Art Matters x FASA present:
Can You Keep a Secret? Consent in Artist-Curator Relationships
February 1st, 2018, VA 323, 6:30pm

A conversation between artist Aleesa Cohene and curator Matthew Hyland, moderated by Tricia Middleton

Matthew Hyland: When Tricia sent me the invitation to this talk on behalf of FASA and Art Matters, she said they would love it if I would consider doing this in conversation with an artist, and the first person I thought of was Aleesa. Aleesa and I have known one another for about ten years now, and we've had an interesting relationship in that we met on both personal and professional terms right out of the gate. Over the past ten years we've had periods in which our engagement was largely professional, and periods in which it was mostly personal or through friendship. She's a real touchstone for me in terms of how I've thought about my own work as a curator, because I've worked with her in more capacities than I've worked with anyone else, and because we've had an ongoing conversation about some of the things we're going to chat about tonight.

When Aleesa and I first met, I was working for a friend of hers and she hired me not long after to do a bit of writing and editing for her. Over the years since then we've worked together in a bunch of different capacities. She's been curated into group shows at Oakville Galleries where I work, I have written about her work both successfully and unsuccessfully (we will talk about that), we acquired her work for the collection at Oakville Galleries, and then a few years ago we collaborated on a solo exhibition together. The conversations that grew out of that particular project we did together have continued in the years since, in regards to our own work as artists and curators, and so that is how we came to have this conversation.

A lot of my engagement with Aleesa has been focused in large part on thinking about ethics, something that I myself spend a lot of time thinking about: What can ethical engagement look like in the art world? It's a context that can be really fraught, that can be really difficult, and doesn't always encourage ethical engagement. Aleesa is someone who both professionally and philosophically is interested in some of those questions, and they've been conversations that we've been having together. Part of what we'll talk about tonight is how those conversations have shifted over time, how our understanding of that has shifted over time. I think it's important to start out by saying that in some of my early engagement with Aleesa, I learned a lot through doing the wrong thing, or being not very good at my job, saying the wrong thing, asking for the wrong thing, not being present the way I needed to be, not being accountable the way I needed to be. Aleesa has been someone who's consistently stepped up and asked me to be accountable in the right way. In a way that was very generous and kind, and has allowed for an ongoing dialogue.

Aleesa Cohene: I'm not sure I experienced you that way, but I think the combination of friendship and having a professional relationship has allowed an honesty that I've never experienced with a curator before, and that's what encouraged me to say what was happening for me when things went down. We took the title [Can You Keep a Secret?] from the experience of having situations in which, in my case, I needed to confide in Mathew after years of trusting

each other, like “Can you keep a secret? I have a problem.” So much so that I could say it twice a week, because there are that many secrets that need to be kept and that many issues that I encountered with my work and navigating the world that the work exists in.

MH: Aleesa and I certainly have had many conversations around crossroads that she’s facing in terms of her engagement professionally with other curators. This is also something I’ve known curators, including myself earlier in my career, to do in an effort to cultivate a kind of intimacy with an artist or try and get them onside. It’s a very common form of engagement. I think many artists who have been practicing for any length of time have felt that kind of conspiratorial vibe with a curator who has said “Can you keep a secret? We don’t really have enough money to do this exhibition, or Can you keep a secret? We really had to fight to get this show on the books. It was really hard to get this done so I need you to meet me halfway.” There’s a lot of that kind of talk that happens as a way of managing expectations or reenacting a sort of imbalance in power. Saying “I’ve done something really generous and important for you, and I need you to honour and respect that,” which is of course a very strange way to go about enacting a relationship.

We were asked to come and talk about consent in artist/curator relationships, something that I think isn’t thought about a lot. There’s a lot of talk about the curatorial at the moment, we’re in a moment where the curatorial sort of reigns supreme in many contexts, and I think that’s evidence of a kind of crisis, I think we’re encountering a crisis in terms of what the curatorial cannon should be. We’ve seen an incredible scope creep in terms of the role of the curator over the last ten or twenty years. The curator historically has been a position or an occupation that’s really been limited to a very specific set of circumstances, mostly working in museums, and I think we’re now seeing the kind of flattening of the field where there’s this mass proliferation of the curatorial in a variety of different spaces that used to function on very different terms. We see artist-run spaces now operating with curators, a lot of commercial spaces have curators on staff, festivals, in any space where artists can or do engage or exhibit work, we’re starting to see curators exist. When I lived in Vancouver the anarchist bookstore had a curator, (which did not seem like a very anarchist idea to me), who oversaw all of the work that was installed at the bookstore at the time. I think we’re seeing this sort of scope creep happening and what it’s resulted in is a kind of homogenization of the field. So all of a sudden, curators are moving away from what was really a caretaker (the literal translation of curator in Latin). Their jobs in museums for at least the last couple hundred years was to care for collections, ensure that the objects in collections were well maintained, exhibited appropriately, that appropriate historical context was developed for them (and there’s problems with how that got enacted). We’ve seen that shift through much of the twentieth century when curator moved from caretaker to tastemaker, and now that there’s curators in so many contexts, we’ve moved from curator as tastemaker to something like curator as gatekeeper, and I think increasingly curator as parrot, where we see a vast percentage of the field clamouring to replicate the work of a handful of influential figures. There’s this kind of consensus building that has proven really difficult for a lot of artists because for artists it dramatically limits what is and isn’t possible. There are few spaces left to engage where a curator isn’t involved, which didn’t use to be the case even fifteen years ago. I know that when I came up in Toronto, the artist-run centres were run by artists, and there were other kinds of spaces too, like festivals that were put on by artists. And we see less and less of that as the field is professionalized.

