Caretaker to Caretaker

An interview with Artspeak's Bopha Chhay - Part One

by Bopha Chhay, Paula Booker

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Bopha Chhay. Courtesy of Bopha Chhay.



Detail of installation of Woojae Kim's *I Am Porous. And I Am Moved by You.*, at Artspeak Gallery, November 5 – December 11, 2021. Courtesy of Artspeak.



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Study group in session, as part of Denise Ferreira da Silva and Valentina Desideri's *Sensing Salon*, at Artspeak, November 24 – December 16, 2017. Courtesy of Artspeak.



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Bopha Chhay, a writer and curator from Pōneke Wellington, speaks about her curatorial work as the director of Vancouver's non-profit artist-run space Artspeak; her interest in artistic projects that reach beyond the space of the gallery and into the community; how an institution might honour the specifics of place; and Artspeak's living legacy. The conversation, with Paula Booker, Vancouver-based curator from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, was recorded after hours on 8 November 2021 at Artspeak, Vancouver, BC, on a cold and wet West Coast evening in Canada's fall.

Part One

PAULA BOOKER Now we start the official recording. Thanks, Bopha, I'm grateful to be hosted in Artspeak's kitchen.

BOPHA CHHAY Well you're the one who brought all the snacks!

PB This tablecloth I also brought was my grandmother's. An heirloom from Weymouth, on the Manukau Harbour, Tāmaki Makaurau. It's got a certain something-something, and it reminds me of that place. Could you start off by grounding our discussion in this place?

BC Artspeak was founded in 1986 by three people, all of whom are still working in the city: curator Cate Rimmer; writer and artist Kay Higgins; and poet Jeff Derksen. Its roots are interdisciplinary. In the beginning, Artspeak was a studio, and the Kootenay School of Writing invited some artists to share their space. After several moves, since 1996, Artspeak has been located in Gastown, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, an area that has weathered contradictory social and economic pressures, most notably, ongoing gentrification. There are a lot of social services in this area to support unhoused people, and organisations that support harm reduction. During the '80s and '90s, Gastown was an area with a lot of artist-run centres, but no longer, due to the unaffordable rental rates. There are a few spaces left in Chinatown, an adjacent neighbourhood. Artspeak is really lucky because we own the strata that we're situated in.

PB It seems like this neighbourhood has somewhat resisted gentrification. On the one hand, Gastown is quite touristic, visitors come Downtown to see the sights, but at the same time, these streets are people's homes and communities.

Tourists might be confronted with unexpected sights. Is it challenging to work here?

BC Having worked in different artist-run centres, both here and in New Zealand, I consider the surrounding context and the community as providing a really specific set of conditions and constraints. We are part of the neighbourhood. We have a responsibility to get to know our neighbours and understand the conditions in which local residents live under, or are subjected to, and the reasons why.

A lot of the programming at Artspeak has focussed on the conditions of our neighbourhood, and a deeper understanding of place and our relationships with not just our neighbours, but cultural organisations here, and then beyond that, to wider Vancouver. We try to make connections between the local, national, regional, to continuously shift perspective and scale in the way we think and approach artistic practices and production. Being situated in this area is important because there are so many different types of people who walk through these doors, simply because the space maintains storefront access.

PB You mentioned that Artspeak is a strata owner of this gallery space, so you can be a permanent part of this neighbourhood and have the security that comes with that. How does that security impact Artspeak's role as a repository for publishing and ideas with regard to your considerable archive?

BC Because of COVID, we decided to close the gallery and transform a lot of our projects into other formats. For example, we did a radio project, and a lot of exhibitions were turned into either online projects or publications. Ali Bischoff, our communications and operations manager, worked with two interns on our long standing project to organise our archive and special collections library. We had time to ask wider questions about the politics of cultural production like how do our citational choices and methodological approaches uphold particular histories and practices while obscuring others? That questioning has shaped this

year's programming: what's absent, present, what kinds of stories do we hold in what kinds of bodies (of knowledge, individuals, communities, structures), and thinking about the archive as a kind of body too. As part of this excavation, Ali has been looking into the history of the building we are located in, specifically with all the complex histories of an early settlement of the West Coast as a colonial frontier. We're located in the Bodega Building, which used to house a saloon, and a hotel for the early loggers in the late 1800s, and from the 1970s-90s a jazz bar/speakeasy called the Classical Joint. There's a long history of this space in different iterations, but it's always been a place where people have come to gather, congregate, share; a public space. Many Artspeak projects have queried our ongoing and reciprocal relationships and layered histories.



