

1 You should eat something before coming over.

C H A R C U T E R I E

98. Good v. bad poetry. The distinction is not useful. The whole idea assumes a shared set of articulatable values by which to make such a judgment. It assumes, if not the perfect poem, at least the theory of limits, the most perfect poem.
How would you proceed to make such a distinction?

—The Chinese Notebook, Ron Silliman

Eli Zibin

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My Argument is Wrong, But



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I—yes I—want to underscore the notion that any and all valuations of poetry and poetics always speak from and with their own unique historical and aesthetic biases. That is to say, any valuation of poetry in terms of “good” or “bad” is only so as constructed within its own particular *épistème* (as Foucault or Butler) may say, and is locatable (as Nietzsche or Haraway would suggest), in a genealogy of shifting values over time. Even if we could formulate a “shared set of articulatable values” (as Silliman doubts), such valuations would be (as Derrida or Irigaray would highlight) always tentative, slippery: unstable in their meanings, bound to their historical moment—only really indicative of aesthetic tendencies of their time.

Even if this weren’t the case and that it were possible to stake out grounds for certain value judgments, Silliman’s proposition does not explain what such a “useful distinction” would be or do in these cases. Any grounding of such hypothetical distinctions would vanish if their utilitarian values cannot also be articulated. Further, is it not that the use of a “useful distinction”—indeed the concept of any “use value”—is also subject to the exact same sempiternal fluctuations which “good” and “bad” are? In this case, even the distinction of the distinction is not useful.

Simple dialectics teach us that with the improbability of a “perfect poem” or a “most perfect poem” that we can neither have poems which wholly “fail”. The notion of a “failed poem” or a “mostly failed poem” is untenable precisely because its definitive opposite does not exist, cannot exist, is illusory. And by extension, even if it did exist, it would still be subject to its own temporal moment, improbably failing only for a second, improbably perfect only for a moment.

Approaching poetry and poetics in this manner refocuses the discussion away from the turtledowns of ontology—what poetry is—towards re-constellating various forms of *poiesis*—what poetry does and can do.

Listen up. There may be a fear that this kind of approach dilutes the critical capacities of poetry and poetics by opening up the artform to hubbub, or irresponsible and detached authorships (as if it isn’t open to these cases already). I too worry about how acephalous this kind of approach could become: the act of circumscribing “good” poetry from

“bad” poetry is also to occupy these opinionated positions with passion and sensitivity. These claims represent an investment in identifiable poetic traditions, as well as supra-poetic and often politically valuable positions. Such positions posit a poetics which at their best are viscerally embodied, politically charged, and full of beautiful nuance. To disregard, discredit, or downplay these responses is surely not what I am suggesting.

Instead, in terms of reading poetry, the type of framing I am suggesting or reminding you of is merely meant to short-circuit those gutjerk reactions we have to certain forms of poetry that are unfamiliar, or annoying, or cliché, or banal, or difficult for us—for whatever reasons we so think. The way of thinking about poetry I’m proposing is simply a way of recontextualizing these initial responses.

Immediately reflecting upon our initial reactions to a poem complicates any simplistic reading, forcing us to confront what it is in the poem in comparison to our experience and our constantly shifting, historically embedded, constellating aesthetics which makes us feel in this particular way—and more importantly, why this may be so. Since no poem can be simply “bad” or “good”, our embodied responses become traces of our own aesthetics, and (and this is my main thesis y’all) the querying of these responses can only lead to more interesting and more fulfilling engagements with any kind of poem or poetics, if not language itself.

Indeed, this type of paradigm forces us to take an interest in the poem (the etymology of interest is *inter-essa* meaning literally between beings). Reading here then is dialogic, an interaction that occurs between two entities, the poem and the reader. There is, although it is often forgotten, an *a priori* perceptual relationship between any reader and any poem; that is to say, the reader, not the author, is largely responsible for the semantics of any poem simply by their perceiving of it. The point then is that any careless dismissiveness of poetry and poetics actually involves us and reflects on us, more-so than the poem itself. Only a reader can activate a poem. How they choose to do so is paramount to any thinking of poetics: our responses are our responsibility.

In terms of writing, Silliman’s dictum is most helpful when it relieves one from evaluating their own work with nonexistent or unhelpful categories. This approach to poetry removes a significant barrier to entry as the fear of writing “bad” poetry is mitigated by the fact that you couldn’t if you tried. feel free: elizibin@gmail.com with your attempts.

Instead, one’s perceived failure is simply a quirk, an errancy within a language game, if not a glitch in a discourse network. This approach can also quell the fear of “authorship” since one must now also recognize that they are no longer the single “authority” of a poem’s meaning: that responsibility is now also shared with the reader. There are no poems which “fail”, and when they do what we conceive to be as “failing”, they are only more interesting for partly exposing today’s aesthetic and linguistic slant.

