the gallery and street, stories and visuals from contributors, and the participatory and generative events themselves. The gallery became a lively space that could ‘hold’ these expressions.

I guess that was an experiment, if you could make a space and have it open for a certain period of time, and allow different kinds of people to come and animate it. People who had their own relationships to that area. (McIntosh 2014a)
Experimenting with malleable notions of the site-specific work (Kwon 1997), VCWB transformed the gallery into site of gathering for artists and local residents whose bodies know Vancouver differently. By congregating and ‘animating’ the space, people shape the site as an event, reworking place in a reanimation of the sociality of the neighbourhood.

The UNIT/PITT is a casual space with an inviting sidewalk level entrance. On performance days, artists would hang around and talk with local people walking by the gallery, inviting them to participate. Sometimes when invited to join a walking project, neighbourhood people “…would just talk. They wouldn’t necessarily want to walk” (McIntosh 2014b). With process as a focus more than outcome, there was no perceived failure in this kind of engagement. Co-responsibility and experimentalism were encouraged between participants, wherever and however performances occurred.

Everything is improvised and I want the audience to feel… ‘I’m not just going to sit back and judge. I’m going to look, lean forward and engage with what’s happening.’ That’s generosity. (McIntosh 2014b)

There was a sense among my interviewees this kind of relationship would not have developed in a ticketed theatre performance. VCWB’s free attendance seemed to uphold principles of public service and inclusivity that have characterized the mandates of artist-run centres since their inception (Shaw 1991; Wallace 1991). For McIntosh VCWB was an opportunity to step outside of constraints encountered in the practical milieu of theatre production and commercial festival circuits. Beyond promoting public accessibility, eliminating tickets seemed to remove VCWB from pitfalls of commercial theatre. Unlike these larger shows, there was an intentional unpredictability to VCWB events: “The idea is they don’t actually know what is going to happen. So they can’t commodify the experience before hand” (McIntosh 2014a). Walking projects could not have operated as intended if they began or ended at scheduled times, and even
Thursday and Friday events did not strictly adhere to set hours. Structuring VCWB’s events as social congregations supported an atmosphere of generosity toward contributing artists and also their audiences. Audiences became co-responsible for the performances as they sang along, called out themes for improvisation, and physically interacted during performances.

The audience have a task to decide what the musicians and dancers will perform based on the storyteller… Everyone is implicated in the outcome of the evening, so that’s getting your attention, right? They’ve taken in the alcohol, they’ve processed the story, and they give an opinion, and now they want to see what happens. (McIntosh 2014b)

Unlike more conventional theatre, performers were not preoccupied with rehearsing or delivering an accurate scripted performance. Dancers experimented with movement, contorting and winding their bodies around others, pulled at clothing, or picked each other up off the ground. The musicians experimented with sounds they could create to shape and respond to the feeling in the room. Bodies did not set out on a predestined course of movement and gestures did not need to flow smoothly or make sense conceptually. McIntosh has described this as a “reciprocal generosity” that becomes the space itself, in extension of the participants.

The performers and the storytellers are…going to give you something unrehearsed and unpolished. So they’re taking a larger risk than normal. I like to believe that the space can be generous, it can hold, it can accept that, as well. (McIntosh 2014a)

An event took its form in the casting of environmental affective conditions and the improvised correspondence of bodies. The generative gathering space of the gallery documented the experiences, imaginings, and narratives that would act as provocations or traces\(^\text{16}\) to spark further thought and action. VCWB demonstrates a material environment’s inseparability from bodies that feel, think, act, and create.

