

8 JUNE – 6 JULY | 24

Christina Battle

listeningtotheland



Gardening slows everything down.

first
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listeningtotheland:

Christina Battle—What does can a curator do?

AN ESSAY BY CHRISTINA BATTLE | MAY 2024



Christina Battle
seeds are meant to disperse,
2015-ongoing,
participatory project.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

When I was first approached to work on an exhibition for the Fine Arts Building Gallery (FAB Gallery) by April Dean, FAB Gallery’s Manager, I was invited to work as both artist and curator. April envisioned a semesters-long series dedicated to projects by Indigenous and Black artists and curators. For her, the series—a first time for the gallery—was one of “curatorial intervention.” April’s invitation came with the hope “that these projects would reinforce the importance of the curatorial lens and innovative curatorial practices while also centering access to professional artistic works on campus for students.”¹ Struck by the potential of the concept of intervention—to occur or lie between two things²—I saw the invitation as an opportunity to deeply consider my own relationship to curatorial practice, as both an *artist* and as a *curator*. The two roles are often kept separate within the ethos of the gallery, but for me they hold a space of hybridity that is difficult to easily tease apart.

April’s invitation to me, as an artist exhibiting in the gallery, was prompted with a question: Who did I want to curate my work? I hesitated to answer—I was struck by what was implied by asking “who.” The question, as it was

asked, seemed to be requesting a name—a specific individual I might work with. Instead, I found myself thinking about what sort or type of curator I wanted to work with. *Who?*

As an exhibition opportunity that inverted the typical approach—which usually begins with an invitation directly from a curator—my focus instantly turned to the expectations I have of curators, my previous experiences with them, and what relationship to the role I hoped to have into the future. It’s important here to recognize April’s own curatorial position in all of this: from imagining and developing a framework for the program, to securing funding, determining artist invitation lists, and administering the project—all themselves curatorial tasks. Many times, I wondered: Was she not the curator? And then in turn: What do curators do, anyhow?

What did I want a curator to do?

I approached the question with both my artist and curatorial hats on simultaneously. Knowing my own approach to the practice of curating, I set my expectations as an artist accordingly. I came to realize that my approach to curating is one that fills a similar need and desire to my approach of art-making; I want to work with curators who approach curatorial practice striving for a similar approach.

Setting out to answer the question of *who* sitting at the heart of the invitation, I turned to my own methodologies of curatorial practice. Conversation sits at the centre of my work as an artist/curator, so I began there. Across the fall of 2023, and through to the spring of 2024, I engaged three artist/curators in conversation to help dissect and approach the question of *who*. Alana Bartol, Cecily Nicholson, and Lisa Myers each tackle the hybridity of the roles in interesting and unique ways, and I spent time discussing strategies and sharing experiences with each of them.

Christina Battle
seeds are meant to disperse, 2022
video still.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



For me, this question of *who* resonates loudest when considering the more participatory elements across my artistic practice. The role of artist is one that itself shifts with these kinds of projects, where administration, facilitation, organizing, and invitation-making can become the material of the artistic work—often mirroring or aligning with what is also often considered curatorial work. These concerns become even more heightened when considering my *seeds are meant to disperse* project, where both participation and living material sit at the centre of the work—and thus care, consideration, responsibility, worldview, and even politics become a critical part of the framework needed to be shaped within the parameters of exhibition.

I often tell a story about the discomfort I encountered when first shifting the *seeds* project to a capital “A” art project. My concern stemmed from working with seeds, the heart of the project, within the confines of the gallery space—which isn’t always conducive to meeting the needs of living material. The participatory nature of the project also made me pause, as institutions often lack the necessary support to initiate, organize, and maintain ongoing participation. So much of my work with seeds is a part of long-term learning, knowledge sharing, and experience. This approach to artistic work doesn’t

always fit so neatly within the framework of gallery timelines and available levels of support. There have been times with this project when I’ve wondered if it might be more accurate to describe myself as the curator of the work, as opposed to the artist—since truly, the seeds at the heart of the project, along with participants, are what make it possible to read the work as “Art.”

That discomfort I feel each time I am invited to bring the seeds project into a gallery, pushes and pulls at April’s initial question—*Who?*—in interesting ways. In the end, my approach with the exhibition invitation was not to consider who I wanted to curate my work, but who *seeds are meant to disperse* needed as a curator. This question became my working method for supporting the project within the space of the exhibition, and for revisiting and reconfiguring the work based on its formal requirements. The project has been ongoing since 2015, with many adaptations along the way. I utilized this exhibition as an opportunity to consider how the project might shift again, now given the time and space to think deeply about its needs.

I’m grateful to Alana Bartol, Cecily Nicholson, and Lisa Myers for their generosity and time; I learned so much from discussing their experiences and methods of approach. I’m thankful to April Dean for the many discussions about the role of curators, galleries, and institutions, all of which informed my thinking, as well as for her well-tuned approach to administering and organizing such endeavours. Lastly, I’m appreciative of Lara Felsing, who was invited to work alongside me as an artist while I wore the hat of curator, which through many conversations came to feel more like that of collaborator. It is the blurring of these lines that interests me and helps fuel my creative practice. I’m grateful for the opportunities April’s invitation sparked—the many conversations it fostered and the relational work it spearheaded.

Work in the gallery presents *seeds are meant to disperse* in a new way: considering both the timing of the exhibition and the seasons that the

seeds themselves are driven by. Revisiting previously made iterations of the project also allowed me to incorporate new strategies for engagement and participation. Across May of 2024, I was invited by Lisa Prins and Allison Sivak to work alongside their Community Service-Learning class, a University of Alberta course dedicated to examining “what ‘knowing’ means in different contexts from different people.”³ Their approach to learning and knowledge sharing has had a great impact on my thinking around participatory works, and engagement from the class is presented within the exhibition as well. Additional outputs from this research into the artist/curator role manifest through a series of online resources, including an interview with Artist/Curator Alana Bartol, a long-term participatory project in collaboration with Cecily Nicholson, and a manifesto written while considering the needs of *seeds are meant to disperse*.

QR codes placed within the gallery provide access to more information about this research and work along with opportunities to participate.

FOOTNOTES

¹ April Dean, email message to author, October 17, 2023.

² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “intervention,” accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intervention>.

³ Kirsty Robertson, *Curating in a Time of Crisis*, video, 7:14 minutes, ArtLab, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/566679501>.

Christina Battle
seeds are meant to disperse, 2022
video installation. IMAGE BY TONI
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A distributed network privileges the dispersal of resources across a number of users.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Fine Art Building Gallery respectfully acknowledge that we are located on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway, Saulteaux, Anishinaabe, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our vibrant community.

We are grateful to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists, designers, curators, researchers, and scholars who generously share their creative work and traditional knowledge with the University community through exhibitions and related programs.



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