

ART CON GUELPH: Developing Alternative Artistic Practices  
through Fan Culture and Fan Convention Models

By  
Angela C. Keeley

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## **Abstract**

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Master of Fine Art, 2013

Angela C. Keeley,

Criticism and Curatorial Practice, OCAD University

At a convention you see the efforts of hundreds to thousands of people who re-create characters from a wide variety of fan culture with a cultish approach to imitation and detail. These efforts display a wide range of artistic skills that are not necessarily accredited as such. ART CON GUELPH (ACG) is an investigation of how the participatory model of fan conventions and their creative interactions can be pushed beyond the boundaries of fandom and be used as a site of interaction, original expression and artistic practices. The goal of ACG is to see how this potential model can be employed to encourage youth to initiate their own artistic practices through original self expression. This essay focuses on the discussion of integrating both the theoretical and practical foundations of ACG in order to build a new framework of art practice which focuses on the public as the fulcrum of the work.

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DIYode

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Transition Guelph

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## Preamble

At a convention you see the efforts of hundreds to thousands of people who re-create characters from a wide variety of fan culture including: television shows, movies, comics, anime/manga, video games and popular genres (steampunk, cyberpunk, zombies), with a cultish approach to imitation and detail. When I began to participate in this vibrant culture, one of the first things that I wondered was - if the fans put all of this effort into creating perfect detailed replicas of fan icons, what could they do if that same energy was put into their own original ideas?

## Thesis Project

What I have been exploring as my thesis project is the investigation of how the model of fan conventions<sup>1</sup> (colloquially referred to as cons) can be pushed beyond the boundaries of pre-existing branded formats and be used as a framework for a site of interaction, original expression and artistic practices. The goal of ACG is to see how this potential model can be employed to encourage youth to initiate their own artistic practices through original self expression. By adopting the format and structure of a con I hope to establish a new convention,

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<sup>1</sup> i. Fan conventions are large events which can be based around a specific part of media culture like Star Trek or Marvel Comics, or it can be based on a genre like fantasy or anime. The convention model is fluid and allows for variations to be set up even at the same convention year after year. Conventions have a few standard set ups: dealers rooms, artist alley, panel programming, events programming and costuming. The reason this model is so useful to ACG is that it provides an already established model which youth are familiar with and which evokes an inherent focus on participation and interaction which challenges the normal standards of everyday social interactions.

ii. "Fan Conventions" last modified June 13, 2010, [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com). "Fan Convention: n. Essentially a meeting place for those with like interests. Examples of such gatherings include furry, comic books and anime conventions. Conventions usually require one to register to gain admittance. Attendees might have to wear a badge as proof of payment. Conventions can range from one day to weekends and more...Features of conventions might include (but are not restricted to) events such as autograph signing, art sales, marketplaces or 'dealers rooms', and entertainment (eg: boxing matches, karaoke contests, dance contests, movie rooms etc). A convention is oftentimes shortened to simply a 'con', in which case one might state that they are 'going to the con?'".



ART CON GUELPH (ACG), to initiate original creative efforts which reflect and perhaps explore the life and local culture of youth in the Guelph area.

The idea is to create a site of interaction that encourages youth to initiate and create distinct cultural practices beyond mass media by questioning what exactly a creative culture could be. By facilitating a situation where there is no required outcome for the day, ACG is meant to foster original expression by exposing youth in Guelph to collaborative contemporary art practices through unusual social interactions where their interests in fan culture are the inspiration for their art. In this case the participants are encouraged to take their interests one step beyond fandom and to think of what the evolution of that interest might look like.

Conceptually, I will be focusing on the methodology of *social acupuncture* which has been defined by Darren O'Donnell both in practice and in theory.<sup>2</sup> Social acupuncture is a flexible framework that O'Donnell uses as a means to pierce and disrupt the implied standards of art by integrating highly social interactions as non-traditional art practices. O'Donnell unsettles and interrogates the expectations of social interaction by working with children and youth, creating unstable and often politicized situations that are facilitated by him, but are

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<sup>2</sup> Darren O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia*, (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2006) 50. Social Acupuncture is a term coined and explained by Darren O'Donnell in his book *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia* (2006) which he posits as a speculative model which could allow for "a way to induce encounters between individuals where we bring the aegis of art out into the world and use it to blanket traditionally non-artistic activities – activities in which power differentials are at least tacitly acknowledged and the artistic manoeuvre is to either reverse or erase them temporarily in a gesture of antagonism that contributes to rising social intelligence." p. 33 His writing concerning his own works of social acupuncture always include a method of destabilizing expected roles, fostering unexpected personal interactions, and using unusual means, which are not focused on the sole genesis of the artist as creator, to create art.

produced and completed by the participants. In this way, he is essentially an *animateur*,<sup>3</sup> someone who is the driving force behind the concept and who presents the opportunity to the public, but does not interfere with the people or their ways of interpreting the event or situation. As a flexible, participant dependant model, social acupuncture works through a method of unstable interactions which is focused on processes rather than results. Because of its adaptable nature, social acupuncture can incorporate more than one arts practice which can be spliced with a more established model like community art practices to stimulate new processes.

With ACG, I am employing the ideas of participation and facilitation, which are already in existence at cons, while situating the theoretical methods of social acupuncture and community art as a framework to locate my research and the experience within the concept of evolving art practices for youth.

Expressions of creativity come in all shapes and forms; some youth express themselves through their high school art classes, radical fashion statements, or branded lifestyles. Others employ what might be called vandalism – street art, graffiti, etc., while media based communities are involved in the appropriation and subversion of visual, digital and new media information. Many youth also express themselves through the experience of fan culture and such by-products as: fan art<sup>4</sup> and cosplay.<sup>5</sup> The participation in fan culture can be publically

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<sup>3</sup> *Oxford Dictionary*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Also available at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>. *Animateur*: *noun* a person who enlivens or encourages something, especially a promoter of artistic projects.

<sup>4</sup> i. Fan Art is the artistic appropriation of characters, personas and ideas which come directly from the comic, video game, book, movie, tv series etc. that are the maker's preferred fandom(s). This results in direct mimicry, reinterpretations of the originals, and crossovers between multiple fandoms. The range of skill involved in fan art is completely spectral and includes the most basic and unschooled efforts to institutionally trained and professional artists who participate via online archives like deviantART under pseudonyms.

displayed and performed taking shape around fashion, accessorization and social interaction based around different events,<sup>6</sup> conventions, cosplay groups, and similar interest groups like Dungeons and Dragons, Live Action Role Playing (LARP), geek clubs, re-enactment societies and festivals. This is particularly visible within the convention - or “con” - model where there is a wide range of consumerism<sup>7</sup>, branding and appropriation that is encouraged and performed.

What I will set in motion with ACG is a youth focused community arts project that encourages the exploration of art practices that reflect and articulate current youth culture in Guelph. By providing a neutral space that can support the unstable nature of social acupuncture as well as encouraging the familiar and long standing format of a con, ACG creates a new hybrid model by removing the necessity for a genre.<sup>8</sup> What the hybrid model does instead of focusing

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ii. “Fan Art,” last modified September 20, 2011, <http://www.urbandictionary.com>. “Fan Art (also “fan art”) Art of any form, usually electronic or drawn free hand, that uses characters or settings from a popular television show, novel, cartoon, anime or movie as the subject. deviantART is a good place to find fanart”.

<sup>5</sup> i. “Cosplay” is a colloquial term for “costume play” used mainly in fan culture to identify the act of replicating costumes, personas and props from specific tv shows, comics, anime, video games and other popular fan medias. This is seen as different from Hallowe’en which is a broader cultural phenomena in North America, or Live Action Role Playing which are original character personas made (generated based on a particular set of statistics and narrative backgrounds) and acted out by the participants to engage in a type of social role playing game.

ii. “Cosplay,” last modified Mach 13, 2012, <http://www.urbandictionary.com>. “The act of gathering raw and ready materials to create a 3D object from a 2D reference. Cosplay are referenced from not just Japanese anime or manga but from Video games and even American comics. Cosplay can be anything from weapons to clothes to even automobiles or animals. The skills required to complete a finished “Cosplay” include anything from: sewing, woodcraft, knitting, sculpting, metal working, painting, fabric dying, hair styling etc. A large component of cosplay is the understanding of composition and proposition so that the costume will look correct on yourself as it does the character you are trying to emulate”.