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\(^{16}\) In the 1997 installation *The Market From Here*, creating and experiencing the installation was the “performance of an evocation” (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006:109). These acts were “traces” calling forth an experience of an urban market in Venezuela. In this way the installation was non-representational; *The Market* performed in participation.
5. A Storied City: Antagonism and the Subject

You’re allowing the city to tell you a story, and it’s, of course, your own story. (McIntosh 2014a)

In the book’s final story, Glad Tidings, McIntosh’s narrative begins with stepping off a city bus to walk past Glad Tidings church near Fraser Street and 18th Avenue. He turns west toward the subdivisions of Mount Pleasant and walks along rows of well-kept homes, reflecting on privileged life in these safe surrounds. The streets are lined with Vancouver Specials—“Special just for being here,” the voice remarks (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np). In the complex acting-not-acting event of the walking project, the truth of the narrative is not necessarily resonant with the performer or with any of the other participants. But in walking the landscape they may find traces of connection with their own experience. This sense of distance and reaching-for is especially poignant in Glad Tidings, as the narrator laments the sameness, duplication and relatively brief existence of floating slabs of concrete that serve as each home’s shallow foundation. The house foundations float on marshy land once governed by different ways of life. He recalls working on a construction team to build the grand entrance hall of one Vancouver Special years ago. The concrete, scaffolding, lumber and tools are heavy and dangerous to work with, and for him these were the materials of casualties and close calls. They have come to stand for the uncertainty and disaster that haunts Vancouver’s history, and its volatile economic ride skyward on a flight of rampant real estate speculation and expansion. It reaches for a place ideal that will remain unknown. “We are so lucky / to be here,” the voice says (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np). What is this place?

The narrator has been charting his trip with street names on this memory-filled walk westward toward Main Street. His abrupt landing at “Sophia” is the final line of the story and of the book itself. As readers, listeners and walkers we are left hanging and wondering, where did
our disembodied narrator go next? In what ways does his experience describe my own? We attempt to assimilate the details to something familiar and concrete about life in this place.

In this section I discuss how VCWB employed story and performance as systemic critique, building my case for VCWB improvisations as embodied “street-level” politics enacted as narratives were experienced anew by participants. Stories carried walking project participants to places where poverty, drug use and struggle are evident, confronting them with diverse affective associations with the city. Details in stories peeled back the layers of historic buildings and neighbourhoods, exposing them as absorptive material sites holding traces of personal experience and the insinuation of power and policy in the city’s lived spaces. Walking project events thus created radical shifts in frames of reference and associated feelings of unease and dislocation. Recitations of the stories by performers who did not write them threw issues of authorship into high relief, offering uniquely positioned critiques of systemic power and inviting participants to reflect on their own relationships with these systems. There was productive antagonism in the reaching of shifting, always-fractured identities, whom in their participation attempt to assimilate differences in subjective experience.

What does it mean to ‘embody’ a story? Performers of the walking projects achieved something outside the aims of traditional theatre. In that kind of dramaturgy stories unfold along predetermined plots and timelines in an otherworldly space of make-believe (Hastrup 2004). Walking projects made no attempt to disguise the fact that performers gave voice to narratives

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17 In Octopus (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np) the narrator recounts a partial history of an oak desk of unknown provenance residing in his office in the historic Dominion Building. The desk had belonged to several previous tenants, including a lawyer, an antiquarian book dealer, and most recently a bankrupt logging company: “The logging company an original tenant from 1910 had vanished in a divestment of assets like the large stand up oak desk on which they had tallied the stripping of all trees still available on the coast at that time.”
that did not belong to them. Walking project performers retained self-positioning throughout the act, facilitating the relation as him or herself, not as a character. Bose described watching performers recite his stories, inflecting the words with enunciation, pauses and breath that marked their own personal connection with the words. In the semi-impromptu telling, stories would become theirs; they would develop “their own relationships with the form, the language” (McIntosh 2014a). This process was rich with opportunity for conversation and forging new connections. Reflecting on his own interactions with performers, Bose (2015) recalled, “they would tell me where they’re from, what they’ve been through, or what their family has been through.” These were productive moments that arose from performing another’s story.

It wasn’t so much that I care that they told my story correctly, the ‘right way.’ It was that they would give the people they were talking to the chance to feel embodied in the place, or to feel their own presence in the city...