So I wanted to start by asking Aleesa, given where we are now, what would your ideal relationship with a curator look like?

AC: The relationship can have any form, but for me there are some imperative tenants that have to be there. The first thing that I always want to know is why the curator is interested in my work, and what is happening for them as a curator and for them in their institution (and I mostly don't receive that information). Then I want to know the context for the work and how long they've been thinking about it. Those are my questions right away. Why do you care about this now? That's sort of where I start. And depending on how we engage with these questions the relationships look different. The next thing I always need to know is the budget breakdown, and that's next ever shared, and it changes without me knowing. Then I need to know all the permitters of the space and what their vision is and what's happening with them before, after, etc. Their timeline and all those practical details. Also when in their thinking they're contacting me, so is this a project they're thinking about for three years down the line, like are they actually just writing a grant and they want me to give me a tone of information that I'm not being paid to give? That's really important for me to know. Like how serious is this, meaning how soon can I get some money. It has to be super clear. Then these relationships develop depending on these questions and my history with the person, and then things transpire or don't transpire. That's how I approach it. I've learned to approach it that way through good working relationships, and maybe some bad ones too, but I figured out that those are my needs to put forward first.

MH: So if you have an ideal kind of engagement with a curator, what has it more frequently looked like? Obviously anyone who works as a curator knows some of the financial information. It's a conversation I have with every artist I've ever worked with, and I work really hard to share as much financial information as possible, and it's hard thing. So I know that's a very clear one. What does it look like more often than not for you?

AC: I don't know how to generalize, so I thought I would just share a few stories about the structure of things. A recent story comes to mind, I'm not going to say the institution or the person's name, but I don't have any problem sharing the details. I was asked to be commissioned to do a body of work for a museum, and the curator asked me to come visit for a residency period. I said I don't really need a residency period, this is the body of work that I want to do and being there in that city is sort of a waste of time. But she insisted and said like really you're at the beginning stages. So already we were having some back and forth. I agreed to go, I mean anything can happen at any time and I was researching, she was right about that. So I decided to be there and she really spent the week flattering me, trying to win me over or something. It seems to strange to me that that mattered. I was asking all these questions that I just outlined for you all and there was nothing, no information, but I could see she was trying, so she gave me a breakdown of the budget and I was like, I need that in writing. The budget was massive, bigger than I'd ever seen for a solo exhibition, and all production, which is rare from a Canadian institution, that production's actually provided. Many institutions rely on artists getting their own production budget from their funders. So she outlined it, we put it in writing. I took a photograph of her book; she could tell I wasn't trusting her. She said, look, in good faith, let me show you that I can support the project somehow, what do you need right away? I said I need a hard drive raid and this is the company I need it from, because they do it in such a way that there's data support and I like them and work with them. There's a redundant copy happening

all the time which is what all raids do but this particular company will also recover data if there's ever a big problem. So she said no problem and many months later the raid arrived.

So I start working, and this is two years before I'm supposed to have the show. I start working and I have all of my work on the raid and it's being backed up, and then all of a sudden files literally start disappearing. I work with many hundreds of small files, and they literally start disappearing like a light show on my computer. And I was like, ok, well I have a backup, and I go and I look and the raid looked like it was set up properly, and I go in and there's no backup. The raid was in a case, it's hard to explain technically but the case had a lock on it, so I looked at the box and I was like they must have given me the key, but there's no key, and they've put their name on this hard drive. I call the exhibitions manager at the museum, and I say that I need the invoice to be able to recover the data, there's been a problem, can I have the serial number? I call the company and they tell me that the museum only purchased the encasement of this raid, and that's all they know, so I asked for the packing slip and everything, and then I see that the museum bought cheaper hard drives and inserted them themselves. Hard drives that can't even run video, they're like 5400rpm. So they did not set it up as a raid properly, locked it, and sent it to me without telling me that any of that had happened. So all my work is gone, like really gone, forever gone.

I called her and she didn't call me back, she didn't talk to me. And in the end, the story goes on, all the details of wanting to know the budget, and her feeling me anxiety. I barely have enough to live so what you're telling me is exactly the money that's going to go into this work, and if you want a show that's going to fill the fourth floor of a massive museum then I need to see…like I literally said with what, dear Liza? Like that was part of the flattering. So long story short, I figured out how to recover it and I invoiced them for the amount that it took. I had to hire about ten people to help me and it was a massive endeavour, and I went into debt in order to do it. For that show, two other institutions were showing the work before her, so I had deadlines for them too. She magically left the institution as well, and didn't tell me she was leaving. Like all of a sudden a new curator comes onboard. It strikes me as a good example of the problems we wanted to outline. I mean, the work's made now but it took a long time to figure that out.

MH: I think it would be interested to talk about our own working relationship because we have had nothing quite that disastrous between us, but it hasn't all been smooth sailing either. I think it's important to be candid about this. It's like how no one wants to see how the sausage gets made, curators don't often talk about how exhibitions get made. You know, some are really simple and straightforward, it's really great and you're on the same page as the artist and you get to the finish line with no conflict involved, and that's probably 1 out of every 25 projects. And the rest, there's always something that happens that you have to figure out together, and Aleesa and I have had a few of those instances.