<sup>6</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London and (New York: Routledge, 2010) 116.

<sup>7</sup> Conventions will habitually have some form of dealers room, which is a like a market space which will sell licensed products which cover a range of fandoms and include everything from clothing to buttons, replica weaponry, posters, movies, games, music and full costumes. There are some issues around bootleg and copyright infringements, but this is usually accepted as part of fan culture or is dealt with by the convention staff as issues of media piracy.

<sup>8</sup> Genre can be applied specifically or in a more general sense when discussing fandoms. It can be applied to *The Lord of the Rings* specifically or just the idea of Fantasy. It can indicate a literature based fandom or

on fan culture is it replaces it with artistic practices. In place of the usual con programming, ACG offers participatory events and open media work sites which are aimed at those who are 21 and under.

During the course of ACG, participants were encouraged to submit what they had made throughout the day to be shown in the exhibition of works made by youth entitled ART CON EX (ACX) at the Guelph Civic Museum. ACG was held on March 16th at Lakeside Hope House from 10am to 6pm and ACX was shown at the museum from March 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> with a closing reception on March 22<sup>nd</sup> from 5pm to 9pm with free admission.

### **Situating Fan Culture in Academia**

Recently, the idea of fan culture has become a popular subject in the academic fields of cultural and media studies. The main interest seems to be in the categorizing of where fan culture resides within society and how it has evolved from a subculture. Examining how a particular genre, show or author, could interact in a separate but largely intangible and erratic community in what might now be called a popular cultural phenomenon or a “fan phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup> Two of the earliest examiners of fan culture as a popular cultural phenomenon are John Fiske and Henry Jenkins. Fiske discusses fan culture as popular culture originating in books and evolving overtime to include television, as well as suggesting that fandom is “characterized by two main activities: discrimination and productivity.”<sup>10</sup> Henry Jenkins’ writing

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a fandom which includes all variations of the original for instance the *Harry Potter* franchise of JK Rowling and Warner Bros.

<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Cohee Manifold, “Culture Convergence or Divergence? Spontaneous Art-making and Participatory Expression in the Private and Collective Lives of Youth,” in *Art Education as Critical Cultural Inquiry*, ed. J.A Park (Seoul, Korea: MijiNSA, 2007) 1.

<sup>10</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 116.

centres on participation in media and fan culture and how it circumvents the obstacles between professional and amateur, ownership and mimicry.<sup>11</sup>

There is a debate in academia as to whether fan culture is able to be a part of the public sphere in the same way that other hobbies or activities (like sports, recreational games or leisure activities for instance) are accepted. The result is that due to the uncertain status of participating in fan culture, the by-products of fan participation are often seen as totally lacking in imagination or original efforts on the part of the creator. This is in direct reference to two specific fan activities which I mentioned earlier: fan art and cosplay.

Fiske and Jenkins both see fan culture as a relevant public lifestyle and believe that fan art and cosplay are sites of potentially creative art practices. Marjorie Cohee Manifold, initially more ambivalent about fan culture,<sup>12</sup> seeing it as limiting to youth culture and artistic practices. In her later essay “What Art Educators Can Learn from the Fan-based Artmaking of Adolescents and Young Adults” (2009), based on a quantitative study of youth in fan culture she sees the potential to encourage artistic engagement.<sup>13</sup>

Both fan art and cosplay begin with the appropriation of pre-existing characters, designs and worlds which they use as inspiration in their own constructions.<sup>14</sup> In both cases the artist will recreate entire styles, characters, costumes and props in as much detail as they can manage

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006) 137, 140, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Cohee Manifold, “Culture Convergence or Divergence? Spontaneous Art-making and Participatory Expression in the Private and Collective Lives of Youth”, in *Art Education as Critical Cultural Inquiry*, ed. J.A Park (Seoul: MijiNSA, 2007), 1, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Marjorie Cohee Manifold, “What Art Educators Can Learn from Fan Based Art Making of Adolescents and Young Adults” in *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, volume 50/3 (2009), 258.

<sup>14</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 118.

from materials and skills they have developed more often as amateurs. Admittedly, if this was as far as a fan ever went with their interests, it would be nothing more than slavish imitation of those pre-existing models and would offer nothing in the way of original creative effort. In my opinion there are two easily visible types of people who take part in fan-production. There are those who are come across as being more orthodox in their approach to fandom and simply copy the characters and ideas as best they can in minute detail. The other group are those who are more experimental in their approach and take inspiration from the ideas and the characters and then subvert them and create their own original scenarios or designs which are still referencing the original, but are no longer a simple imitation.

Fan culture is not a stable community. The popularity of genres, shows, comics and narratives fluctuate on a massive scale that is nearly impossible to grapple with, in much the same way artistic practices and youth culture does. It is also possible for people to take part in more than one fandom at a time and to be engaged in fan art and expressions of multiple fandoms simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> This is a difficult area from an academic point of view as there is no clear cut definition of what fan culture is or how one is involved in it. It is simply the participation of an individual in regards to the appreciation of a specific narrative through the representative

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<sup>15</sup> i. Fandom is a colloquial term which indicates the dedicated audience of a particular genre or a specific example of a genre in any media. For instance: Someone involved in sci-fi fandom might be a fan of the Star Trek series or the Firefly comic or the Star Craft video game or all three. On the other hand, an individual who is involved in Star Trek fandom could also be a part of several other fandoms which are less sci-fi based: Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Batman, the TV series Merlin, and Disney movies. "Fandom" as a term can be applied both generally and specifically depending on how the fan wants to identify their interests.

ii. "Fandom," last modified on October 19, 2012, <http://www.urbandictionary.com>. "The Microcosm made up of people who are fans of a fiction genre, or of a subgenre, who have their own clubs, conventions and amateur magazines (fanzines), dating back (in some cases) to the early 1930s. Some of these are overlapping. Star Trek fandom, for example, started in science fiction fandom and eventually became a separate fandom on its own. Comics fandom and even rock (music) fandom also started there before becoming separate entities".

media that is then shared with others on an intimate or impersonal level. There are several ways fan culture is experienced; via the internet, through social media or simply by the recognition of a particular fashion quirk between strangers.<sup>16</sup>

In my experience, looking at the fan conventions I attend, the majority of participants seem to be made up of youth and teenagers, of diverse races, genders and backgrounds. These young participants are potentially a new generation of makers and doers who are heavily engaged in replicating popular personas as a means of self identification, social interaction and creative outlet. Their interest in adapting and reproducing these roles and characters comes from a long tradition of the desire to inhabit, embody, perform and express their interests and creativity in a public manner. This idea of performing for an audience of peers and basing these interactions within pre-existing consumer models is an integral part of fan culture today and is usually an inseparable part of the con model where cosplay and fan art are tangible ways for fans to interact with and inhabit the personas they identify with or covet the most.<sup>17</sup>

The larger body of academic work which discusses fan culture, fan art and cosplay often situates them in an amateur and condescending realm, where they are seen only as mimicry.<sup>18</sup> I believe that fan art and cosplay can be pushed into an original sphere of innovation, as from my perspective these efforts are not necessarily amateur or less than art. What I see them as is a way of developing the skills and confidence to build an original practice. The question then, is how do you engage someone in the process of making something original? And who can be

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<sup>16</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Manifold, *Convergence or Divergence*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins, *Media Convergence*, 190-191.

engaged? This is especially true for an up and coming generation of makers who aren't involved in art at school or don't have the means to be involved in extracurricular classes or groups.<sup>19</sup>

In fan culture, the roles and inspirations for costuming and personas have been interpreted as a limiting factor as they are focused on the imitation of pre-existing forms and characters which are invented, produced and packaged within consumer based media culture.<sup>20</sup> The narratives, costumes and personas are defined and limited by a culture of mass production, despite the large amounts of energy put into the process of turning out these elaborate imitations.<sup>21</sup> Within the con community it is also considered somewhat transgressive to deviate from the original design stylistically or conceptually. As I mentioned before there are fans that will respond negatively to variations that are not accepted by the fan community at large. For instance where it is acceptable to create a steampunk<sup>22</sup> or zombified version of a character or

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<sup>19</sup> Jenkins, *Media Convergence*, 258, 267.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins, *Media Convergence*, 190-191.