…To just have a sensation of being embodied in the now. Here, like in an event. You start thinking about yourself. Your trajectory through the city, or your life…

Working with the six performers I was trying to get them to allow that to happen. And it was also okay if they just told their own stories, if they just got into a conversation with somebody and just walked around. In a sense that could also work. Even if they’re not used the stories are still there as a bedrock of the event. (McIntosh 2014a)

McIntosh hoped these experiences would resonate with participants and prompt them contemplate their own “story in the structure” (McIntosh 2014a). Stories mediated the everyday act of walking with references to Vancouver’s institutional historical development, inciting us to examine the naturalized position from which we experience and act in the world. Moving in the city we engaged with “structures that have somebody’s else’s story attached” (McIntosh 2014a).

Bose’s stories recall affective associations of vulnerability and fear in the city:

Vancouver was a different city 30 years ago. It was a lot of real intense gang violence, it was a shadier city than this bland utopian rich money town it’s become. It was a lot different, a lot darker. (Bose 2015)

18 Jaime Yard (2005:3-4) has contrasted generalized conceptions of Aristotelian versus Brechtian theatre techniques to point to the former’s tendency to “convince” audiences and “inspire acceptance,” against the latter’s more progressive aim to de-naturalize.
Bose participated in some walking projects and found it “surreal” revisiting old sites and hearing his stories recited by others (Bose 2015). Even while gentrification has changed neighbourhoods and few sites from his stories remain, walking projects highlighted lasting conditions of life in Vancouver. The problems that create aboriginal youth at risk, for instance, are evidently still present, Bose (2015) remarked. For participants, adopting personalized frames of reference connected to these realities could create a sense of dislocation and an uncomfortable awareness that structures hold a multiplicity of stories.

There is antagonism in the reminder that a story always belongs to somebody. Similar to the identifying, emplacing and contextualizing affects of the Invocation, walking projects were thick with moments of disorientation and the uneasy sensation of navigating a dubious ethical slope. In the story Octopus a young artist “of partial Kwakwaka’wakw descent” told a story to the narrator for money (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np). The artist explained this story belonged to the Hamatsa secret society, but he was going to share it anyway. The narrator resolved to forget the ill-begotten knowledge (or try). “They are owned by somebody. All stories are a bit like that… Whenever you tell a story you’re betraying somebody” (McIntosh 2014a). In the telling and reliving of these stories participants wore the mantle of another’s experience, sometimes examining sites through lenses of marginalization, homelessness, or disability. These reflective dislocations are a privilege for participants. Do they make a tourists’ spectacle of street corner and alleyway for bodies that have not known them differently?

I have worked with the concept of subjectivity throughout this paper to convey individual experience and the singularity of VCWB stories as crystallized recollections of actual events. This is to acknowledge the historical formation and construction of selves and ways of knowing, and the validity of individual truths expressed in art. However valid these positioned narratives
are, fixed identities are not at play in VCWB events. Living, sensing bodies take over. Manning (2009:6) writes these “bodies-in-the-making are propositions for thought in motion,” a reciprocal reworking of self, thought, and environment.

In the field of art history and criticism Bishop (2004) and Deutsche (1996) work with a similar becoming-body concept. Both argue against naturalized conceptions of the subject as a unified whole, or a “self-transparent, rational, and pure presence” (Bishop 2004:66). Instead identities are fractured, incomplete and shifting.\footnote{Deutsche (1996) and Bishop each reference Lacan’s “understanding of subjectivity as split and decentered” (Bishop 2004:65) and the application of this thesis by Laclau and Mouffe (1985).} Deutsche (1996) describes a progressive democracy as one that sustains rather than evades conflict, requiring the clash or friction of the incomplete subject. Bishop and Deutsche connect the fallacy of the complete and unified subject to a version of democracy that excludes difference and disorder to maintain an illusion of unity. This kind of democracy is enacted spatially in municipal bylaws against sleeping in public parks (attempted erasure of homelessness from public space). These ideas are foundational in Bishop’s (2004) critical assessment of Bourriaud’s (2002) \textit{Relational Aesthetics}, in which she argues experimental performance and installation works can be constructive in their antagonism. She describes works that create and maintain antagonism in relation, confronting participants with differential relations of power using bodies and materials. This is not incompatible with Manning’s (2009:10-11) claim that identities “take form” only in “brief individuations”: “To locate identity as the point of departure of a body is to deny the complexity of the concurrent planes of thought, expression, conceptualization, articulation.” Whether of positive or negative effect, these momentary spaces of relation contain endless possibility. “The world is rich” (Thrift 2004:123) with resources with which bodies form new concepts, connections and expressions.
6. Improvisation and the Space of Relation: Walking Projects