One of the first real professional engagements that we had was when Aleesa asked me to write for a project that she had worked on. She'd made this piece that I really loved and still really love, and we talked about it quite a bit. A publication was being made for the project and she asked if I would write for it and I said that would be great. This was right around the time I got the job that I have now, which came as a real surprise to me as I was not at all prepare to get it, it was sort of an accident that I got this job. So as I committed to this piece of writing, I said in my head, I have no idea how I'm going to write this. I think most people who write feel that way

any time they say yes to anything, but I really knew as I committed to this piece of writing that I was probably biting off more than I could chew. Aleesa said it's a project that was being made with a modest budget so there wasn't a writer's fee, and I said that's fine, I want to write about this work. I knew the terms of engagement, and it really was within the first weeks of me having this new job. So Aleesa said this is the deadline, we're still working out the production timeline, and I just said ok, and left that conversation and as I always do went home that night and made an outline for what I wanted to write, put down some key points and felt really good about it, and then closed that file and didn't open it for months and months.

I knew that the deadline for the book had been pushed back, and at this point my job had become like fully all-consuming. There was a financial crisis at the institution I was working at that I only had a passing understanding of when I accepted the job, and was just completely immersed in. The demands of these jobs can be great sometimes, they often don't look like what we imagine them to look like. So Aleesa started very gently coming to me, saying alright, the production timeline is back on schedule, how is your text coming along, I probably need it in the next couple weeks, is that realistic? And I'd write back like Yeah, yeah! In a couple weeks, no problem. And I think I had this fantasy of my undergraduate life where you could stay up all night and write an essay in one sitting if you really needed to, but that no longer works. I don't know about anyone else in the room, that no longer works for me past the age of 24. The wheels came off the bus in grad school, that stopped working for me. It became like an agonizing weeks-long process to get a text out into the world that I felt good about, and I was like yeah I can just do it the day before, it's fine. And of course the day before came and there was some problem at work, and for the first while I was reasonably candid with Aleesa about this, and then at a certain point I just started dodging her calls. I just started avoiding it because I was embarrassed, I felt terribly, Aleesa was a good friend and an artist that I had committed to, and it's the first and only time that I've done that. Aleesa was really, I imagine deeply frustrated with me, but was very generous about it. At a certain point I just said what's best is for me to pull out of this, I'm holding things up. It took awhile to get there, Aleesa was very patient waiting for me to get to the finish line on that, and I just had to admit that I couldn't meet the deadline in a way that I wanted to, that would allow me to write about the work in a way that made sense for anyone, and it was certainly a low moment for me, and in my career. Aleesa was great about it, we've since spoken about it at length. But what that really did was set into motion a conversation between us about how we would engage, and about what that would look like. It's interesting because in hindsight, we were talking on the train today on the the way here, I realized that in that moment my attitude was, (without realizing it), I'm not being paid for this, and so it's a lower priority. It's amazing how the logic of capitalism infiltrates everything that we do. I just said if I'm not being compensated then this is a lesser priority, if someone's paying me for my time each day then therefore I need to meet those commitments. At the time, in my very weak defence, I was working twelve and fourteen hour days at the job that I had, but instead of communicating that I just said "I'm on it." My evasiveness got really labyrinthine by the end. To Aleesa's great credit, many artists can and should have written me off at that point. And like I said, I've never enacted that again in the same way since, but for Aleesa it was an opportunity to have a conversation around what this kind of engagement could look like between an artist and a curator.

AC: Yeah, I mean going forward with that situation it's like, I don't want a friend that's not saying the full truth to me about the situation that we're in, nor do I want a working relationship. I mean

the background was just me learning that I never want to manage these projects on my own, and that as the artist who's the one to disappoint, I was in a very bad situation to manage the publication. And that the curator of the publication wouldn't do that…I mean, the publication's still forthcoming, it's been nine years.

MH: So, I haven't really missed my deadline.

AC: You still could write! But you did write. It evolved, there was another opportunity in the last few years for a catalogue about my work, and I invited Matthew to write and I said, I loved the essay you wrote nine years ago, can you work on that, and finish? Someone else was managing it, someone else I really liked and trusted and who understood that I could just invite him knowing that we've been through what we've been through, and that if there's a problem with deadlines I won't know and that I'd be protected. So that was a very big lessons for me, that I wouldn't have been able to take that plunge without the protection of other people and working on those relationship as well. I said to the publication coordinator, I don't want to know if it's late, because we have a history.

MH: She also said that to me.

AC: And I said it to Matthew.

MH: She said, I've told the publication coordinator I don't want to know if it's late, so don't tell me. It was a moment where Aleesa was being put in a difficult situation by two curators. The curator who wasn't effectively managing that first publication and me, who failed to meet the deadlines on several occasions. I did meet my deadline for this most recent catalogue, and it's laid out, it's going to press, there were very few traumas in that process. It really was a very particular kind of generosity, from Aleesa's perspective, in terms of saying this is what I need from you in order to get to the finish line. So when we worked together we worked on a couple of group shows, it's always difficult when you're working with 20, 25, or 30 artists on a single project to meet everyone's needs, but Aleesa's very good at articulating her needs. So we had a couple of experiences, and then when we worked together on the solo show a few years ago Aleesa was really great about laying out her needs. As she said, when she's looking at her ideal relationship with a curator, a lot of those are very practical things. Can you tell me what the contribution to my production will be? Can you ensure that I have 48 hours to install before the show opens so that I can do last minute fine tuning? These are things that I witnessed my colleagues, even colleagues that I've worked with, whether collaborating with another institution or my own curatorial colleagues, often take these things with a grain of salt and blow through them. I learned very quickly through Aleesa's generosity that these basic things make or break situations in terms of her working environment.