Study group in session, as part of Denise Ferreira da Silva and Valentina Desideri's *Sensing Salon*, at Artspeak, November 24 – December 16, 2017. Courtesy of Artspeak.



Study group in session with Constantina Zavitsanos and Amalle Dublon, as part of Denise Ferreira da Silva and Valentina Desideri's *Sensing Salon*, at Artspeak, November 24 – December 16, 2017. Courtesy of Artspeak.



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PB You've been director/curator at Artspeak for six years. Which Artspeak projects have been highlights for you?

BC Every year at Artspeak we have a year-long question or inquiry that shapes the programming. In 2018, the query focussed on "Writing in process. What structures of support does this require?" We created a programme called the *Studio for Emerging Writers*, an informal mentorship program for writers. We also hosted Justine Chambers' *Semi-precious*, which transformed the space of the gallery into a dance studio, and where a group of choreographers spent time together writing, moving and dancing.

That year, another highlight was the first iteration of *Artspeak Radio Digest*, a three-month radio programme run by a collective of people including myself and Erik Hood (former Artspeak associate director), Brady Cranfield, Autumn Schnell, Emma Metcalfe-Hurst and Gabi Dao; all artists with practices in sound, writing and publishing. It was essentially an artist-run radio project, in partnership with nearby Vancouver Co-op Radio, an incredible station that has been active since the 1970s, as a cooperative society rooted in social justice values, working creatively with media in the interests of people. Their mandate resonates with the work we are doing at Artspeak, in thinking through different forms of creative, collective practices, and how to create space for more emergent forms that we can't quite articulate or make total sense of yet. Each episode ran on Tuesday from 9–10pm, and was conceived of as an issue of a publication. We saw *Artspeak Radio Digest* as a periodical or a journal. We did a bunch of interviews, commissioned people to write or read or make sound projects. We had to learn new skills; how to produce, speak and perform within the particular medium of radio. The idea of writing in process forefronted particular aims, specifically how we speak to and with members of our community, and collaborating with Co-op Radio, an important local cultural organisation. The episodes are still available to listen to.

In 2020 when it became clear the pandemic wasn't going to be a short-term thing, we asked ourselves, what can we do, and what can we do safely? So *Artspeak Radio Digest* became a major programme that year. This project related to my thinking about curatorial work that extends beyond the space of the gallery and into the wider community.

PB There is a level of relationship development and community engagement that is legible in your curatorial practice. Being in the director/curator role long-term and carrying Artspeak's legacy to explore the historical, social, and intellectual conditions for visual and language arts, you have the opportunity to have an iterative curatorial and publishing practice. You bring artists to Vancouver and undertake projects that require multi-year funding or research. What is the capacity for Artspeak to

allow for your voice to be developed? Has this appointment given you the opportunity to develop curatorial statements that are paragraphic rather than short talking points?

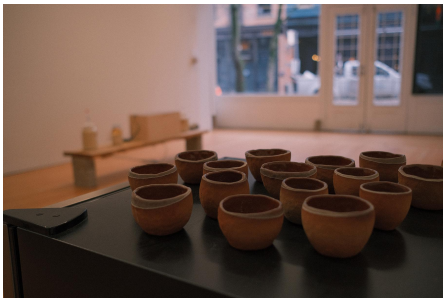
BC I'm fortunate to have this position. It allows me to focus on building relationships with peers and colleagues over a longer period of time, and to create a guided inquiry over the course of each year. Each exhibition or project is a different chapter or a paragraph that can be read within a broader text that provides another angle or perspective on the year's inquiry. The challenge is how to make a year of programming cohesive and also how much information to provide about what you're trying to do, to make sure you leave space for viewers to come to the work on their own terms too.

PB I think this openness is a kind of generosity, not wanting to foreclose interpretation or force a connection between the different projects that you curate. What concerns or threads do you think you bring through your projects? Is there a particular methodology or some core concerns that you bring from one project to the next, or have in the back of your mind?

BC An expanded approach to publishing and exhibition making is important to me, as are informal study groups and pedagogical approaches, as highlighted in the year of collective and collaborative projects in 2018. Practices around sound and listening have been very prevalent in my curatorial thinking, particularly in how it engages a different register of attention beyond non-visual forms. I also think very closely about our relationship and responsibilities to place and place making, as an outcome that is determined by the communities and collective desires of people invested, as opposed to policy outcomes.