The dancer’s body—in the case of relational movement, the two of us moving together—provides a glimpse into the ways in which movement creates the potential for unthinking dichotomies that populate our worlds: abstract-concrete, organic-prosthetic, alive-dead, mind-body, actual-virtual, man-woman. It’s not that movement directly undermines these dialectical concepts. It’s that movement allows us to approach them from another perspective: a shifting one. When we are no longer still, the world lives differently. (Manning 2009:14-15)

In post-project reflections McIntosh (2014b) described the “interesting space” of relation between participants as a phenomenon he was keen to examine with VCWB. In this section I reflect on how this relation operated in city walking performances. The unexpected and differentiate trajectories that events traveled as participants thought, felt, and moved their bodies—a process Manning (2009:30) has described as “moving the relation”—provides some substance to McIntosh’s hunches about what I have been calling spaces of possibility.

Walking projects participated in life on the city street and produced events through a series of actions. I finish with two brief reflections on walking project experiences and post-walk interviews with performers Pedro Chamale and Aryo Khakpour. Whereas Pedro’s work provides rich description of the ways emotion and affect move participants and shape environments, stories from Aryo are particularly illustrative of the unpredictability of performance and the generative spark created in the friction of improvisation. In thinking through how these events relate to the “body-becoming” (Manning 2009:6) and “worlding” (Manning 2009:24) inherent in relational movement, I position these improvisatory moments as forms of experiential or non-representational art that transform social-material spaces.

If an impetus of VCWB is to create conversations rather than statements, to promote process and movement rather than stabilization, the notion of a body-worlding offers inspiration. As employed by Manning (2009) and Ingold (2015), these concepts describe a mode of
materiality allowing for all of life’s constant movement. The body is a processual building and thinking process, always in the “in-between” (Ingold 2015:147). Manning suggests that, like language, its movement is political and creative. She shows the body in relational art is always more than itself, carrying the “…capacity to become more-than and to create more-than” (Manning 2009:41). “More-than” describes those “actual occasions” that establish unique movements of thought (2009:42). Thinking the body in this way collapses distinctions between social and material worlds and reveals its transformational potential. In art or improvised performance, the body’s struggle to identify, to articulate and express, is the perpetual ‘reaching-for’ that creates art’s productive instability.

Like the “interesting space” McIntosh and collaborators identified in the corresponding actions of participants and performers, Manning (2009:17) has used “the interval” to describe a virtual durational unfolding of potential routes for movement. This virtual “in-betweenness” inherently holds “micropolitical potential” because its possibilities are inexhaustible (Manning 2009:28). As virtual possibility crystallizes in actual events, art insinuates itself in life. VCWB performances do not mimic scenarios described in stories in a representational sense, nor set up a relation between actors and audience in which a totalized narrative is delivered to predictable affect. Audience members do not consume at a distance, but are participants who experience, feel, act and create alongside artists. Just as Bolt (2004) has argued for the performative power of

20 Manning’s (2009:7) use of “actual occasions” comes from Alfred North Whitehead.
21 This kind of instability is not unfamiliar to theatre. Consider for instance Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, inspired in part by the works of Bertolt Brecht (as discussed by Yard 2005), which intentionally sets up what could be called an uncomfortable space of relation between participants. The performance is experimental, the content and its unfolding a “dialogue, not monologue” (Yard 2005:14) on real life events and controversial issues. I connect this kind of performance relation to Bolt (2004) and others who demonstrate, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), that artistic practice occurs in a space of instability: as a world organized or experienced differently, or a flow of relationships less static and stabilized. In this space we find the collapse of organizing frameworks and the occurrence of the unexpected. For this reason this unstable space has been likened to travelling a ‘diagonal line’ (Bolt 2004:48). These are Deleuze and Guattari’s “lines of flight” that “do not connect… but swirl in the in-between” (Ingold 2015:111).
the image, that is, the mutually constitutive relation between world and artwork in process, VCWB performances come to be consequential in the present.