<sup>21</sup> Manifold, *Convergence or Divergence*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> i. "Steampunk," last modified on December 15, 2004, <http://www.urbandictionary.com>. "Steampunk is a subgenre of fantasy and speculative fiction that came into prominence in the 1980s and early 1990s. The term denotes works set in an era or world where STEAM POWER is still widely used—usually the 19th century, and often set in Victorian era England—but with prominent elements of either science fiction or fantasy, such as fictional technological inventions like those found in the works of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, or real technological developments like the computer occurring at an earlier date. Other examples of steampunk contain alternate history-style presentations of "the path not taken" of such technology as dirigibles or analog computers; these frequently are presented in an idealized light, or a presumption of functionality. Also see Robert Sandberg's work".

ii. "Steampunk," last modified on April 2, 2007, <http://www.urbandictionary.com>. "Steampunk is a subgenre of speculative fiction, usually set in an anachronistic Victorian or quasi-Victorian alternate history setting. It could be described by the slogan "What the past would look like if the future had happened sooner." It includes fiction with science fiction, fantasy or horror themes.

Medieval Steampunk: Speculative fiction set during the Middle Ages. Victorian Steampunk: A modern Science Fiction work (post-1930s) that is set in the early parts of the industrial revolution. Western Steampunk: Science fiction set in the American Old West. Industrial/Modern Steampunk: Science fiction taking place in the late industrial age, early modern age: i.e. World War 1, World War 2".



world design, it might not be acceptable to create a sci-fi or lolita<sup>23</sup> versions. These implied social limitations are similar to what I have observed within youth fan culture, functioning in a similar structure of peer evaluation and response.<sup>24</sup>

However, in cosplay the limitations of social interaction do not extend to gender performance.<sup>25</sup> Through their personification of specific characters, fans also challenge gender and traditionally gendered roles. A popular trend for females is to present as males especially in the tradition of Manga and Anime where the art styles often depict pretty or effeminate looking men and young boys. This trend allows for intense masquerading efforts that confuse gender identity. There is also a con trend for men to dress as female characters without trying to hide their masculinity (for example instances of “Man Moon” or “Man Faye”. You often see attendees taking up a pre-existing character and switch the gender without changing the persona so that you have a female version of the Doctor from Dr. Who, or a male Hermione Granger. Playing with gender-roles has been endorsed by the larger fan community over all and because of this it creates a visible rupture in the public notions of gender performance while simultaneously

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<sup>23</sup> “Lolita,” last modified on May 14, 2005, <http://www.urbandictionary.com>. “Lolita is a fashion from Japan that tries to capture the innocence of youth, and nostalgia for the 19th century. Knee length puffy skirts, lacy blouses, platform mary janes and head dresses are standard attire. This fashion was popularized by Mana from the band Malice Mizer, and has nothing to do with Gwen Stefani. There are several types of lolita: Gothic lolita: Clothing is dark blues, reds and blacks. Very similar to Victorian mourning garb, only with shorter skirts. A prime example is the brand Moi meme Moitie. Sweet lolita: Light pastel colors and florals, lots of lace, and more childlike. An example is the brand Baby the Stars Shine Bright. Classic lolita: Shorter versions of clothing that looks like it is from the French and English countryside during the 1900s. Less lacey and more mature looking”.

<sup>24</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Fan conventions are massive sites of interaction even at small conventions (meaning an attendance of less than 5000) which are the most common in Canada. All conventions, though, are non-discriminatory as tickets are generally bought before the event and anyone can buy them. There are some limitations based on the ability to get to the convention, but the convention model itself does not have any strictures about who can attend based on sexual orientation, socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender or gender presentation – in fact, my observation is that, especially at large conventions, there is a large amount of intentional gender-bending and gender anonymity. Again, based on my experiences, the most notable demographic is the ages between 14 and 30.

enforcing a strict code of popular representation.<sup>26</sup> These acts of regendering are not necessarily approved of outside of the con itself and in many cases the interactions of attendee and non-attendee are uncomfortable and create social situations where the outcome can be either positive or negative. The result is that two different public spheres have met and an unstable model of social interaction was established, performed and dismissed.

Fan culture has a strong appeal for youth who want to participate and be respected for their participation in an original and alternative expression of culture that they see as relevant and demonstrative of their own interests. However, my argument is that the significance of fan art and cosplay could be applied within the framework of social acupuncture. As I mentioned earlier, social acupuncture is a concept coined by Darren O'Donnell that is participant and process driven and initiates public situations that are unstable. It is a highly flexible model that would be able to facilitate a disruption of the barriers between youth culture, fan culture, art and artist in the public sphere.<sup>27</sup>

My use of the con model was intentional. ACG required a flexible model that could function in a neutral space and still encourage interaction. Cons, regardless of status or genre, are open venues and create temporary communities based on the recognition of particular tropes, genres, characters and worlds that encourages interaction, collaboration and exchange between the individuals who are participating. They interact with each other through their shared interests in fandom and they relate to one another, even briefly, through their individual efforts to take on roles adapted and mimicked from fan culture. Jenkins sees this as being a way

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<sup>26</sup> Betsy Gooch., "The Communication of Fan Culture: The Impact of New Media on Science Fiction and Fantasy Fandom" (MA thesis, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2008) 25.

<sup>27</sup> Darren O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 50.

to involve a new generation in active cultural roles. In this manner they can see that their interests and expressions relate to external issues in ways that can be publically explained and accepted, even by those not involved in the fan community.<sup>28</sup> The reassurance that their interests will not be dismissed as amateur or non-professional, is what Jenkins sees as an opportunity and confidence building relationship which may lead into voluntary efforts to be more engaged as a socially active participant.<sup>29</sup>

Conventions are not spaces where artistic practices are overtly enacted, but the fans who are taking part in cosplay and fan culture could be coded as performance artists. Even those who create fan art, and who have developed their abilities through experimentation with their interest in fan culture do not necessarily identify as artists. In most instances within fan culture, there is no clear definition of who an artist is and what they produce, or at what level they must participate in order to be referred to as an artist.

Although, it is possible to see the points of crossover between cosplay, fan art and artistic practices. These fan practices include similar elements of identity and performance, endurance, fashion, textile work, photography, sculpture and even employ use of multiple perspective and illusionistic painting. What is less easy to see and experience being outside of fan culture is the varied uses of artistic media and the practicing of skills which allow the fans to work more innovatively towards their costuming or fan-based creations. With no bias towards the origin of the materials, fans have been known to creatively reuse cardboard, metal, cloth, second hand clothing and other ephemera gathered wherever they can find it.

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<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, "Cultural Acupuncture," 3.

<sup>29</sup> Jenkins, "Cultural Acupuncture," 15.

In contemporary art practices it is common to see an artist take on a persona, perhaps embody an historical persona in order to question it. Efforts to examine and challenge the roles of culture, performance, fashion, mimicry and the limitations of imagination are seen in art history as well as current art practices, especially on the fringes of new media, nostalgic explorations and the questioning of globalization.

In the early stages of conceptualizing ACG, I thought it should be presented within established models of artistic practices, for instance community or public art practices. However, as I grappled with the history and application of these methods, I realized that they lacked the necessary flexibility and fluidity that I needed in order to launch a new convention model. Originally when researching various methodologies I thought that participatory performance art seemed like it would be the most viable way to integrate art theory and practice within a convention model. However, the more I read it became clear that it still implied that the artist was the fulcrum of each project. Although participatory performance art requires audience participation, the public are not the instigators of the work and each event has set boundaries that designate who can be involved and how. The model of participatory performance art does not allow for instability and still focuses on producing results rather than allowing the process to be the focus and the results supplementary to the event.

