



Fermenting Feminism at Access Gallery

Megan Jenkins



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The north facing window of Vancouver's Access Gallery faces out onto East Georgia Street, one of several bustling avenues which compose the city's Chinatown. Across the street, the cheerful cat emblem of Fat Mao Noodles smiles into the gallery. Gallery 221A and the Pollyanna Library, modern and nearly austere in their appearances were it not for the posters in the window, sit next door, shoulder to shoulder with the Lore Krill Co-op. East of the gallery are Mingfei Enterprises, Garlock Seafood, and Tin Lee Market, who roll up their shuttered windows every morning to regular customers. Dotted in between new restaurants are tea shops and pharmacies which have held their stations for decades. The street is heavily trafficked during the day, as folks in Evos and Car2gos whip through Chinatown and delivery drivers double park and block alleyways to make their daily drop offs. The few blocks that make up Chinatown represent some of the city's most diverse, and therefore, represent a dynamic site of interaction between varied communities.

For *Fermenting Feminism*, the exhibition on at Access Gallery from 14 September 2019 to 26 October 2019, this environment is perhaps its ideal space: fermentation as a speculative process relies on interacting milieus. Curated by Lauren Fournier as part of her ongoing curatorial project, *Fermenting Feminism* brings together the diverse works of Walter Scott, Andrea Creamer, Eleonora Edreva & Leo Williams, Alanna Lynch, Christine Tien Wang and Sarah Nasby for a critical view of the process of fermentation as a speculative and material process. Mindful of the diversity of neighbourhood residents, the exhibition immediately engages its surroundings with a work by Scott, pressed in vinyl onto the window.

“Kombucha as a sticky allegory where language goes to die,” reads the quote, in wavy, graphic text (Scott, 2017). It is intended to be read from the street, and invites passersby for at least a second glance, and perhaps a pause for a visit in the gallery. This work is a still from Scott’s *XINONA*, a short which follows from his wildly successful Wendy comics (Scott, 2014). For Xinona, living on her traditional, ancestral Kombucha planet, “kombucha embodies the limit point of language—a kind of symbolic death,” writes Fournier (Fournier, 2019).

At the end of language, by what means can we communicate? One method of communication proposed by the exhibition, or at least of exchange, is fermentation. Fermentation enables a sticky, dynamic, somewhat passive, but nonetheless transformative process to transpire. And at first glance, given the gallery’s presence in this vibrant but contested neighbourhood, Scott’s work alone continues the important dialogue between the many parties who live, work, learn, eat, and leisure in the area.

But as Fournier writes in her curatorial text, fermentation necessarily requires a vessel to contain its processes (Fournier, 2019). Sarah Nasby’s work reimagines and interrogates histories of design via sculptures which contain kombuchas and teas which continue to ferment, sour, and rot throughout the exhibition. The vessels speak to how even entropic processes are shaped by those which enclose them, despite their intangible nature. Around the vessels, the scent of the air changes as the liquids take on consecutive forms.

This notion of the vessel is fundamental to approaching the exhibition in relation to the institutional mission of the gallery. Access is its own vessel. Chinatown is its own vessel. Within the confines of its borders, people, politics, ideas, and energies mix and ferment, passively and actively, often specifically through the cultural experience of shopping, making, eating, and sharing food. As new restaurants move in and old businesses close, the landscape of Chinatown is in a near constant state of change.

Like many gallery spaces, Access and 221A live in Chinatown in part for its more affordable rent. This means, inevitably, that rent will rise as the area is gentrified; the galleries will close; residents will be displaced, and the rich culture inherent to the neighbourhood could fade. Regardless of the understandable economic reasons for the presence of the gallery (cheap rent is also not the only reason the gallery lives in that space), Access’ tenure on Georgia E street

still requires critical appraisal. But Fournier's exhibition, with the support of Access' Director/ Curator Katie Belcher, successfully enacts the very processes of passive, horizontal, collaborative transformation which the exhibition itself discusses.

Access, especially under the leadership of Belcher, has established itself as an incubator for emergent artists and practices. Belcher's own curatorial interest in food makes her partnership with guest curator Fournier a logical and fruitful one. For *Fermenting Feminism*, Fournier's decision to bring together such a diverse collection of works, from Scott's vinyl to Alanna Lynch's performance *Gut Feelings* (2016) and her dehydrated SCOBYs shaped into gloves, and to Andrea Creamer's plaster-cast bread boule bricks model how proximity facilitates new and dynamic sites of interaction. Revisiting Nasby's work, for example, the scent of her works enveloped the other pieces.

This proximity offers a view into Chinatown's unique circumstances in more ways than one. The bustle along the streets of the neighbourhood and the diversity of businesses and residents yields exactly what the exhibition models: interactions impossible elsewhere occur daily, creating a series of frenetic but generative incidences. Along the streets of Chinatown, the scents of legacy grocery stores and restaurants waft about, similarly enveloping the interactions which take place on the street.

Works like Scott's and vessels like Nasby's model the processes by which Chinatown is shaped and developed everyday, and illuminates how the gallery, under the guidance of Belcher, strives to feed these processes. The reactions between people and energies taking place on East Georgia Street are not lidded, starved of oxygen and sugars, but rather are nourished by discussions such as these. I can't speak for the experiences of residents of the neighbourhood, but the intention of the gallery and the exhibition is clear: without fermentation—exchange and transformation—kombucha is just a flat tea. Without nourishment, SCOBYs discolour and rot. But with care and attention, new modes of being are created. The important difference between this metaphorical kombucha and the carbonated tea in Scott's *XINONA* is a pointed shift away from kombucha as a symbolic limit and toward its generative processes as a way forward—a method of critical exchange for which Fournier successfully argues.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Megan Jenkins is an MA candidate at the University of British Columbia's Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory. She is the President of the Board at Access Gallery and the Editor-in-Chief of SAD Magazine.