My walking project with Pedro Chamale involved a short jaunt from the UNIT/PITT to the historic Ivanhoe Pub on Main Street, known for its grungy atmosphere and ‘biker bar’ décor. We left the gallery and followed smaller industrial streets east of Main Street. Pedro began delivering lines in short bursts after we passed a handful of Chinese stores and our view became more industrial. Chain link fence, parking lots, and discarded everyday items accumulated in the overgrown grass instead of being crushed or kicked aside by sidewalk pedestrian feet. He was reciting Bose’s *He Gave Us the Keys, Parts I and II*. His face and body were highly expressive, his manner highly attentive and engaged. We greeted people on the street as we walked. His story continued as we turned onto Station Street and made our way along the backs of buildings that face Main. For the narrator of this story there is grimly familiar trouble around each corner, and the dark details of a chaotic evening described began to saturate the event.

“Live connection with the audience” (Chamale 2014) is an important theme in Chamale’s work outside of VCWB too, as he explained during our interview:

…I could see the audience being affected immediately. And we never shied away from ‘Yeah, I’m here doing something for you,’ but we’re also engaging together, directly, not a performer and an audience…we affect each other. With *Vancouver, Crawling, Weeping, Betting* it was the same thing: I’m a performer, and you’re my audience, but it’s an engagement that we’re navigating together through this journey. (Chamale 2014)

In VCWB and in his other projects, it is less about “portray[ing] reality onstage” (Chamale 2014) and more about an act of co-creation in these moments. VCWB was like other performances he had done in which there was “no direction other than simply to allow the physical situation to inform the emotional state in which you deliver your text” (Chamale 2014). Acting comes alive with countless variables that will arise during the event. McIntosh asked Chamale to sustain an
engagement with participants, to facilitate their ‘embodied’ experience in place, without exercising too much control.

He didn’t want me to… Alienate myself from the audience member and stand in front of them and deliver text. It was never about that, it was about the moment I’m in and the situation and all the things that are affecting and happening, not ignoring the world we’re in, and… not trying to guide my audience member to a conclusion or an idea of what this piece means. Simply allow them to either listen to me, or to look at something else…To be constantly in engagement with their surroundings or myself. (Chamale 2014)

In constant engagement with life’s movement, paths traced in walking projects transcend the consumptive and reductive relation of ‘looking at’ so embedded in western visual tradition (Bolt 2004; Casey 2005; Ingold 2013; Manning 2009). Bolt (2004) has contrasted the performative work of art making with the subject-object relation that governs representational apprehensions of the world (Heidegger 1977). Such a distanced and objectified position dissolves in works that encourage a “looking with” or an active “feeling-with” art’s movement (Manning 2009:46). Both Bolt (2004) and Manning (2009) argue this can trouble or shift the organization of dialectical concepts. Walking projects were opportunities to experience the world ‘living differently’ (Manning 2009:15) as we transited distinct frames of reference.

Chamale and I emerged from the alleyway, rounding the building’s edge to reach the Ivanhoe’s entrance. We purchased mugs of ale and walked toward the back of the dark and musty bar, passing leather-clad regulars. We sat across from each other and rested our forearms on the sticky table as he finished the last few lines of Bose’s story. They were about a friend bursting into the Ivanhoe in a furious search for his car keys and the night’s blurry momentum as the group raged together into drunken “oblivion” (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np). The path traced in Bose’s recounting is but a singularity22 in an affective pattern that characterizes his

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22 Singularities are unique proliferations in thought and event that give shape to affective attachments to place; the “improvisatory conceptuality” that is our understanding of places or ‘regions’ as distinct (Stewart 2013:283).
relationship to the city. It also signals a more universal affective quality that has taken hold, shaping this place for many others. But it is more than just a feel, mood, or atmosphere. The story conveys a particular way of being for the narrator and his friends. In later chapters He Gave Us the Keys Part III and Part IV the story continues as the friends travel from one bar to another, and finally to different places in the city looking for somewhere to sleep. The final lines of Part II convey the chaos of this practiced ritual: “And the drunken rabble / All begins to slur / And blur / Into a hymn / A buzzing / A roar / All saints day / In the skids” (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np).