What distinguishes O'Donnell's idea of social acupuncture is the interrogation of implied structures of artistic practice; who is an artist? and where and how can art happen? Projects such as: *The Walking Talking Creature* (2004), *artsTraction: Epic Youth Festival* (2012) and *Haircuts by Children* (2006) are examples of participatory, public art projects that focused on community building through non-traditional forms of art practices which are usually seen as

amateur or unprofessional. Each of these events had large, varied audiences whose participation defined the work rather than the artist being the fulcrum of how and in what way art was produced.

### **Case Studies in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

#### **A. *Hair Cuts by Children*, Toronto 2006, *Mammalian Diving Reflex* and a Grade 5/6 class from Parkdale**

*Haircuts by Children* was conceptualized and initiated by Darren O'Donnell who is a part of the Mammalian Diving Reflex collective, as an act of, if not social acupuncture in name, than a total inversion of the expected roles and interactions of children and adults.<sup>30</sup> O'Donnell has now reprised this project globally and each time the children he is working with typically are in grade 5-6 (or the equivalent) and so are usually between the ages of 11 and 14. The work brings adults and children into contact with each other in situations where trust is necessary between strangers in an uncomfortable situation of responsibility reversal.<sup>31</sup> There were questions of safety brought up by the Toronto Community Foundation: Was it wise to allow children to be in possession of tools like scissors and use them largely without supervision? Why would a theatre company want to give children the chance to cut hair? Should kids be allowed to interact with strangers? O'Donnell's take on the situation is that he noticed how kids like to be in charge and

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<sup>30</sup> *Toronto Life*, "Running with Scissors: An interview by Jason McBride with Darren O'Donnell," May, 2006, (accessed 02/10/2013) 1-2 [www.torontolife.com/features/running-scissors/](http://www.torontolife.com/features/running-scissors/).

<sup>31</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 84-85.

he saw it as particularly salient to the Toronto Community Foundation's "Growing Active Kids" where the idea is to give children and youth agency and unsettle adults by giving the kids control of the situation.<sup>32</sup>

By unsettling the rules of engagement that are expected by most people in social situations, the children, knowing or not, question the ability of adults to take part in events where they are not in control of themselves or the outcome. This calls into question where authority resides between generations and how it can be subverted and redistributed throughout a community.

#### **B. artsTraction: *Epic Youth Festival 2012***

The recent project "artsTraction: Epic Youth Festival" took place across Huron County in rural southwestern Ontario last fall.<sup>33</sup> Youth were invited to participate in structured workshops, online forums, challenges and events based in a multidisciplinary framework that incorporated stage, music, spoken word, and visual art works all referencing the theme of isolation. While there were professionals involved, the main focus was on giving the youth control and agency of their own works. The professionals were there to give basic instructions on form and technical skills, but the content and the themes were conceptualized by the participants from across Huron County. The structure of multidisciplinary interaction and the centralized location of *Epic Youth Festival 2012* was a new format which generated more participation in a very rural area that normally does not encourage an interactive creative youth culture.

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<sup>32</sup> "Interview with Darren O'Donnell," last modified July, 2006, <http://www.jondavies.ca/ODonnell.htm>, accessed February 13, 2013, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Arts Traction 2012 Epic Youth Festival's Facebook page, accessed February 13, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/artsTraction?fref=ts>.

The unusual format allowed for collaborations that were not possible when the festival was focused only on stage works and was spread out among several sites across Huron County. The result of the 2012 festival was a more fluid, highly energized and uncontained forward motion which gave the event a sense of urgency, relevance and determination obvious in the end result. The participants were aware of time constraints and worked within them to the best of their abilities, instead of being daunted by an insurmountable task with only amateur technical skills. Their interactions were born out of necessity with no time to be concerned with social etiquette/norms, and they were driven to collaborate and compromise on a final project with just over a month from start to finish. Even the organizers and assistants who started the project and oversaw the administrative side of it had no control over the project. Once it was underway there was a distinct division between the facilitator/administrators and the creative energy of the youth, who were working largely without supervision or direction.

**C. *The Walking Talking Creature* Toronto 2004 (variant on *The Talking Creature* 2003)**

The first instance of the *Talking Creature* was instigated by O'Donnell through the Mammalian Diving Reflex Collective, the idea was to get strangers to interact with each other and have random conversations creating unexpected interactions beyond social norms. This was during the "Summer of SARS" in 2003 when there was a heightened fear of social interaction between strangers in Toronto.<sup>34</sup> The second version in 2004, *The Walking Talking Creature*, involved two classes from Parkdale Collegiate and the AGO's Youth Council. It was met with some resistance when the AGO's educational department expressed concerns about letting students go by themselves to Queen Street to engage with strangers in conversation with no

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<sup>34</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 52-53.

supervisor or guidance. O'Donnell sees this as a "rhetoric of safety used to cloak control"<sup>35</sup> over situations that are beyond control and are therefore seen as untrustworthy. The project was altered slightly with a basic set of guidelines enforced by the AGO that youth had to approach strangers in groups, and O'Donnell had to act as a moderator, but the actual process and how any results would come about were left undefined.<sup>36</sup> The group of seventeen-year-olds were excused from normal social interactions in order to interact with both willing and unwilling participants on the street, who had no idea what the project was about. O'Donnell stayed away from the questioning and shared experiences that happened as it was up to the students to engage the strangers and encourage responses.<sup>37</sup>

O'Donnell, in creating these events, encouraged interactions that were out of his control as to whether they happened or not, as he could not force people to interact. He simply provided a model and format for potential interactions and then left it to the youth and the people to initiate the dialogue themselves. O'Donnell's works of social acupuncture focus on the empowering of the public through interaction, participation, art making and a political community awareness within a particular urban neighbourhood. O'Donnell's framework of social acupuncture puts a name to the shift towards participation driven artistic practices and makes a comprehensible, practical methodology out of an elusive concept.

### **ACG's Theoretical Framework**

In his book *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia* (2006), Darren O'Donnell applies the idea of social acupuncture as seen in the series of case studies

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<sup>35</sup> O'Donnell *Social Acupuncture*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 56-57.



above and based on his own artistic projects. In a frank discussion around the issues of art and politics O'Donnell criticises much of what passes for social art practices as often being institutional cooptation.<sup>38</sup> He also distrusts the desire to "hipify social work" in order to reclaim the word "social" for art, by falling instead into the trap of social work masquerading as art practice.<sup>39</sup> There is a connection between O'Donnell's frustration with contemporary art practices and the issues surrounding the commodification of art,<sup>40</sup> and Baudrillard's discussion in his book *The Conspiracy of Art* in which he writes "The same is true for art, which has also lost the desire for illusion, and instead raises everything to aesthetic banality..."<sup>41</sup> What O'Donnell suggests as relief from Baudrillard's potential artistic or aesthetic banality is "the explosion of artistic practices that induce encounters between people, replacing object-based art practices and interactions with one dedicated to generating personal, social relationships."<sup>42</sup>

O'Donnell presents the idea of social acupuncture as coming from his own frustration with political and activist art in what he called the current society of "manic and hollow civic boosterism."<sup>43</sup> What he is referring to is the co-optation of social interaction as art practices. He calls these co-optations "projects that glorify the sweet, whimsical and easy – projects that reinforce enclaves of race, culture, age and gender."<sup>44</sup> O'Donnell's political and activist focus

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<sup>38</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 22-23.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, (New York: Semiotext(E) Foreign Agents Series, 2005) 25.

<sup>42</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 22

<sup>44</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 22, 23. In the text O'Donnell suggests that the "manic and hollow civic boosterism" is part of the hype that surrounds the shallow projects which claim to be art practices in the guise of social events and networking communities. He cites Toronto's Live with Culture Campaign as a "nominal support for culture and the plethora of activities it encourages...does nothing to attend to any of the real indicators of civic health..."

uses art to encourage engagement at the civic level with people, places and ideas that rarely interact, either with or without the inclusion of institutions.

The initiation of a process which could be identified as social acupuncture erases the necessity for the artist to inhabit the role of an *animateur*, as social acupuncture is not reliant on a specific outcome or even a specific person who directs the result of the project/activity. The focus is on the participants, the interaction and the actual process which brings the individuals together through a common creative outlet, in this sense the result of the process is the reward for participation in civic engagement.