AC: Yeah, I mean, as most artists I'm mostly working for free, so why not create an environment that's worth working in? That's always what strikes me, that there's a sense of equality between myself and the curator. I'm inviting you, you're working, I'm working, and yet every single email they're writing they're being paid to write, and I'm not. And I don't know why that's so confusing. That's actually something I'd love to hear you all talk about.

MH: It is not a common attitude, you are actually the first person who ever said it to me, way back when. I am not being compensated for this time, and you are. You weren't saying it in reference to me but in reference to another project you were working on where all of a sudden an entire grant application had been put on you to write, that was to support you project, and that grant would provide you with some nominal support, but really it was funding the institution to realize this exhibition. You ended up going back to the curator and saying I'm not paid for this and you are. It was a real turning point for me, and I have to say, that conversation was significant in terms of my own thinking. Every conversation I enter into with an artist I am now mindful of the fact that I'm being paid for that time and they're not. Every studio visit I go on, every time I email an artist, every phone call or Skype session I have, I'm being paid for that time and they're not. I'm also mindful that I cannot do my job without them and the same is not necessarily true for them. I'm mindful that my success depends on creating conditions for an artist's success, and this is not actually a very common attitude.

When I first started out I had a mentor who was really wonderful to me, who made a series of comments that I took as sort of gospel early on, and one of them was in reference to artists: once a problem, always a problem. If someone gives you a hard time in your first couple of interactions with them, it's going to be difficult for the entire duration of your engagement, and my experience has been that's not entirely untrue, however, the argument was that you just shouldn't proceed with the project. The deeper I get into doing this the more fascinating that statement becomes to me, because there was this attitude that was there are so many great artists out there, why not work with the ones that you'll have the nicest time with? I think that's a very strange criteria to be working with. What I will say, and part of what I think the problem is here, is that the position of the curator is one that has evolved really considerably over time, and I think when we think about a curator we think about the best bits of the jobs. We think about studio visits, talking about art, making exhibitions. We may think less, at least in terms of institutional curators, about the fundraising, the board meetings, the administrative burden, the grant writing, the calling Home Depot and asking them for ridiculous things that make you sound like a crazy person in order to get to the finish line for an artist. There are a lot of moving parts.

Historically, the curator has really been beholden to art, not artists, but to art objects. Their job was to care for these objects, and over time we've seen those demands expand. Over the last ten years we've seen a dramatic shift in terms of how we imagine the public, or an audience. Curators, for much of history, weren't really imagining an audience as being integral to what we do. That's a relatively new phenomenon. So we now have an obligation to a "public", and I think that sometimes we abuse that imaginary commitment. I have witnessed many a colleague say, "oh well, I know you want the didactic materials to say this, but the public won't understand, so we have to simplify it." We also have demands to our donors. At the end of the day, one of the things anyone who has spent any time working in an institution knows is, if you're going to get the money in the door that is required to get something done, you have to keep your donors happy, and that can require a particular kind of engagement. Let us never underestimate the continuing and increasing power of the market, in terms of influencing everything that we do in the art world, including and especially what happens in museums. At the end of the day so much of what we do is made possible by donors and so much of what donors are willing to fund is driven by the market. We're in a moment where I think the market is the greatest influencer, no longer the curator, that transition happened sometime over the past 20 years, I won't venture

to say when. There are these competing demands, demands to our institutions, donors, funders, an imaginary public, to art, and then demands to artists.

Curators haven't been working with living artists for most of history, this is a relatively new phenomenon in the last hundred years. It's only in the last century that we've really seen curators begin to work with living artists and only really in the last several decades that we've seen that become essential, an essential component of the curatorial roll. I think we're seeing more and more that those other demands can feel more urgent and overwhelming. So because of these other demands, and because artists seem, whether they are or not, to be self-sufficient, seem to be able to do what they need to do without support or intervention, I think that it's really easy for curators to allow that engagement to fall low on the priority list. I think we see that more and more often. I don't know what your experience with that has been like, but I've seen it quite often.

I want to open this up to questions because you invited us here. You did ask us to talk about consent so I do want to bring this back around to that idea. Tricia and I attended a conference about curating together several years ago, and it was probably among the most frustrating weekends of my life. It was a four day conference about curating and I think it was in the last three hours of the last day in which the word artist came up at all. No names of artists, or the idea of working with artists, had come up for the first three and a half days of this conference. If I remember correctly, it was Judy Radul, who many of you may know is an artist, who got up and gave this incredible introduction to her talk and, if I recall correctly, just said "self-deprecating remark, humble brag". Rather than actually going through the motions of what every other speaker had done that week, she just acknowledged what was happening, and then she said "artists work from the unavailable, and curators work from the available." And that statement has always stated with me. There were a number of people in the room who bristled at that and really thought it was hogwash, but it's always stayed with me because I really think it does cut to essence of what the difference between being an artist and a curator is. Artist are creating something from often nothing, and curators are working with what artists produce. Sometimes that comes from an invitation, sometimes a curator is extending an invitation and that's what makes something possible, but artists are working from the unavailable and curators are working from the available, we can only work with what we're given. And that's always stayed with me, and has shaped my thinking pretty considerably.