The point when writing is that we can always just check the numbers afterwards. Pegasus. The flatness, when inscribing, is that we always re-numericalize numerology after words. Abbot Kinney. What if I told you the syntactic constraint I wrote this piece under? The etymology of “define”. What if I then wrote over this syntactic constraint? Do the adjectives I’ve used have any relation to the Fibonacci sequence? Look again. My argument is wrong depending on how you frame it, I believe this. All forms of diving involve the nose somehow. Many small animals dig holes. Knot nonsense metaphorically, but what’s the difference, or, either way, who is counting?

Located in Vancouver's political Chinatown, "political" because it is the only part of the city that has managed to maintain a cultural vanguard on the verge of rapid gentrification), Spare Room doesn't have a proper street entrance nor presents itself as a place that ambitiously needs a more centric or mainstream location. On the second floor of 222 E Georgia St, amongst artist studios, artist-run centers and publishing offices, Sung Pil Yoon has partitioned and repurposed his studio to facilitate projects and collaborations. Yoon, a curator and artist, has allowed Spare Room to let artists with very diverse practices participate and exhibit their material with no institutional pressures. It is a literal spare room, a utilitarian space, the result of an individual's need to share and invite others to be within. A significant gesture in response to privilege and how conceding something economically valuable transforms both the meaning of inclusion and the notion of pluralism.

Jacobo Zambrano

No More Studio, No More Privilege

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For the course of 1 year, Spare Room has hosted 6 projects, numerous podcasts, a film room and an audio room and many undocumented conversations about what collective consciousness is and how does one develop it in our community. Not to mention that limited resources have never thwarted the realization of projects at Spare Room.

Its inaugural exhibition 86, Nigel Dembicki, Genta Ishimura and Ian Lowrie presented an ambitious transformation of Spare Room into a rock garden informed by the spatial and philosophical teaching of wabi-sabi as a critique of West Coast "isms". As stated in the accompanying text, "...the space will be transformed into an archive of soil samples, a glimpse into multi-dimensional diorama inserts within a floating wall (a "reveal"), and deliberate assignments of rocks in odd-number based systems... Dembicki, Ishimura and Lowrie present a synthesis of space-efficient hybridity in the nature, composition and architecture of its urbanized setting through the lens of Vancouver and its noted imagery of an exaggerated West-Coast life". Also, Gabi Dao's fictional treatment of cultural sites through her installation "Open Sesame" also considered the potential of space and history that Spare Room grants. The structure of the installation quoted the concentric rectangles of the Cambodian temple at Angkor Wat with 2x4s. Dao invited James Linton Murphy, an artist with a sensibility for humorous appropriations, to collaborate on a soundscape to layer on a lens of colonial tourism characterized by a David Attenborough-esque voice-over. "[Open Sesame] attempts to devise a parallel discourse indulging in the colourful mythology and its surviving rhetoric of old-world aesthetics". These two exhibitions are emphatic of the aspects that make Spare Room's collaborative impulse resonate outside formal narratives.

It's been a year already. The name Spare Room should at least be slightly familiar by now. What incites my reflection on Spare Room is how it consistently programs work that subverts institutional etiquette, and allocates space for emerging practices in an urgent, and arguably efficient way. It's exciting. Yes, there are other spaces in Vancouver that share some structural characteristics that I identify with Spare Room, but few of those pre-existing spaces challenge or present themselves as a contrasting force against history or conventional modes of exhibition making.⁽¹⁾

Spare Room is not publicly funded nor does it stipulate demanding career prerequisites to the individuals who are interested in collaborating within it. Conceived as a direct critique to the notion of "the white cube", it examines institutionalized modes of exhibition making and also challenges key concepts such as collaboration, environment, situation and space.

Pg. 7
222 East Georgia Street.
Image: Jacobo Zambrano

Pg. 8
Installation View
"Open Sesame" Spare Room, Vancouver
Sao Paulo, Brazil.
August 8-September 5, 2015



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The dynamic of artist/curator surpasses that of a power-relation and, to empower artists and their work, encouragement towards pushing the boundaries is always present. Each event aims at the room's reconstitution through music, film, sculptural interventions and site-specific installations, or as Robert Irwin describes as "site conditioned/determined" which is the condition that "...the sculptural response draws all its cues (reason for being) from its surroundings".⁽²⁾ This translates into urgency for total awareness of the specific situation as part of the process of making the work. Additionally, "This requires the process to begin with an intimate, hands-on reading of the site. This means sitting, watching, and walking through the site, the surrounding areas (where you will enter from and exit to), the city at large or the countryside" (Irwin 1985, 27). Arguably, in most cases, it is this complete sense of independence and freedom and the opportunity to think, critique, construct, write and make, which drives artist and curators to start projects like Spare Room.