O'Donnell suggests that there should be a way to “induce encounters between individuals where we bring the aegis of art out into the world and use it as a blanket for traditionally non-artistic activities in which power differentials are at least tacitly acknowledged and the artist manoeuvre is to either reverse or erase them temporarily in a gesture of antagonism that contributes to rising social intelligence.”<sup>45</sup> The implication that social acupuncture can be an approach where the process is defined by the participants, where any politicization comes from the public rather than directly from the artist, that any number of specific art methods can be engaged in the name of social acupuncture is what makes it the ideal framework to set ACG within.

### **Artistic Practices and Fan Culture**

Fandom is particularly accessible as it is based in mass media culture, and can be easily found on the Internet, in bookstores and in movies. Therefore inspirations for artistic fan

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<sup>45</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 33.

content are extremely fluid and easily interpreted even though fans have exclusive jargon and seemingly impenetrable customs.

As Jenkins and Fiske attest, fan culture is a vibrant and fertile community to which they attribute huge potential and creative abilities. Fiske focuses quite closely on the productivity of fans as being able to create their own texts which he describes as being anything from fashion to accessorization and music choice.<sup>46</sup> While Jenkins discusses the ability of fans to artistically engage in grassroots or folk activities using new media that can subvert the author/creator's interpretation, but still support the original text.<sup>47</sup> In my experience there is a noticeable divide within fan culture between those who identify very directly as loyal fans (1970's - 1990's) and the new generation of fans (around 2000's) who have simultaneous interests with multiple fandoms. The divide is seen largely in terms of age and can be seen in how fans approach a con. Older fans are often more orthodox if they decide to take part in cosplay or in fan art, and will focus on a single fandom with great attention to the subtle details of the original texts. The younger fans will cosplay several different fandoms (all at one con), or produce fan art from several different fandoms with little question about their loyalties.<sup>48</sup> The new fans are still very attentive to detail, but it is arguable that could be termed the "transmedia generation" as Jenkins discusses in his blog, where younger participants switch easily between a variety of media.<sup>49</sup> The idea of transmedia suggests that younger fans feel comfortable being involved with

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<sup>46</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 116.

<sup>47</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 136, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Jenkins, March 31, 2010 post on "Transmedia Generation," *Confessions of an Aca-fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, accessed February 25, 2013 <http://henryjenkins.org/2010/03>.

various fandoms the same way they are involved with digital media; on multiple levels with multiple devices which all have different functions.<sup>50</sup> Multitasking, so to speak.

All fans, however, regardless of their age or approach to fan culture are adaptable in their engagement with cons, as they are malleable spaces which allow for large crowds to engage with their chosen fandoms, as well as each other without the barriers imposed by conventional social interactions.<sup>51</sup> The con provides a meeting place, a showcase and an arena where one can watch or be watched, participate in peer review and further develop their production skills which are a part of their cosplay or fan art practices. It is an adaptable idea where anyone can create artistic content that will be recognized by a group of peers,<sup>52</sup> it is representative of the fan public, acknowledging their own areas of interest and the current issues that the fans find relevant to their own lives.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast, art can be appreciated without any specific lessons, it requires a great deal of knowledge and involvement with professional art practices and theory to be able to actively engage in the art world. It is important to note that going to an art gallery or a museum is not the same as engaging with the practices and theory of art. You cannot be considered an expert in any field of art without specialized training and experience. Today, contemporary art practices, appear to be disconnected from the general public and are perceived to be inaccessible and opaque to society at large. The lack of empathy between the public and contemporary art creates significant barriers in how the public accepts and interacts with art. In

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<sup>50</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 116.

<sup>51</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 135.

<sup>52</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 258.

<sup>53</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 117.

comparison, fandom does not require training or experience, it requires participation and interaction.

Jenkins redefines and acknowledges participation and interaction as concepts which are integral parts of media and fan culture. As he wrote in *Convergence Culture*,

“It maybe useful to draw a distinction between interactivity and participation. Words that are often used interchangeably, but which, in this book, assume rather different meanings. Interactivity refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback...ranging from television, which allows us only to change the channel, to video games that can allow the consumer to act upon the represented world....Participation, on the other hand, is shaped by the cultural and social protocols...Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers (137).”

Jenkins’ distinction is that interactivity is as a new form of technological intervention while participation is open-ended and invites human intervention. This is similar to social acupuncture which involves both interaction and participation, producing a new form of technology that is largely under the control of the human participants. This allows ACG to be able to adapt the con model in a cohesive and tangible way. Jenkins’ discussions of participation also highlight the ability of fans to use materials that are around them and then adapt them to their needs.<sup>54</sup> At ACG the same awareness of surroundings and materials is provided through the open concept of space and undefined uses of art materials. This is a way of encouraging youth to act on their interests in fan culture while disturbing and enlivening the expected replications by

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<sup>54</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 135.

pushing the idea one step further into original art practices. As Fiske comments, popular culture (and fan culture by extension) are progressive not revolutionary. Similarly, ACG utilizes the con model as a progressive format which does not imply or rely on any political underpinnings, but will allow for a political stance if the participants choose to do so.<sup>55</sup>

### **Critical Evaluation**

ACG was conceptualized as a platform where popular media and fan culture use the concept of social acupuncture as the staging ground for new artistic practices. It became a developmental link between the mimicry of fan cons and original content that can be seen in the outcomes of ACG and ACX. The anime style of characterization was visible throughout many of the sketches and drawing samples. In the lightning round there was an interesting blending of cosplay and original design with small teams collaboratively making original creatures based on a given concept.<sup>56</sup> Fan culture inspirations are normal in a lightning round at any con. The results at ACG were unique in that the creations still played into the genre norms of science fiction archetypes; anthropomorphic dragons and comedic inhuman monsters. However, they were also highly original in approach and not derivative or focused on fan culture references. The inclusion of any fannish content seemed to be largely relegated to a few single instances, and it is fair to say that none of the work replicated fan culture.

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<sup>55</sup> Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 127 - 128

<sup>56</sup> "Exhibition Report", Angela Keeley, "ART CON GUELPH: Developing Alternative Artistic Practices Through Fan Culture and Fan Convention Models," (MA Thesis, OCAD University, 2013), 33.

An important aspect of ACG was that it was based on a structure which was flexible enough to encourage different methods of interaction and participation. This format brought about spontaneous collaborations and artistic expressions that were unrestricted and instinctual rather than controlled or taught. The focus on art making meant that it was easier to encourage social exchanges ranging from shy and awkward to unabashed and energetic between strangers who varied greatly in age and background. The necessity for sharing resources helped to create hubs of action and further collaborations. This fostered unusual and potentially uncomfortable public interactions that were part of the methodological framework, as much as the act of art making.

The positive outcome of the event was that it allowed for flux and unstable situations to happen and be incorporated into the framework rather than having a negative effect. In addition it was clear, based on the highly individual use of materials and subsequent works, that it is possible to foster original art practices in a public studio setting. Despite the obvious pop up nature of the tables, chairs and materials that were in the gymnasium, it was an uncoded space. In my original concept of the project, I saw myself as an animateur/facilitator. I then made the decision to intentionally remove myself from an active role as director of ACG and purposefully decided not to establish an overall concept beyond “making art”. I had wanted to situate the participants as the artists and the process as the focus of the event instead of having me as a fulcrum and with a set of expected results. This enabled participants to produce original works of art based on their own interests, mitigating the demand for imagery seen in fan culture or for any formal artistic judgements.

In hindsight, the one problem within the overall framework of ACG was the lack of a theme. I was not aware of this until I realized that I was answering the same question of “what do we do?” over and over again. The lure of making art and the description of “make anything” seemed to be too open ended for participants to initially grasp. There was no starting point or idea to spark the first step into making. Although fan cons have no specific theory and only very general frameworks of physical space, they generally set up a con theme, which on occasion can actually limit creative expression. However, the issue that I am still grappling with is how to draw out the ideas of popular media and fan culture without creating the thematic cul-de-sac of fan cons.