In terms of consent, this is where Aleesa and I started our conversation. It's one of the things that curators have not historically been great at. It took me a long time to figure out that how to do this was to be vulnerable, to be a good listener, to be accountable. All of these very basic things that consent requires, including some ability to ask, and listen to a response. And really listen to a response, to be accountable for one's behaviour, to continue to check in with someone, as consent is an ongoing process, not something that you cross off a list. It also involves something really fundamental about vulnerability and desire, and that these are essential to any curatorial relationship, which is that curators have to make themselves vulnerable in front of artists, we have to be willing to be good listeners, to go out on a limb, to say I don't understand. We were talking about this on the train and Aleesa mentioned that "I'm not sure I understand what the goal of this piece is, I'm not sure that I understand what this decision is about," is not something that someone says very often.

AC: People are mostly afraid to ask that. I feel their fear of not getting it right, which is really unproductive for me as well. From some of the conversations that we've had, any kind of criticality brings it into a good direction because even if I disagree, it's a real conversation, it's actually tangible, it's about your opinion, and I understand you in it better as well because it's your opinion. So it matters, there is no neutrality between those spaces at all. I want to know from curators what they care about, what they're seeing, what they're looking at, what was surprising and what was expected, if it's new work at least.

MH: There's a saying that's really common in the art world, which is "he looks with his ears." It means that instead of actually looking at work, someone is listening to buzz about someone, someone is reading things, hearing what other people are saying, not really looking with their eyes. I think there's an endemic problem right now, and there's all sorts of really interesting research that backs this up, that shows all of the ways in which a certain percentage of solo shows in this country are all drawn from a handful of galleries. In New York it's an even greater problem, there was an article that came out a couple of years ago saying something like 75% of solo exhibitions in major New York museums were all artists represented by only three different galleries. So we see a sort of consensus mentality emerging, and what happens is that curators often end up in studios and they don't really know why they're there, except that they've heard something's exciting. They're not prepared in those moments to have conversations about what's exciting about the work.

I will always remember this question that Tricia asked me when I came into her studio. Tricia was someone then whose practice I wasn't super familiar with, I'd seen a little bit of it and thought oh, this sounds cool! (I was younger). So I went to visit Tricia and Tricia was like, well I have to ask you, why do you care? She phrased it more gently than that, like "I'm curious to know what your interest in my work is?" and I realized in that moment, I have to be able to answer this question every time I go into an artist's studio. I now have notes and questions prepared for every studio visit, and I've read everything that I can about the work. If I'm asking for time, I'm going to honour that person's time. But it was a rookie mistake I made in my 20s quite often, like I heard this person's cool I want to hangout with them, maybe we'll be friends, maybe we'll work together, who knows! Let's just go and see what happens. And that was really not a very professional form of engagement. I think it's a lot more common than we think it is, and I think one of the things I think about a lot is that curators are often seen to be setting up conversations that they themselves do not engage in. So if we think about what the job of the curator is, if we think about what a show in a museum is supposed to accomplish, the idea is that it's a forum, a space to start a conversation, but often what we see is that curators themselves don't want to engage in that conversation.

I think one of the places we see this most readily is in terms of conversations around diversity, for example. There's a whole other talk to give about the history of the museum as a tool of colonialism, racism and white supremacy, and the way that the impulse to collect, organize, classify, and explain has been a really destructive impulse in a number of ways. As museum direction in Canada remains a really white and homogenous field, funders are saying you have to be accountable to this, your museums have to start reflecting the world that we live in. So what we're seeing more and more is curators engaging diversity in these very surface ways, in which blacks artists are invited to do something and then told that they need to make work about being black so that this appears clearly on the walls, and then black writers are invited to

write an essay and then curators pull the interpretive material from that essay. We see that all of the time. Curators are often talking about these kinds of conversations they want to create for this imaginary public, but aren't engaging artists in those conversations. Aleesa and I were talking about one of the most nerve wracking parts of being a curator being when you send the first thing you've written about the work to the artist and you say "alright, let's chat." And for me, I always want that to be very open. I remember with Aleesa I said this is a first draft, I don't know if I've gotten this right, I want you to tell me if I've gotten this wrong, and we went through several drafts together to get it right. I didn't get it right the first time around and we had had many conversations prior to that leading up to it. What we often see, what you've had the experience of, is curators asking no questions, reading all of the other website copy that's been written for other shows, and then mashing that together and coming up with something and then presenting it like, "oh by the way, here's the copy."

AC: And they often say "you don't know our audience." So tell me what you think, but just so you know, you don't really know who's coming to the gallery, so don't tell me what you think. Then I'm in a situation where I have to spend hours fixing it if I care, or living with it and the work being represented in a way that doesn't make any sense to me. I know lots of artists who are picky about very specific words or whatever, and I understand that as well, I don't judge that, because I think sometimes that's actually amazing and a lot gets done when people are focused on how they actually want to represent their work, but for me it's just a vibe. Does this feel like the work? Does this feel like I want to see more if I read this? Like I could step back at certain points and just try to understand it from that perspective? But I'm always presented as if I'm a problem, like because I'm the artist I'm going to have a problem, so if we're always starting there it's sort of impossible to show up and be like, actually I don't want this to be my words, here's an email exchange that might help you, here's a text that I drew from, here's what I was researching, take any of it. Also, the show's been up in three other places, I signed off on that copy, you could also use that if you're lazy. There's just so many options in my mind. But there's also tones I don't know about what's going on which is why I ask people to be a little bit more upfront about what's happening for them in their office, like what are their hands tied with?