The current project at Artspeak, *I Am Porous. And I Am Moved by You.* by Woojae Kim, questions our relationship to place as uninvited guests and settlers on unceded territories, and reflects on the layers of histories of this region. It also considers our relationship to the non-human. In this exhibition, Woojae is

making *makgeolli*, a Korean fermented rice wine. He has been capturing microorganisms from different areas of Vancouver, including from Artspeak, and then creating the conditions for these microorganisms to thrive. Through this, Woojae has become a certain kind of caretaker within this space. This project brings into clear focus a different type of attentiveness that is grounded in place, acknowledging and honouring our significant relationship with the land and responsible stewardship of the resources that are shared with us, and amongst us.



Detail of installation of Woojae Kim's *I Am Porous. And I Am Moved by* You., at Artspeak Gallery, November 5 – December 11, 2021. Courtesy of Artspeak.



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PB I can look into the darkened after-hours Artspeak gallery from here, the space is illuminated by the green neon shamrock of The Blarney Stone, an Irish pub across the road. The light spill illuminates the fermenting crocs. When you present microorganisms as an example of other-than-human organisms that are ever-present in our lived environments, but that we don't necessarily engage with in a positive way, it gives a presence to the environment as a whole. This ties to the notion of legacy and some of your curatorial themes, of place-making and histories.

You have developed projects from long-standing connections with artists, relationships that you have fostered as a curator over time. I was thinking about the etymology of curator, to curate: cure. It comes from the verb to care. Historically, a curator looks after and wrangles the collections in a museum. In a contemporary sense, there's more curatorial care turned towards the artists. Especially with the dematerialised practices that we're so often exhibiting or engaging with; it's the artists who travel and their work may not exist afterwards, to be cared for.

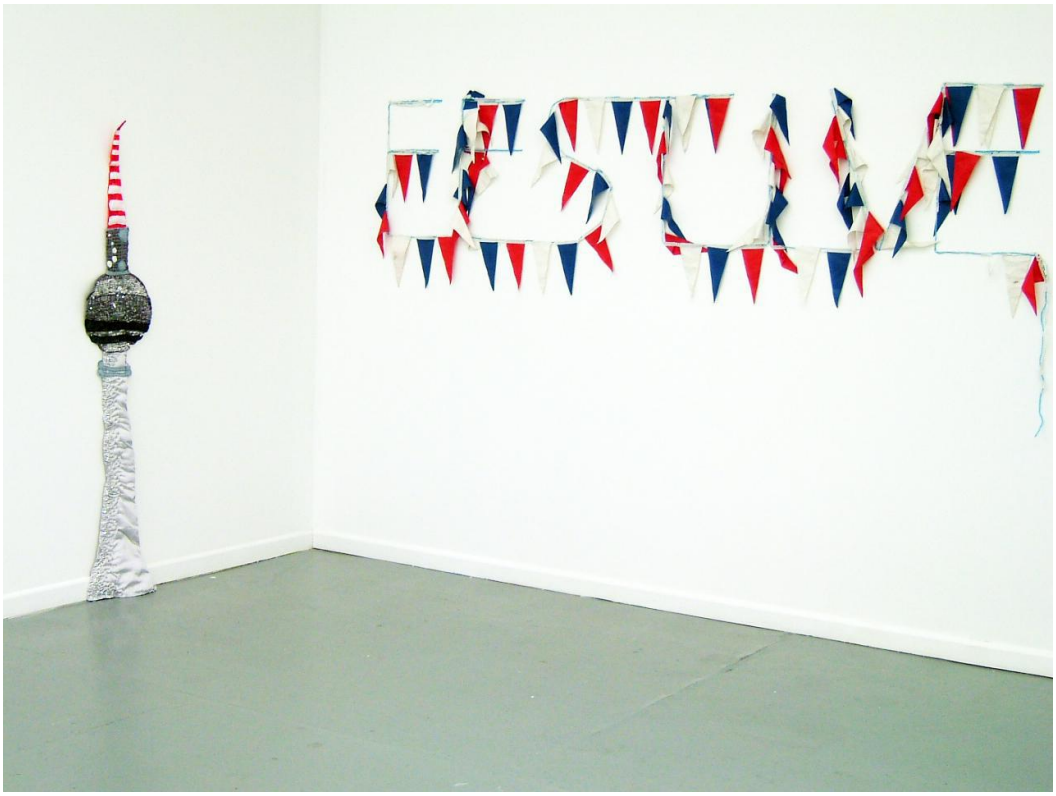
BC I really like your description and that interpretation of what the role of the curator is, and can be.

PB I've only known you since I moved to Vancouver in 2016, so a big part of my friendship with you is my knowledge of your curatorial and publishing practice here.