Darren O'Donnell's concept of social acupuncture, as a socially and publically based practice that renegotiates what art is, provided a practical and theoretical model for ACG.<sup>57</sup> His projects all involve intense interactions, stimulating broader arts practices that reflect the cultural moment. The projects often involve processes that are not customarily artistic, but engage with the public and encourage unanticipated interactions and promote collaboration. Similarly, the con model encouraged widespread public participation much like social acupuncture does and reflects the most current range of fan culture.

## **Conclusion**

The fusion model of social acupuncture within a fan con model at ACG acted as a meeting point for theory and practice, unsettling some of the assumptions about public participation within art practices. Personally, it was the ability to include the idea of fan culture with the theoretical model of social acupuncture that allowed me to question artistic practices.

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<sup>57</sup> O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture*, 44.



Fan culture is not a new idea, having been around for over forty years, but it is one that has been isolated from artistic practices. The ability to integrate these two phenomena to see where further applications of fan culture and social acupuncture could broaden the scope of art practices and public participation really excited me. Based on my experience with ACG and ACX, this model can be applied in a flexible manner and can be broadened and readjusted to address current aspects of fan culture, youth culture and artistic practices.

The questions that remain are not ones of what? or why? but rather, how? How can the intersection of fan culture and artistic practices be explored and boundaries broken down, in order to enable practices which reflect a larger spectrum of the idea of cultures and art? How can fan culture and artistic practices be merged and employed in community art practices to encourage public interaction and participation? How can the fan con model be further used as a framework for social acupuncture that fosters wider participation in unexpected and non traditional art practices?

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## **Project Report: ART CON GUELPH and ART CON EX**

### **Preamble**

This Project Report is to provide a synopsis of the actual planning, production and results of the two public events; ART CON GUELPH (ACG) and ART CON EX (ACX). It describes the location and process of the preliminary organizing, development and support structures that were built in order to make ACG feasible. The report then examines the practical process of producing the two public events, the one day convention on March 16, 2013 and the subsequent exhibition and closing reception at the Guelph Civic Museum March 19, 2013 – March 22, 2013. It concludes with a brief summary of the outcomes from ACG and ACX as well as the potential to develop the ACG model further.

### **Location: Guelph**

Guelph, Ontario has a notable community of local arts, culture and heritage groups. There are many events and community initiatives which promote local culture to families, artists and crafters. Within this thriving city wide effort though, there is a noticeable absence of arts and culture projects and events for youth (which for the purposes of my thesis encompasses the

demographic of 21 and under). There are a few visible community youth organizations, like the Guelph Youth Council, that have a specific focus and earnest goals. There are also sites, like 40 Baker Street, which are open to the community and work in tandem with outreach centres, as creative outlets for high risk youth, and socially disadvantaged individuals. These types of groups tend to be service oriented and didactic efforts, and as a result, they have particular target audiences that limit who can be involved and how. However, even within these organizations, there are a range of teenagers and young adults that are excluded from these activities either by omission or due to lack of interest.

#### **Background and Organization of ART CON GUELPH and ART CON EX:**

ACG and ACX were conceptualized as a project that allowed for community arts and culture institutions to become involved as foundational supporters through donation and in kind trade. This worked in my favour as it alleviated some of the financial necessities and began a dialogue between organizations and ACG which had not existed previously. The positive nature of the support – meaning it was left up to them to decide how they would be involved – meant that there was no pressure on them to do more than to be a part of the public awareness campaign which encouraged most institutions to be generous with their in-kind trades.

My first step in securing public support was to approach the four institutions which I had identified as the necessary foundational partners in order to secure the space, material support and major public awareness avenues that ACG would require.

#### **Four central institutions:**

**Wyndham Art Supplies** – the only large scale art supplier in Guelph where I could easily obtain decent quality materials. They are a well established local company and therefore more likely to support a project like ACG than a chain business like Michael's or Walmart.

**Lakeside Hope House** – a satellite space attached to Lakeside Church, a Christian congregation, which had recently bought the old Norfolk Street United Church downtown. The space included a small two story gymnasium, two fully equipped kitchens, washrooms, a clothing depot, and a cafe space. The current mandate of the Lakeside Hope House includes providing rental space to foster community involvement, particularly for local youth events. The youth focus of ACG and ACX was a natural intersection to involve Lakeside Hope House and they were enthusiastic about the potential for collaborative programming.

**Guelph Civic Museum (GCM)** – The Civic, as it is often referred to, has been working on expanding its community programming, creating new forms of involvement within the museum and through participation in such city wide efforts as the *Fourth Fridays* local art events. The museum readily donated the space for the five-day exhibition ACX, as well as providing public service announcements through their mailing lists and website.

**MacDonald Stewart Art Centre (MSAC)** – provided free printing for a run of 200 posters as well as publicizing ACG through their own social media networks. Initially a MSAC staff member was to run an event at ACG, but due to unforeseen circumstances they were unable to participate. However, MSAC made it clear that they would be interested in participating in any future events run by ACG .

**ACG project and institution organization:**

By November 14, 2012 I had agreement from all four organizations regarding participation and their ability to support ACG and ACX with donations and subsidized space, materials and main social media avenues. Then I began looking at other organizations that might have an interest in supporting or taking part in ACG which lead to a network of 13 institutions being involved. They were able to help with the promotion and public awareness campaign and assisted in getting the word out about ACG to different community groups through their own social media feeds.

I worked with these supporters and institutions in an ongoing manner from November 2012 until March 2013. We continued to meet over the next five months in order to clarify details and circulate promotional materials, follow up on bookings, orders and the timing of events. I also developed an order for Wyndham Art Supplies and an additional supplies budget which included every thing from salvaged fabrics to extra art materials, to food and cleaning supplies.

Although I was working with a limited budget based on funds from OCAD University and the Guelph Youth Council, I wanted to make sure that I did not run short of art making materials and amenities at the event (even though it was difficult to predict the number of attendees). Therefore the decision was made to charge an entrance fee to ACG for those who were over 21. So there was a suggested \$2 donation that went directly to paying for the materials. Looking back I can see where I could have made cuts to the art supplies and materials. However, I now have a clearer idea of the essential costs and expected attendance for such an event.

**The Setup: Friday March 15<sup>th</sup>**

When it came down to actually setting up Lakeside Hope House, the most difficult obstacle was the timing as I could not get access to the space until 5pm on Friday after they have finished with their regular programs. This proved to be stressful and poorly planned, as I had to make multiple trips by myself in order to move all of the supplies and set up on Friday evening. I also had to wait for classes to finish at the University of Guelph Fine Arts Department on Friday afternoon to pick up the easels and drawing donkeys. Once the materials were in place the set up wasn't too onerous.

I had decided after seeing Lakeside Hope House's cafe, that a snack bar would be a good addition. Although there are several food outlets near by, in view of the weather and of the habit of people to wander once they leave a space, I thought it was a good idea for ACG to have snacks and drinks available. This was an excellent idea as it provided people with a reason to explore the entire space and become involved in more than one activity.

#### **Saturday March 16, 2013:**

ART CON GUELPH (ACG) ran from 10am to 6:30pm with a number of events which included *60 seconds of Beauty* via Ed Video, the timed sketch event with live models, and the *Lightning Round* hosted by Con-G's Lindsay Patillo. DIYode also provided a birdhouse workshop which was open as long as the birdhouse kits lasted. There were four small tag walls that were used as a way to keep track of how many people came and went. Plus there was a *What Tree* which started as a bucket of rocks, a pile of sticks, masonite leaves and access to all kinds of materials, such as fabric, ribbons, yarn, feathers, leather, plastic bits, braids etc., and glue guns.

Out of all of the events and worksites, the *What Tree* was the one that surprised me the most. It had been a last minute addition as a way to include more unusual materials. What resulted was a collaborative forest of beautifully and intensely decorated and wrapped sticks and leaves that took root in the bucket of rocks. This was one of the most popular sites of interaction and through the participant's use of a wide range of materials it was a truly original creation.