MH: I think this idea you mention of the artist always already being a problem is really real, I think it's something a lot of curators feel and I think it has guided a lot of curator/artist interactions.

Tricia Middleton: Now I'm going to join in. Thank you so much, you covered so much amazing territory. I had some questions that I had prepared to start off with but I'm going to go in a different direction, mostly because I am so impressed by your boundaries. So I would like to know, and I think student artists are also very interested, how to cultivate these boundaries for ourselves. I think one can start off feeling very exploited from the beginning, if you never get your claws into it to stop that process from happening until something completely crazy happens to you and you change your entire existence. Did you already start with good boundaries or is this something you had to cultivate?

AC: I'm sure it's something I've had to work on. I decided quite young in age that I would work as an artist, and that I would only freelance if I needed income, and I'd freelance fast, that is I'd do jobs as quickly as possible in order to support my practice. In doing that it felt like I needed to champion the labour of that, the decision and sacrifices, without out being a victim to it at all. A

lot of my friends and artist colleagues were complaining a lot about how they were being mistreated and I felt like, it's true, you are being mistreated, but I always thought there was a better way to deal with this. So they developed out of that. Even if I'm a problem, I have choices in that interaction, I don't go in thinking ok, you're going to think I'm a problem because I'm the artist, but two minutes into that interaction I might get a signal, like "you're a problem, I'm afraid of you, I'm afraid of something in the work," (fear's one example and there are many others), and then it's my choice to figure out how to have the best and most productive conversation with that person so I can stay focused on the work. I know where I want to put my labour, and I know where I don't. The boundaries came out of that desire, not anything else, nothing external. And they're not always good, it's easier to represent them in a talk than in an interaction. Half of the time, I think they come out of how confused I am while things are happening because I don't have the information. And then when I look back I think, well that happened because of that, and next time I'm going to ask, you know, are you planning to leave your job halfway through our project? Because I need to know that. It's happened three times! I've had three curators just leave in the middle. And they knew, they totally knew, and that makes a difference. I want to be able to make a decision.

TM: Well it's interesting because—and I want to relate it back to what Matthew was saying about that conference and the unavailable vs. the available—for me it's sort of reflective of a troubled internal struggle with the individual who's making these choices, and the vulnerability of other people. I remember at that conference, I was there because there was an artist residency that was taking place around this conference, so there were in fact artists there as well. And all the artist were like, ya, of course you're working from the available. So you're right, the curatorial contingent of that bristled but the rest of us were like "finally!", because before that we were just sitting there like, "this is crazy." So just going back to that, Matthew, what do you suppose is bringing this desiccated level of engagement with artists and artworks? Why is it so low do you think?

MH: I think there's a number of reasons. I think one of them is that we have all of these spaces that now have curators that didn't used to have curators. And you can now see the same exact exhibition in a commercial gallery, as in an artist-run centre, as in a regional gallery, as in a major museum. There isn't a lot of difference in terms of what those exhibitions necessarily look like, but there's a vast difference in terms of the resources available to each of those spaces. I think we have a number of curators who have created positions for themselves or are in positions that have been created, so there's all of these trained curators out there who needs jobs, and I think they often find themselves in situations where they feel they have to rise to this level, but don't have the resources or the support to do it. So I think part of it is very practical. We have a lot of people who are trying to do too much with too little. A couple of years ago an artist did a campaign that was "do less with less." Work within the reality of your budget, don't ask artists to subsidize your budget with their time, labour, and energy. And that happens all the time. So I think part of it is that, and when artists bristle at that or don't immediately rise to the occasion, there's a sense that one's favour is not being repaid. I mean, I initiate every project that I do by first saying "I'm so grateful, you're doing me a great favour, this is a big gift that you're giving me, you agreeing to work on this project together is a gift." And I don't know that that's a universal feeling. I think a lot of institutions feel like they're doing a favour for artists. So I think part of it is that. I think part of it is the demands, there isn't enough time, there are very few curatorial jobs in this country that permit curators to have the time, resources, and energy to do

what they need to do to engage artists properly. So as I said, I do think engagement with artists falls low on the priority list because artists aren't banging our doors down in the same way. The building's not going to shut down, you're not going to get fired, you're not going to run out of money if you don't meet your obligation to the artists. The artists might not like you at the end of the project, and I think that happens a lot, but you're still going to keep your job. So I think a lot of it is about competing priorities.

I come to the art world through the back door, it's a total accident that I got to have this job. I don't have any art historical training, I don't have any curatorial training, I don't have any arts training at all. I did a women's studies undergrad, and then went to grad school for culture studies, and I started writing about art a little bit in grad school. I think I lucked out in that I didn't fall into the trappings of a traditional curatorial education, in terms of what that is right now. I think how we prepare people to be curators bears little relationship to the actual practice of curating, and I think there's a real disconnect between how we theorize curating and how it gets realized. I said to Aleesa in our conversation about this, that artists should be involved in the development of curricula for curatorial programs. I think we would have a very different field if it looked like that. I think a lot of it is that people are poorly prepared for the realities of what this looks like.