Aryo Khakpour was an improv dancer for Bob’s Salons and also told two stories for walking projects. Like Chamale, he described the work of generating an event in relation.

For these tours…there’s no way to prepare but to memorize the story of course. It works because David was emphasizing how it’s about the human connection. When I can’t prepare anything the only thing I have is my partner, which is for example you, as the guest of the story, the listener. (Khakpour 2014)

My walking project with Khakpour was inspired by Bose’s story East Hastings: Vancouver. We crossed the street from the UNIT/PITT, cutting through an alleyway between Pender and Hastings Streets. He began his telling of the story, asking “What used to be here 50 years ago?” as we turned left toward the Main and Hastings intersection. We crossed to the north side of the street and continued along a busy section of the East Hastings sidewalk where people set up blankets on the ground to sell all kinds of items, often used or acquired by unknown means: shoes and clothing, VHS tapes and DVDs, beverages, and electronics. Much like my walk with Pedro, lines of the story were interspersed within a separate conversation. Our trip westward was interrupted and fitful, halted by bodies jostling and materials on the sidewalk. We slowed our stride to gaze over some of the items for sale and Aryo stopped to pick through a pile of

Singular events or happenings are “incitements to form” of an affective “regionality” that may or may not “stick” to become more universally recognizable (Stewart 2013:283).
electrical cords. He reached into his pockets to find 50 cents for the merchant. During this transaction our bodies were aware of others all around, and we shifted positions to make way.

Both walking and dance are illustrative of the ways our bodies anticipate and conduct movement in relation with others (Ingold 2013, 2015; Manning 2009). There is a careful orchestration to movements that does not occur on a rational, pre-conceptualized plane. “Feeling-with” this partnered movement “is a virtual dance. It is too quick for conscious thought, and yet it composes with it as a layering of felt experience in the making” (Manning 2009:46). As bodies navigate a crowded sidewalk they are propelled in movements almost prior to awareness or conceptualization, weaving, stitching, hesitating, twisting into the spaces that open in an unfolding of time and movement through space (Ingold 2013, 2015; Manning 2009).

Manning (2009) provides thick description of a partnered dance, detailing the rhythm created by and between bodies to demonstrate how walking with a partner gives structure to relational movement. Reciting a story during walking projects was an “enabling constraint” (Manning 2009:230) that held together a co-responsible relation between participants.

It seems to me that the story is somehow becomes secondary. ….The real thing is not the story necessarily. It’s the relationship to the city, and the people. [David] said that if you don’t feel the need to tell the story, don’t tell it. Or tell your own story. …There have been incidents when things happened and I ended up not telling the story. And that was the tour. (Khakpour 2014)

Sometimes a new person would begin to follow a walking project. This person’s involvement would cause the event to take off in a new direction, creating a new relational dynamic between participants. To Khakpour (2014), interruptions from boisterous bystanders also evidenced the project’s connection with life and history in the area, but some of these interruptions enveloped the event in an affective register of confusion, unease or fear. One day a man joined his walking project and began “telling his story” (Khakpour 2014). The man shouted and sang over the
others, his interruption so complete that he “basically colonized the tour” (Khakpour 2014). A grounded connection with local context, such as the one provided in this intervention, could be revealing for participants. “The couple [participants] were fascinated… I didn’t end up telling the story. I’m like ‘Okay, this is it.’ But all [we could do] was to talk to him, listen to him” (Khakpour 2014).