Even though the doors opened at 10am, I did not expect anyone to turn up until 12pm for several reasons: St. Patrick's day weekend, the College Royale Agricultural Fair and showcase at the University of Guelph, plus it was the last weekend of March Break for elementary and secondary schools. I consciously made the choice to start at 10am so that people would begin to show up around 12pm (as if I had begun at 12pm I doubt anyone would have shown up before 2pm). Between 10am and 1pm there were about ten people and from 1pm onwards there was a steady flow of individuals and small groups who came and engaged in a variety of unexpected ways. Some went directly for more tactile centres with fabric, hot glue guns and cardboard, others went immediately for painting or drawing and some, unsure of where to begin, started with the birdhouses and expanded from there.

The busiest time was between 2pm and 5pm when various individuals and groups of people were working on painting, making birdhouses and decorating the *What Tree*. In the cafe upstairs, there was a timed series of sketches with live models in costumes. This also encompassed the *Lightning Round* which was a timed 45 minute challenge to create a costume or structure based on a thematic idea. For the ACG *Lightning Round* the challenge was



“You are a space traveller and on your travels you end up on the planet Phosphera where the first thing you meet is a \_\_\_\_\_. Your challenge is to create and name the \_\_\_\_\_.”

There were two groups of three people who took part in this challenge. Initially there was a rule about having to sing to be able to use the glue gun or the xacto knives. This rule fell aside as the groups worked feverishly to complete their aliens. They were given the chance to extend their time by 10 minutes if they could sing a song about ACG (which both teams did). Once they were done, both creations turned out to be costumes which were worn carefully. One group had created a dragonsque alien which was mostly fabric draped over the group member along with a very detailed head and tail made out of cardboard, fabric, paint and hot glue. The other team created a cardboard frame which they elaborated on with detailed accessories which was then animated by a group member who crawled inside of the structure. For their creativity both teams were awarded passes to Con-G 2014 and their creatures were displayed at the museum during ACX.

It was during this time that participants began to experiment and try new things, working outside of their initial comfort zones, easily mixing mediums and talking to others who were working close by. Interestingly some of the interactions between people came from an unintentional shortage of scissors, erasers and pencil sharpeners as this required some basic discussion between strangers. This seemed to break down some of the initial communication barriers and allowed for more free flowing conversation about what they were making, their backgrounds (artistic or not) and their relation to ACG (whether they knew me, if they were a volunteer and how they had heard about it).

I had intended ACG to target a 21 and under age group, however, based on the information I gathered, most people were between 16 and 25. There were a few parents that came to drop off their teenagers, but who stayed long enough to make a small piece “just for fun”.

One of my initial concerns was that I would not have enough works for the exhibition, ACX, as it was dependant on voluntary submissions. However, once the first two submissions were handed in and hung up, there was a steady stream of people dropping off drawings, little sculptures, paintings, fabric creations, etc. It seems that there was a general reluctance to be the first to submit. Once the dam was broken (as it were) they felt they could submit in anonymity.

**Exhibition Installation: Monday March 18, 2013:**

By the end of the day on Saturday I had fifty-three pieces of artwork submitted to be shown at ACX exhibiting a wide range of materials and subject matter. As the space was limited at the Guelph Civic Museum, I had estimated that approximately fifty to sixty works would be the most I could exhibit. This proved to be a fairly accurate estimate as the rectangular room had a number of windows and therefore wall space was limited.

Once I had all of the pieces moved up to the museum, it was necessary to come up with a hanging scheme. As I had no way of knowing what sorts of pieces or sizes would be submitted, it was not possible to develop the installation ahead of time. What took the most time was simply sorting the pieces as they were resistant to any sort of scheme based on size, material or subject matter. I had to hang a few works as a trial run, while rearranging the hooks and clips around pieces which could not be moved due to their size or weight. Eventually the works were

sorted and hung in a manner that used colour and texture to balance, while drawing out the differences between two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. The two creatures from the lightning round were large and therefore difficult to place so they were assigned a corner space. Once the show was installed there was a cohesion that came from the textures and overall tactility of the works.

While the show was up, there were no specific parameters or rules for the public to interact physically with the pieces. (The museum staff even admitted to handling one or two of the objects themselves). It was clear from the museum staff that they supported the project and enjoyed the exhibition and wanted it to be viewed and appreciated by the general public. The show did not disrupt regular programming as there was a lecture and two day programs hosted in the space during ACX.

There was a closing reception held on March 22, 2013 in the gallery space. This was part of the City of Guelph's *Fourth Fridays* which is a free event meant to open the doors of cultural institutions and groups to the public. Between 5pm and 9pm there were 75 people who walked through the exhibit, added their names to the tag walls and stopped to take a detailed look at the works. Simultaneously Ed Video screened over 65 clips of various *60 Seconds of Beauty* submissions which had been produced over the last year in Guelph.

### **A Practical Conclusion**

I am happy to report that the outcome of ART CON GUELPH and ART CON EX was entirely positive and encouraging for future incarnations of the same model. During ACG there were about 50 – 60 participants who came and went throughout the day with about 15 people

who came and stayed for the entirety. During the closing reception for ACX at the Guelph Civic Museum, there were roughly 75 people in attendance. Many of the people who spoke with me enjoyed the unusual format and were especially interested in the “everything goes” guidelines for submissions. The lack of criteria or judgement based on skill or ability attracted the immediate interest of those who were asking me about ACG as a project and I was questioned closely on my decision to not have specific requirements. Once I explained that one of the ideas behind ACG was about fostering and encouraging original and positive artistic practices in youth and community spheres, there was more interest in how and when the next project might happen and who could take part. Interestingly, during teardown the next day, there were ten visitors who came specifically to discuss ACG and ACX and the further applications that the same model might have in other situations.

Throughout the planning and development of ACG I did not have a specific theme as I didn’t want to limit the possibilities or focus too narrowly on either popular media or fan culture. However, by leaving ACG very open ended, I unintentionally created a potential vacuum where the participants were at first unsure of where to begin and how to interact. There was a natural movement to areas where others were already working, which provided launch points to then spread out throughout the rest of the space and begin using other materials. In any future incarnations of ACG, I would endeavour to establish a theme which would not be proscriptive, but could provide a starting point so that participants would have some direction and hopefully less hesitancy to begin to engage. In the next iteration of ACG, I would make the space more intense by having all events take place in the same room. The split between the cafe and the gymnasium meant that while there were great projects happening all over, they were very much

divorced from each other and could have been sites of further collaboration had they been working in the same space. I would also make sure that there was continual music. I noticed that the atmosphere changed noticeably and became more awkward if the music paused for even a few moments.

I believe that it was absolutely necessary to have this first attempt of an art convention be as neutral, open and accessible as possible in order to gauge if there was genuine interest from the community. It was also helpful as it allowed me to be fluid, deal with any problems or shortages, and gave me a chance to highlight potential areas of expansion and renegotiation for the various organizational collaborators with ACG. In light of the interest in the exhibition in the next iteration of ACG, I would move the date into mid or late April in order to reach more University students without clashing with too many other public events. In the museum space, I would also encourage more activities that allowed viewers to touch and interact with the works of art. This parallels the theoretical ideals of social acupuncture and community practices.

One important aspect that came out of the larger project was that on Sunday March 17, 2013, during the tear down, I invited Sue Potvin who runs the open art workshop on weekends at 40 Baker St. and Eve Tesluk from Guelph Counselling Services to come and select surplus art materials and supplies to use in their regular programs. For me, this was a first step in setting up a community art support system that will draw local social service organizations into indirectly supporting charitable arts projects and fostering public support s via a not-for-profit intermediary network. As they provided support and assistance in the initial publicizing of the event, my conscious donation was an acknowledgement of that initial assistance. In addition it was a responsible dispensing of materials to organizations that are often unable to raise funds or

materials from the same types of sources that I had developed through the larger ACG/ACX project.