BC Even though we did share the same job in New Zealand. But not at the same time obviously.

PB Yes! I was the writer and publications manager at Enjoy, a Wellington artist-run space, from 2006 to 2009 when I moved to Berlin. Later, you moved back home from London, to Wellington and Enjoy. Language and publishing crosses into both of our curatorial practices around life, living practices.

BC Yes, I lived in London from 2008–10. I worked at *Afterall*, a contemporary art research and publishing organisation within Central St Martin's, University of Arts London, a wonderful job. I have a long history with artists' publishing, zine culture; I also worked at Parsons Bookshop in Auckland until 2007, where I learned so much about what artist publishing was and could be beyond catalogues and flyers.



PB From 1975 to 2012, Parsons in Auckland was important to the art ecosystem, sourcing specifically New Zealand art titles, hard to find Māori, Pacific and queer literature. It was

idiosyncratic, personal, Roger and Helen Parsons knew the community, supported research into local artists, financially supported those artists producing handmade books. Parsons supported several of our projects at Canary Gallery (an artist-run space in Auckland active 2004–2007), especially enabling *New New Zealand Art*, a very limited-edition handmade artists' book. They generously paid in advance for their order, to help finance our production costs.

BC It was at Parson's that I first encountered Erica van Zon's work, in the form of various artists' books, including one about Liberace! Also artist books by John Pule, et al., and also poets who had set up their own presses. When I worked at Parsons, it was located in the Auckland Art Gallery annex, then called The New Gallery. It was significant that Parsons was located in that building, but had a very different relationship to artists than the gallery did. Working at Parsons was formative to me, because I began thinking about artistic practice, processes, and the form that ideas could eventually take—beyond exhibitions, beyond the white cube. There are so many artists making work in the form of a book as a way to think about different forms of public presentation, circulation, and also dissemination, that challenge formal modes of the way art is shared and experienced. Across the road from Parsons, the Auckland City Library had an incredible collection of zines and other DIY publications, which also speaks to the desire for other forms of distribution, and the intimacy of how a work can be received, via mail for example. I mention this because that particular cluster of public cultural institutions—the Auckland Art Gallery, Parsons, and the Auckland City Library, brought together an informal group of peers, colleagues, forming friendships, notably the arts workers from these institutions, together with art students from Elam and AUT. It was through these regular conversations over a number of years that I really began to think about artistic and cultural production very differently. I still think about those conversations from time to time!

After *Afterall*, in 2010 I came back to New Zealand, and was excited that the writer/publications job at Enjoy had opened up, because

I've always appreciated Enjoy's artist-driven ethos, with so many amazing people having worked and exhibited there. Enjoy also had that storied history within that particular building at their former space on Cuba Street.

PB I love thinking about how Enjoy's former space at 147 Cuba Street was built to be a photography studio, with all that light that was a challenge for exhibitions, and with Peter McLeavey Gallery, this incredible dealer space, just across the hallway. More layers of histories.

This is Part One of a two-part interview between Vancouver-based Aotearoa curators Paula Booker and Bopha Chhay. Click here to read Part Two.

Biographies



Bopha Chhay is a writer and curator who lives and works on the unceded territories of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səl̓ílwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations, also known as Vancouver. She is the director/curator at Artspeak, an artist-run centre with a specific mandate to encourage dialogue between visual arts and text/writing practices. She has held positions at Enjoy Public Art Gallery (New Zealand), Afterall (Contemporary arts research and publishing) Central Saint Martins College of Arts & Design (UK) and 221A Artist run centre (Vancouver). Her curatorial practice is frequently guided by a thematic query that shapes programming over the course of a year, guided by the research areas of transnationalism and diaspora, collective pedagogical practices, art and community organizing, art and labour, sound, and independent publishing.



Paula Booker lives on the edge of the Salish Sea, in the place called X̱epx̱ápay̓ay [Sḵwx̱wú7mesh], formerly the place of many cedar trees. In 2004, she co-founded Canary Gallery, on Auckland's K Road, and has held leadership, editorial, and curatorial roles at Enjoy (NZ), Ngā Taonga/New Zealand Film Archive, Richmond Art Gallery, VIVO Media Arts Centre (Canada), Belkin Gallery (Canada). Now living on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and səl̓ilwətaʔɬ Nations, Paula believes work in the arts that supports Indigenous sovereignty can be both reparative and generative of new spaces for social justice. She holds a Master's in Critical Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia; her research was in curatorial decolonisation informed by Indigenous analyses of coloniality and theorisations of unsettlement, always cognizant of issues of place.

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