Khakpour’s experience with the shouting, singing man who took over the performance is illustrative of inevitable antagonism that arose during VCWB events. A man who socialized on the street in an unreserved manner, or as Khakpour (2014) suggested in an interview, ‘performed on a different level,’ became part of a walking project, revealing social and structural fractures and raising questions. Issues of authorship and identity were especially interesting during this event, less because of the story itself and more because this man had encountered an opportunity to “tell his story” with the walking project. Questions about the man’s health or socio-economic status may have been part of participants’ reflection on this relation. People in Vancouver negotiate occurrences like this daily, but the walking projects made them a focus, a part of the creative event. There was improvisation in Khakpour and the other walkers’ surprised and intrigued reactions to the walk’s ‘colonization’ by someone else. Beyond merely a set of repetitive and reductive acts, these decisions come from a virtual plane of endless possibility.23

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23 Manning (2009) focuses on a proliferation of possibility that opens up as each event comes into existence—‘actual occasions’ are closings that make way for a new creative cycle building upon patterns of past action. However, no two movements are the same. Similarly, Bolt (2004:37-40) cites Deleuze’s (1994) writings on representation as a repetitive process that builds upon past iterations but always produces difference.
7. Conclusion: Spaces of Possibility

In our earliest conversations about VCWB McIntosh reminded me that surveyors divided this land with string, stakes, lines and maps. ‘Put a stake in it, claim it, divide it. That’s Vancouver’ (McIntosh 2014, paraphrase from fieldnotes). These divisions lend themselves to linear conceptions of time and history and fixed understandings of landscape identity.

In their confrontation of historical and structural power in Vancouver, VCWB events worked against this system of stabilizing representation. The project’s stories and improvisations examined what it means to live in and share a place so fractured by lines of economic and racial privilege and with a glaring history of cultural and material disenfranchisement. They simultaneously foregrounded and destabilized the role of memory in its collective and highly personal or singular iterations.

When I first started working with Chris Bose on this project, I wondered why I was so ignorant of the place I lived. I am a fourth generation Vancouverite, and the heir to eight or nine generations of continental settling, policing and drinking. Why is my inherited knowledge so geographically shallow? The names I know so unconvincing? (McIntosh, Some Final Words, battery opera performance 2015)

In the book’s preface McIntosh lamented his “ignorance” to British Columbia’s “restructured geography” (Bose and McIntosh 2014:np), positioning himself as an outsider in a place he has lived his entire life. Conversely Bose perhaps brought a more resounding outsider’s perspective to VCWB. His relationship to Vancouver has taken shape in visits to the city from elsewhere in British Columbia. Paired with McIntosh’s visceral descriptions of privilege and volatility in Vancouver, their stories (alongside those of other VCWB contributors) contribute to a wider critique of colonial and structural power and reference an assortment of symptoms locatable in competitive, globalizing or international cities around the world, especially those with similar histories of colonial conquest.
Now, after seeing this project come to life in seven generous weeks of encounters, stories, booze, music, dance, mayhem and paint, my “terrified tongue,” as Cease Wyss says, still cannot say the words of this place. However, I do know that this place is full of people. Living, dead, and being born, and I want to thank them for letting me walk amongst them. (McIntosh, Some Final Words, battery opera 2015)

Contributing artists celebrated the generosity of this project’s relational art making, in the same breath admitting to a sustained antagonism in this place, an ongoing struggle that cannot be addressed with any finality.

Stories and other visual and material contributions facilitated a series of improvisatory events as proliferations of thought and action. I have argued that the improvisatory, processual character of these events is an answer to the futility of conciliatory apology. Instability and movement is a kind of “dialogue” (Bose 2015) incited in the antagonism of juxtaposed voices and the friction of unexpected encounter.

Our bodies relate in what I have been calling spaces of possibility. I have related these creative spaces of instability to the notion of art as experience rather than representation (Bolt 2004; Casey 2005; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Manning 2009). In this I find VCWB’s strongest counter to the conventional map, a powerful representational tool and itself a singular iteration of a pervasive settler-colonial power relation. Walking projects were an interrogation and recreation of Vancouver experience outside of these bounds, offering opportunities to pull up the stakes and place them elsewhere.
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