## **Appendix A: Organizations, Institutions, Partners and Supporters**

### **Four Central Organizations**

- **Wyndham Art Supplies**- Art supply store in downtown Guelph. Has been established for 20 years. Involved supporter of local arts programs and events. Supplied core materials for ACG.
- **Guelph Civic Museum**- Local museum focused on the history of Guelph. Has several public engagement programs. Provided the gallery space for ACX, as well including public service announcements for ACG and ACX.
- **Lakeside Hope House**- A satellite site of the Lakeside Church in Guelph. They host a food bank, alternative classrooms for high risk youth, rental space available for community use. Subsidized the cost of rental space for ACG. Aided with public awareness campaign.
- **MacDonald Stewart Art Centre**- Guelph art gallery, associated with the University of Guelph, local arts and culture institutions. Printing support for posters and public awareness campaign.

### **Other Organizations involved in ART CON GUELPH**

**School Of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph (SOFAM)** – loan of easels, drawing donkeys and public awareness

**Guelph Youth Council** – The Guelph Youth Council is an organized and city sanctioned group comprised of approximately 20 high school students. They organize and take part in community

events and have funding from the city to put towards youth based projects each year. For ACG they volunteered and aided with the public awareness campaign.

**Ed Video** – Is a Guelph based new media centre which has gallery space, hosts workshops, community programming and equipment rental in downtown Guelph. The *60 Seconds of Beauty* video challenge is a year long ongoing project where they loan out handheld cameras at public events and give the public a chance to make one minute videos on what “beauty” is. The videos are then compiled and screened at events before being archived. Ran a *60 Seconds of Beauty* event at ACG and assisted with the public awareness campaign.

**Con-G:** Guelph Anime and Geek Culture Convention – A local convention in which is five years old. Conceptualized and began by a small group of recent graduates and their friends. Focus is on all aspects of fan culture and has a strong community focus, working actively to support the Guelph Public Library and the Guelph S.P.C.A. Ran the lightning round, took part in the timed sketch event as models, assisted with the public awareness campaign.

**DIYode** – Is a local makers workshop in Guelph which provides access to all kinds of tools and machines to members for a small monthly fee. DIYode works on group projects, provides space for individual projects and have a focus on working in a broader spectrum. Most of the members work closely with the community in a variety of ways by providing workshops and programming events for cultural institutions. They created the pattern, cut the materials and ran the workshop for the Bird houses for sustainable environment which took place at ACG.

**Bob Rumball Association for the Deaf, Milton ON** – Provides support and day programs for the deaf and hearing-impaired for the Milton area. They have youth programming and run an art sensory and therapy program for members. Through a previous grant for the Rumball Association, they were able to donate excess materials to ACG.

#### **Public Awareness Campaign Partners**

40 Baker Street - A part of the Abbeyfield Houses Society of Guelph: Friends of the unemployed, needy and dispossessed

CFRU Radio

Guelph Resilience Festival

Transition Guelph

Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition

#### **Media Coverage**

Waltmore

SNAP Guelph

The Ontarion

**Groups that ART CON GUELPH helps to support:**

**40 Baker Street** – Hosts a weekend art program which is run on donations. It provides a free community work site on Saturdays and Sundays. The art gallery runs out of a safe space which is a youth shelter and food/drop-in centre from Monday to Friday. ART CON donated leftover materials to be used for their arts program.

**Guelph Counselling Service and the Trellis Medical Group** – Two health and wellness services that have a shared coordinator for individual art therapy programs with very limited funding allotted to materials, works with other therapy institutions to provide expressive and creative programming for a variety of situations (groups, couples, individuals). ART CON donated left over materials to be used by the art therapy programs

**Appendix B: ART CON GUELPH Final Budget**

**Costs**

Material fees	1000.00
Promotional materials	200.00
Location rental for either ART:CON or ART:CON:EX	278.75
Miscellaneous	100.00

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1578.75

**Sources of Funding**

OCAD University	1000.00
Guelph Youth Council Funding	200.00
Personal Funds (Angela Keeley)	378.75

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1578.75



**TOTAL**-----

	Price Per Unit	Unit	Item	Description	# of items	Total per item
	30.45	Roll	Fabiano Accademia	200g (150x1000)	1	30.45
	18.87	Roll	Fabiano Accademia	120g	1	18.87
	14.67	Ream	News Print	18x24	3	44.01
	10.47	Roll	Kraft Roll	36x100	1	10.47
	1.37	Pack	Assorted Construction Paper	9x12 (48 sheets)	6	8.22
	3	Board	Canvas Board	10x12	0	
	1.61	Board	Masonite Board	12x16	40	64.4
	11.03	Jar	Radisson Acrylics	32 oz		
				Titanium White	2	11.03
				Carbon Black	2	11.03
				Brilliant Red	1	11.03
				Brilliant Orange	1	11.03
				Brilliant Yellow	1	11.03
				Cobalt Blue Hue	1	11.03
				Dioxazine Purple	1	11.03
				Permenant Green	1	11.03
	13.97	Jug	Art Joy Demco Tempra	Gallon		
				Black	1	13.97
				White	1	13.97
				Cyan Blue	1	13.97
				Yellow	1	13.97
				Deep Green	1	13.97
				Scarlet	1	13.97
				Orange	1	13.97
				Violet	1	13.97
	4.95		Sharpie Magnum			
				Black	3	14.85
				White	2	9.9
				Red	2	9.9
	3.47		Sharpie Waterbased Paint			
				Black	2	6.49
				White	1	3.47
				Red	1	3.47
	5.57	Pan	Prang Water Colour	8 Colours/Pan	4	22.28
		Single Brushes	China Bristle			
	0.7		#2, #4	Flat and Round	0	
	1.23		#8, #12	Flat and Round	0	
			Gesso Brushes			
	0.72		1"		0	
	1.91		3"		0	
	3.19		4"		0	
	5.43	Pack	Compressed Soft Pastel	12 pk Black	4	21.72
	1.75			3 pk White	6	10.5
	13.5		Charcoal Pencils	12 pk 2B	1	13.5
				12 pk 6B	1	13.5
	9.8	Pack	Prang Drawing Pencils	12 pk HB	1	9.8
				12 pk 2B	1	9.8
	8.05	Pack	Crayola	50 pk	1	8.05
	11.75		Sharpie	12 pk Black	1	11.75
	13.99	Pack	Reeves Oil Pastels	48 pk	0	
	11.17		Reeves Soft Pastels	36 pk	1	11.17
	11.9	Pack	Prang Coloured Art Pencils	50 pk	3	35.7
	17.5	Box	Earthenware Clay	Mix White	1	17.5
	1.39	Pack	Plastic Modelling Tools	3 piece	5	6.95
	20.97	Jug	Prang White Glue	3 Litres	1	20.97
	20.97	Box	Nitrile Gloves	100 pk	1	20.97
Totals	275.35				113	658.66

Fig. 1.0

	Dollar Store	Rona Cashway	No Frills	Games Club	Con-G	
	Scissors	3/4" x 49" x 97' MDF Sheets x 4	Pop	Chocolate bars	Water	
	Elastic bands	White Primer, Black matte	Fruit	Granola Bars	Apple sauce	
	Twine/string	Paint Rollers and mix stcks	Milk/Cream	Cookies	Granola bars	
	Hot glue guns + sticks			Coffee, tea	cookies	
	Paint brushes (fine and large)					
	Pencil Sharpeners					
	Prize baskets					
	Tinfoil and Parchment paper					
	Ribbon					
	Thread					
	Safety Pins					
	Xacto knives					
	Bristol board and foam core					
	Soap					
	Sponges					
	J cloths					
	Buckets					
	Clothes pins					
	Paper towels					
	Napkins					
	plastic utensils					
Totals	90	100	35	30	20	275

Fig. 1.1

## Appendix C: Reading List

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## Appendix D: Images



Fig. 1.2



**Fig. 1.3**

**Special thanks to Tamara Keeley for photographing both ART CON GUELPH and ART CON EX.**



LEAVE Your MARK

Angelo  
Evan  
Chelsea  
JHN  
Lena  
EVE

CT  
Genny  
Lena  
EVE

JOH  
Gragg  
Chris  
EVE



Fig. 1.6





**Fig. 1.7**



**Fig. 1.8**



Fig. 1.9



Fig. 2.0



Fig. 2.1





Fig. 2.2



Fig. 2.3





Fig. 2.4



Fig. 2.5



Fig. 2.6