TM: Okay, I think I could keep asking these people questions all night, so I'll just have a boundary of my own here and ask if we have any people in the audience who have a question they want to ask right now.

Audience member: I have two quick questions. The first is why do you think that break between the artist and the curator happens in the first place, and why is there that lack of trust or fear of vulnerability? And the second, kind of relating: is there a way to tell if the relationship between an artist and a curator isn't going to work and if that in some way bleeds into that fear of being vulnerable?

AC: I can't necessarily tell when something's not going to work, but I think I have to redefine 'working' all the time. I always need the opportunities and I need the money, so I try to make it work in a way that will work for me, and I think that's my freedom. In most cases I can sense if we're communicating well or communicating poorly, if it seems a little dodgy or if something's wrong. I feel like having that assessment is really important as an artist. I didn't mention it, but I've lived in Berlin for many years, as well as Toronto, and now in Los Angeles, and the thing I'm now thinking a lot about is the contrasting ways in which different cultures understand their artists as labours. There is something very specific about Canada still thinking it's a luxurious thing to be doing.

MH: I think the best piece of advice I ever got from a colleague was "pay the artist on the first day of installation," which I've always done on every project we've ever done. When the artist arrives there's a cheque waiting for them. It immediately sets a tone, which is we're paying you for your labour, let's work together.

I just also want to follow up on your question—I think there are very few scenarios between artists and curators where it can't work. When we hear that something doesn't work, that's about

power, about curators enacting the kind of power that they have to make choices, to say yes or say no, and that's very big power. It's something we didn't really talk about, but it's an area where we have quite a lot of sway. We can make something happen or not make something happen, either in saying yes to a project or within a project itself. We have a policy where I work where we can't say no to an artist until we've exhausted every possible avenue to find a way to say yes.

At the gallery where I work, one of the spaces is an old estate home and a twelve acre garden, and there are some public artworks in the garden, and there's this beautiful Liz Menard sculpture made of bronze that weighs several tons in the garden that is sunk into a pad of concrete. And so this other artist we were working with wanted to pull it out of the ground and bring it into the exhibition space to be part of his exhibition. I knew this was going to be tricky, and we work with teeny tiny budgets at the institution where I work, and the curator who was working on the project (it wasn't my show), said "well, I'm just going to say that's not possible" and I said, "no, we have to explore every option". So we called a crane operator, we called an engineer, we called a conservator, we spoke to Liz, we put all of those things into motion, and really we got a lot further along into the process before we hit a wall. Of course this being in Canada what stymied us was the weather, because the ground was going to be too frozen to safety pull it up. The concrete pad might've got stuck to the ground and it might have damaged the artwork when the crane pulled it up. But I was able to send the artist all of this correspondence and all of this context, and I say this not to toot our own horn, but he came back and said never in a million years did I expect that you would investigate this. It was really a trial balloon, a way of seeing what the engagement would look like. So I think that curators have a lot of power here that we don't often think about. These are our day-to-day lives and we're constantly working on multiple projects at once, as our artists, but the stakes look different for us. We're still getting paid, no matter what. The same is not true for artists.

I think when a curator gets grumpy about a difficult artist, and I mentioned that phrase my mentor said to me, "once a problem, always a problem," I actually think the opposite is true. The artist who is very clear about their needs and very demanding is my favourite kind of artist to work with. I know exactly how to give them what they want. The artist who says, "I can only work under these circumstances, I need the following things in order for the project to be successful," a lot of my colleagues bristle at that. I don't, because they're laying out a very clear path to success, so I'm grateful. I think when you hear curators grumble about how difficult an artist is, what they're saying is "I could've made another choice. This artist should be grateful I made this choice." That's what we hear when curators grumble, that they're talking about their power not being respected or acknowledged appropriately.

Audience member: So it sounds like a lot of curators at least from what you're saying, don't seem to understand that you can't just expect to have a one-way power dynamic, you have to have a long, continuous conversation about the process of the art piece.

MH: Well, I would like to say that you can't just have a one-way power dynamic, but we know that not to be true. But I think yeah, ideally we're moving toward a different kind of model where it is an exchange and recognized as an exchange.

Audience member: I'm coming from a cinema background, and often in film making we talk about the relationships between producer and filmmaker, and often the producer also plays the role of a mentor, the person who somehow teaches or gives suggestions about the creative process, not just the production. So I was wondering, in the visual arts or in the artist/curator relationship, can it work in a similar way or does it ever happen?

AC: I've worked with producers on films too, and it's such a different system, it's like completely different worlds in my experience. I think the film industry is so difficult, also, in terms of those hierarchies, there's no opportunities to say, I think we see a shift, etc., there's an entire system that is holding that in place, I don't think the majority of people are too interested in shifting that. I mean, it depends what we're talking about. Independent cinema, maybe. Experimental, maybe even more. Hollywood, for sure not. I think there's lots to learn from the different power relationships. But I don't think it's similar, or at least in my experience it hasn't been.

MH: Have you ever had a curator provide you with input or suggestion that was meaningful?

