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# Mutual Portraits in a Convex Mirror

From December 13th, 2020, to April 7th, 2021, I did not speak to a single other live person face to face. I had online classes, but when the monitor was off, I was alone again. There were a few student-led clubs at the Daniels Faculty of Landscape, Architecture and Design that hosted various online group chats and Zoom events to salvage any sense of community amongst the undergraduates. Otherwise, there was only the impenetrable University of Toronto interface.

I felt this void most strongly coming back from the year online. I was once again surrounded by people, but that did not equate to a sense of belonging. This feeling was familiar. It felt like my very first year of undergraduate as an international student coming from New England, one of the most frigid places on Earth. Finding meaningful connections with other people had always been a struggle for me. That in combination with the ages old New Englander tendency to hate thy neighbor, which probably stemmed from the bitter

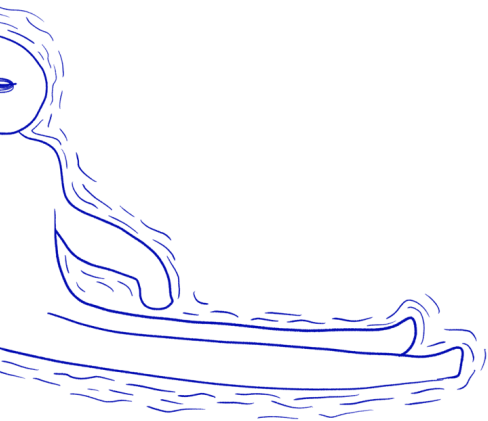


winters in Jamestown, made for a confusing and lonely first year of university. I was beginning to figure it out well into the second semester when March 2020 came, and I transformed into an icy iguana of a person once again.

Transitioning from online to in-person, while taxing, did uncover some things about my environment. I was able to step back and apprehend the root of my disconnection. For one, the nature of creating art in a university setting is isolating by nature. Students must perform individually for grades lest collaboration distorts the distribution of points. What is more, we occupy a unique space with many quirks. The North and South Borden Buildings that house the visual studies program exist on the literal periphery of One Spadina Crescent. The two structures were built in 1909 to serve as dairy processing plants for City Dairy Company Unlimited, and later Borden Dairy.<sup>1</sup> Their interior plans reflect, of course, their function as factory spaces. Today, a tangled mess of hallways and staircases that once suited dairy processing procedure conceal the converted workspaces and offices within. The interior's industrial aesthetic does feel like your classic art studio, both richly historical and out-of-the-way. The downside is that students and professors are apparitions in the trick corridors and hidden compartments. Larger workrooms that suite students' needs are also locked, and storage rooms are like the wild west. The space no doubt hampers socializing, let alone working side by side for extended periods of time.

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1 Kevin Plummer, "Historicist: 'If It's City Dairy It's Clean and Pure. That's Sure,'" *Torontoist*, November 30, 2013, <https://torontoist.com/2013/11/historicist-if-its-city-dairy-its-clean-and-pure-thats-sure/>.



But how very symptomatic it was for me to diagnose my peers' tribulations by thinking and writing on my own. The logical way forward was to start conversing. I gave myself permission to be that catalyst for conversation by creating an online form to send to other visual studies students as the first phase of my project. Incidentally, the dissemination of the form allowed me to contact other students

outside of the small circles that I inhabit in my studio courses. As of today, the form reached 7 individuals within the time it circulated, which is about 10 percent of the program.<sup>2</sup> Though it is a small sample size, the answers I received to the poll were plenty indicative. One question asked whether one feels "out of touch" with the program, to which all replied either "yes" (57.1%) or "so-so" (42.9%). Other data indicate that all polled do most of their

"I've been in the VIS major since 2016 and while I have had some personal situations that had limited my social ties, I found that I always felt out of place in a lot of the studio classes. The professors and peers have always been pleasant and lovely but I find that there's a disconnect between studio classes and the importance of networks and just social relationships."

-anonymous

artmaking at home due to lack of storage space or because they feel "out of place" when using the spacious undergraduate architecture studio across the street. Most of the answers

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2 Planning and Budget Office, *Enrollment Report 2020-2021* (Toronto: University of Toronto, February 8, 2021), 19, accessed November 13, 2021, <https://planningandbudget.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Enrolment-Report-2020-21-FINAL.pdf>.

show an overall trend towards dissatisfaction with our studio culture at large.

I feel relieved and saddened that many of my peers share my feelings. Like most university students in this

“...At this point (in my third year in the program), I’m just genuinely curious as to who my peers are, and to see something that facilitates that sense of acknowledgment or community I feel is much needed.”

-Billie Aningalan

decade, this year has not met our expectations.

Some may see this disappointment as a non-issue. Why should we care that a handful of students feel lost in their program?

When I read the answers in my survey, I feel some-

thing fiercely protective over the artists that toil

away alone. I think back to my first year when I did not know what a community felt like. I want to do now what I wish someone did for me two years ago.

Our healing begins with agency. I gave myself permission to work through this issue, however writing alone does not solve the lack of propriety that my peers feel towards starting a community from scratch within the Borden Buildings. In this case a material problem requires a material solution: we must combat the unruly building layout with physical signifiers that prompt collective engagement in addition to online communication. Attachment and ownership go hand in hand. In addition to the survey and the text, my first contribution will be a series of posters hung throughout the Borden Buildings

that invite students to consider their occupation of the site. The posters will also ask students to reflect on and share their own interactions with studio culture in the visual studies program through a QR code on each flyer. These responses constitute a hopeful first step towards a more collective visual studies experience.



**MUTUAL  
CONVEX  
PORTRAITS  
MIRROR**





**I THINK OF THE FRIENDS  
WHO CAME TO SEE ME, OF WHAT YESTERDAY  
WAS LIKE. A PERCULIAR SLANT  
OF MEMORY THAT INTRUDES ON THE DREAMING MODEL  
ON THE SILENCE OF THE STUDIO AS HE CONSIDERS  
LIFTING THE PENCIL TO THE SELF-PORTRAIT.  
HOW MANY PEOPLE CAME AND STAYED A CERTAIN TIME,  
UTTERED LIGHT OR DARK SPEECH THAT BECAME PART OF YOU  
LIKE LIGHT BEHIND FOG AND SAND,  
FILTERED AND INFLUENCED BY IT, UNTIL NO PART  
REMAINS THAT IS SURELY YOU. THOSE VOICES IN THE DUSK  
HAVE TOLD YOU ALL AND STILL THE TALE GOES ON.**

**-JOHN ASHBURY**





**ONE WOULD LIKE TO STICK ONE'S HAND  
OUT OF THE GLOBE, BUT ITS DIMENSION,  
WHAT CARRIES IT, WILL NOT ALLOW IT.**

**-JOHN ASHBURY**







I AM NOT ALONE

PAPER RECYCLING

ENTRANCE

EXIT

COMMERCIAL

