

Large Text

The aleatory object

An exhibition-as-research

Curated by Shani K Parsons

May 11–July 30, 2022

University of Toronto Art Centre

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In conversation with Betty Julian,
Dawn Cain, Emily Cook, Jasper Parsons,
Jennifer Brethour, Jeremy Laing, Jules Lewis,
Liz Ikiriko, Maureen Hynes, Mira Berlin,
Nahed Mansour, and Susan Low-Beer

**Art
Museum**

The aleatory object

Originating in an encounter with a psychoanalyst's collection, *The aleatory object* makes visible a curatorial process that is critically oriented toward the unknown. Unfolding as an open-ended assemblage of images, objects, and ideas, it is a process that values attention over intention, curiosity over comprehension—resulting in a curatorial selection that defies easy classification. Through an intentional embrace of uncertainty, and pursuit of associative and improvisational approaches to research and presentation, *The aleatory object* proposes a different kind of curatorial engagement with knowledge production, one that does not simply restate what is known or strive to demonstrate expertise in any conventional sense. This does not mean that knowledge won't be produced or shared, but rather that the process will not be so constrained, to paraphrase Freud, by the "imposition of reason on the imagination."

The aleatory object thus occasions an unconventional co-existence between ambiguous and anomalous things, transcending normative cultural, historical, and disciplinary divides. Underlying the obvious question of how to treat "artifacts" vs. "artworks" within a single exhibition is a deeper, more vexing issue: when not much is known about a thing, it tends to languish in academic and museum contexts where value is often tied to knowability. Objects about which much is known are simply easier to teach and talk about. But what is lost to a culture that only teaches and talks about

what it already knows? Ultimately the questions such a project asks may be unanswerable, but the untold possibilities it engenders are the reasons for asking.

This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

Our Supporters

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Exhibition Essay

Objects . . . often arrive by chance, and these aleatory objects evoke psychic textures which do not reflect the valorizations of desire. Instead we are played upon by the inspiring arrival of the unselected, which often yields a very special type of pleasure—that of surprise. It opens us up, liberating an area, like a key fitting a lock. In such moments we can say that objects use us, in respect of that inevitable two-way interplay between self and object world and between desire and surprise.

—Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character* (1992)

The aleatory object is a proposition for the embrace of uncertainty and ambiguity in curating and exhibition making. Originating in an encounter with the Malcove Collection, the project makes visible a curatorial process that responds affirmatively to initial conditions born of chance and contingency and expands upon them through an ongoing critical orientation toward the unknown.

Taking an intuitive approach to curating that matter-of-factly admits to positionality and partiality in this embrace of uncertainty, *The aleatory object* unfolds as an openended assemblage of images, objects, and ideas that have emerged in conversation with a psychoanalyst's collection. It is a process that values attention over intention, curiosity over comprehension—resulting in a curatorial selection that defies easy classification. *The aleatory object* thus occasions an unconventional co-existence between ambiguous and anomalous things, transcending normative cultural, historical,

and disciplinary divides. Underlying the obvious question of how to treat “artifacts” vs. “artworks” within a single exhibition is a deeper, more vexing issue: when not much is known about a thing, it tends to languish in academic and museum contexts where value is often tied to knowability. Objects about which much is known are simply easier to teach and talk about. *But what is lost to a culture that only teaches and talks about what it already knows?*

Within the context of contemporary museology, such questions are of critical import; museums have always been sites of production of knowledge and ignorance alike. Calls to dismantle bureaucratic, linguistic, and psychological legacies of colonial power have been long in coming and will be most productively pursued through more consensual and conversational practices of relation making between people and things—even and especially those we can never fully know. *The aleatory object* thus situates itself precisely at the shifting interstice between self and other through responsive (associative, improvisational) approaches to research, foregrounding curatorial subjectivity as an inherent and integral, yet largely invisibilized factor in all stages of exhibition making. Further extending beyond intuition and introspection to encompass collaborative and conversation-based approaches to thinking and knowing, *The aleatory object* does not advance curatorial subjectivity as an end in itself, but rather as a means toward fostering greater intersubjectivity—that which is essential to language and the production of social meaning—across the exhibitionary complex.

Upon reading that Lillian Malcove embraced the generative potential of ambiguity in her work and life, I recognized a

shared affinity for open-endedness that is reflected in my own approaches to living and working. Citing Freud, she describes the analytic situation as a suspension of critical judgment on one hand, and maintenance of a “state of evenly hovering attention” on the other—both necessary conditions for sustaining mindful two-way relations. It is, she states, “to listen to everything with all of oneself”—and, borrowing from Keats, a much-desired capability for all forms of creative work—to exist in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without an irritable reaching after facts and reason.”

In thinking freely with people and things, other things and people spontaneously come to mind as cousins, counterpoints, conversation partners—and in contemplating the latent relationships between them, it becomes possible to discern fresh affinities. This belief in curating’s associative and exponential potential is further extended beyond research and production into reception, with gallery visitors invited to respond aleatorically in turn. As such, *The aleatory object* is an exhibition-asresearch as much as it is of-research. Through a different kind of (personal, critical, political, intellectual) engagement with knowledge production, *The aleatory object* does not simply restate what is known or not known, or strive to demonstrate expertise in any conventional sense. This does not mean that knowledge won’t be produced or shared, but rather that we shall not be so constrained, to paraphrase Freud, by the imposition of reason on the imagination. Ultimately the questions such a project asks may be unanswerable, but the untold possibilities it engenders are the reasons for asking.

A good question . . . is an honest question, one that, like good theory, dances on the edge of what is knowable, what is

possible to speculate on . . . or what is possible to say. A good question, . . . like good theory, might be quite unlovely to read, particularly in its earliest iterations. And sometimes it fails or has to be abandoned. But we don't come together to perform what we already know. . . . We come together to be unlovely and take ourselves apart, in order to mutually construct even more difficult ideas. It's not supposed to be easy. The labour is what makes it beautiful.

— Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “We Aren’t Here to Learn What We Already Know” (2016)

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All quotes from Lillian Malcove, “The Analytic Situation: Toward a View of the Supervisory Experience,” *Journal of the Philadelphia Association of Psychoanalysis* 2 (1975): 2–3.

About the Curator

Shani K Parsons is an independent curator, designer, and founding director of Critical Distance Centre for Curators. With degrees in architecture (Temple University, 1994) and graphic design (RISD, 2000) she has pursued an interdisciplinary, process-driven practice within both independent and institutional/museum contexts and has produced an eclectic body of work ranging from intimate artist's books to large-scale exhibitions. Recent curatorial projects include *Infinite Distance*, an accessible online exhibition presented in conjunction with transmediale Festival 2021–2022, and *The Parkette Projects*, a public art exhibition for Gallery TPW. (criticaldistance.ca; skparsons.ca)

Curator's Acknowledgments

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Public Programming

Opening Reception: MVS Studio Program and MVS Curatorial Studies Program Graduating Exhibitions

Wednesday, May 11, 5pm–7pm
University of Toronto Art Centre

Writing by choice or by chance

Saturday, June 4, 5pm–7:30pm
University of Toronto Art Centre and University College Quad

Join curator Shani K Parsons and poet Maureen Hynes as they guide participants to respond ekphrastically and aleatorically to any aspect of the exhibition.

Free and all are welcome! For more information, visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs/

Visiting the Art Museum

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3
416-978-8398

University of Toronto Art Centre

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Hours

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. For information about class tours and group bookings, contact artmuseum@utoronto.ca

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