AC: Yes...yes and no. Because the work is almost always done. And very rarely will a curator check up on something in a productive way. When I've made new work for exhibitions, the feeling I have is that they're not checking up on me or thinking about the work, they're thinking about how to frame the work before the work is done, and I'd rather not show them because there's just too many ideas that will come about from that, and the nerves are high at that time. Maybe there's a roundabout way that those conversations happen but there isn't an opening for like, "let's actually talk about the work, let's actually think about where you're going and what your goals are, last time I talked to you we talked about this, now I'm seeing this, what changed?" Mostly I feel like I'm managing their nerves about how to frame it. I'm like "don't worry, this will be done, don't worry, this will be this size now," etc. There's so much stress that we're managing each other's stress in some ways.

TM: It's almost like they're parentalizing us in a way, to sort of deal with their "not good enough" parental abilities. Not to put it in this parent/infant type relationship, but it's like you're making me responsible for your feelings too in this weird exploitative way where I already have my feelings, and now I've got you and your weird energy about you, and it looks like it's about me when it's not about me. So it's bizarre.

Audience member: You've both spoken, and I've seen it happen too, about the dynamic where every email that you [Matthew] send you're getting paid for and every email you [Aleesa] send you're not, and I wonder if you've seen or have any suggestions on how to level that playing field. Are there best practices to compensate for the labour that goes into that process?

AC: Keeping the labour minimum is the thing that I think has worked best, is at least most available for institutions and curators and the people who are working. Even when someone says to me, "these are the things I'm doing, I'm taking care of, and this is what I need from you." Knowing that they've done work all around that situation, as opposed to an open-ended question, like how do you want to see this happen? I also feel like we're long overdue for a subsistence model in terms of funding. If I was given something every year to just live, even $15,000, I would answer those emails with pleasure, because that's something. I think what gets to me is I'm so close to just surviving so often that I just feel like not always ready to

answer, because I'm not grounded and there in that headspace. I'm either hustling in another way or not actually at my desk, so I now have to answer this question on a phone because I don't have the resources to actually be there and respond. I think with what we're working with now, I'd say doing the work, and asking for very specific information from artists. And also just knowing someone's context, knowing that not every artist has the means to do extensive administrative work.

MH: I think from the curator's side there's a couple simple things you can do, that I don't always succeed at doing but try to do. When I'm working on a project, every conversation, email, phone call, Skype session, ends with a what can we be doing right now to support you? What do you need us to be doing at our end? It's amazing to me what will come forth in those moments that wouldn't have come out in the 90 minute conversation prior, just by virtue of saying we have some time and some energy to take care of things. So making yourself accountable for shouldering as much of the burden as you can. The other thing I do is I try to only send artists one email a week, and so I have a draft always going and anything I need to ask them gets put in that draft, and you'd often be surprised by the end of the week, because you've often already answered some of those questions. We have a culture of just wanting to fire questions off immediately to artists, so I work really hard to ensure that artists get one email a week, it's in bullet points, and the questions that need to be answered are clear.

AC: And you notice that. Lots of people have done that for me as well, and I notice it, and I'm so grateful. I can also then plan to have the time to sit down and answer them well. Because I want to answer them well, I want to give them what they need so it goes well. There's some sort of weird assumption sometimes that artists are invested in chaos, and I'm not.

TM: Okay, so I will take one more question.

Audience member: This might be a little left field, but I was wondering how you would navigate a situation where an artist might tell you something in confidence about a piece, whether it be the process, their inspiration, etc., but the institution you're working for, the donors, or your boss, are really pressuring you to share that information, whether through a publication, a talk, or whatever. How you would navigate that?

MH: Don't do it. I mean, it's really not complicated. You know you have hit the right moment in a curatorial process, that things are going well, when you start having those conversations that happen in confidence. The artist doesn't always have to say this is confidential, you know that these are not things that are supposed to end up on the wall, or in the essay, or at the talk, or whatever the case may be. Where I work, the artist sees every piece of writing about their work before it goes out into the world and we don't send it out until they give final sign-off. If someone has told you something in confidence, that's that.

TM: I want to elaborate on that question a little more, because it actually will extend into a person's personal life as well. There's loads of ways you can completely trash an artist's boundaries in the process of working with them, which isn't necessarily even about the work, but can even involve their personal lives. Maybe you hear some information about them and then you go and share that with all your colleagues, and later your colleagues will be like "hey so I heard this horrible thing happened to you" at your opening or something...anyway, that's one of

my stories. That was why working with Matthew was good for me. No one working with us knew anything about me at the time and people just let me work. Even with what's going on in people's personal lives or any number of circumstances, there's an element of the relationship that needs to be respected and confidences held across many different contexts.

AC: Totally. I also think it has to do with how the artist is seen by the curator and the institution, and things the artist may not be privy to. I've been pigeonholed many times in exhibitions because I'm visibly queer, and so my bio all of a sudden becomes "Aleesa Cohene, a queer blah blah blah..." and I didn't put it there. It helps them, you know, maybe make me more palatable or make the work more understood. That's an ongoing problem. Because then if I fight it, I'm fighting something that I am, but I didn't put it there and I don't care to have that read on the work whatsoever, but I also don't not care to have that read on the work. So then I'm in a very complicated situation. And that's the kind of thing I only learn at the opening, where I'm like oh, ok, that wasn't welcome here.

TM: I'm not welcome in different ways, and I see it all the time as well. Where it's like you get that reading, like you're almost reading your work on the person's face much later, and the kinds of things they'll say about you or the work, it's like "oh, that's what you think about me, you think I'm trash, or you think I'm this or that." So I think your question has this much broader scope as to ways to not treat people well in this line of work.