Spare Room comes to existence under challenging circumstances: 1) our local need for exhibition spaces in times of capitalist supremacy and, 2) how independent curatorial projects became scarce due to this circumstance. The politics of the social

atmosphere in which we find ourselves practicing as artists, also imposes many norms when it comes to where and how we should exhibit our work. This absurd fact of a nonsensical posture, contra-autonomy, should not exist. No institution or individual(s) should dictate nor manipulate the type of discourses that emerge from those who are no longer considering traditions and seek to redefine the establishment.

We live in times of cultural complexity (for myself, the dichotomy of being a Marxist living within a heavily capitalist society), where the economy no longer only dictates the type of materials we use, but also forces us to reconsider our creative processes, hence the continued course of post-studio practices. With no more studio, it changes how we weigh the privilege to make art, against our survival due to our exorbitant cost of living. Where and what are we left with in order to connect with artists in our vicinity? Spaces which ask for the reconsideration of the very structures of art and exhibition making in place that determine our "professional" status.

In my experience, I have encountered situations where the proposed work/project is evaluated more quantitatively than qualitatively by the institutions in question, which so far has been the main barrier for the realization of a given project. The nature of the work and conceptual framework becomes suspiciously secondary as the evaluators/jury prioritize "emergent" or artists with higher career levels (minimum 5 years practicing and 2–3 page CVs).⁽³⁾ Not to mention that opportunities for the young or emerging to present work within

a commercial setting in Vancouver are virtually non-existent. Perhaps making and exhibiting the type of work that we want to look at and experience, as a community, is a good starting point when considering the function of spaces like Spare Room. But prior to considering spaces as such, we need the social and physical space for them and secondly, we will need the artists, and voices that will see the space as a surface for new discourse to exist and expand, potentially developing a collective voice that will resonate and have a significant impact outside the specific situation I've just described.

The topic of access and freedom to experiment in a professional context shifts from generation to generation, but for me, this is also currently a globalized situation that affects the vast majority of young emerging contemporary artists that today find themselves dealing with the politics of institutional hierarchy. To illustrate my position, take for example spaces like Biquini Wax, self described, whimsically, as “a Common Social Property Company devoted to contemporary art” operating in a house in Mexico City, 820plaza, a repurposed auto-body shop in Montreal, Observatorio, a reclaimed rooftop in downtown São Paulo, and Alaska Projects, an always-shifting parking lot in Sydney. This wave of artist-run sites, not galleries or centres, which aim for experimentation outside art world and market norms, have exponentially gained necessity and momentum in the last half decade. Their programming is cross-disciplinary ranging from exhibitions, installations and performances to film screenings, readings and symposiums. No institutional aspirations, but serving a restless art community. Art no longer feels contained by a neutral, professional space, but rather in dialogue to the peculiarities



of the site that informs its presence.

Having the opportunity to experience a space like Spare Room in Vancouver should not be dismissed as youthful enthusiasm. Though projects like these are itinerant, they are so because they usually are symptomatic of the current economic conditions that compel artists and curators to deviate from the white cube, currently understood more clearly as an arena of commerce rather than artistic livelihood. Furthermore to site-specificity and Spare Room's commitment to it, what Robert Irwin describes in a consideration of our surroundings goes beyond physical nuances, but features socio-political and emotive forces: “Here there are numerous things to consider; what is the site's relation to applied and implied schemes of organization and systems of order, relation, architecture, uses, distances, sense of scale? What kinds of natural events affect

the site—snow, wind, sun angles, sunrise, water, etc.? What is the physical and people density? What are the qualities of surface, sound, movement, light, etc.? What are the qualities of detail, levels of finish, craft? What are the histories of prior and current uses, present desires, etc.?” This apparent list of dry questions can be also taken up as a program towards attuning ourselves spatially in relation to the shifting means we have for sharing ourselves and supporting our work, subversively.

Jacobo Zambrano is an artist from Caracas, Venezuela living in Vancouver, Canada. Zambrano is interested in historical cultural narratives that are often considered as defining milestones in current socio-political and economic contexts, mostly in relation to the global peripheries. The North-South Divide constitutes one of the primary subjects of research in his conceptual practice, as this particular paradigm defines how identities have been constructed due to modernity, the artist focuses on the potential for new discourses that challenge the dynamic between the Old World and the New World within his own immediate context. Zambrano often adopts sculpture in conjunction with installation as formal tools in his explorations.

(1) Another local and artist-run initiative that may fall under a similar inquiry into visibility and maintains an experimental momentum akin to Spare Room is The Maillardville Cultural Appreciation Society in Coquitlam founded by artist Zeblon Zang, whose mandate simply states that it “is an exhibition space promoting cultural exchange and alternative forms of exhibition making.” One may contest my exclusion of CSA Space, which although operating independent of public funding for a decade, it has not explicitly positioned itself within non-traditional modes of exhibition making, whose website states that to receive an exhibition, one must solicit one of their curators for a studio visit and refuses open submissions.

(2) Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (California: Lapis Press, 1985) 27.

(3) Ibid

I put that word on the page,
But he added the apostrophe

—Lydia Davis, “Collaboration With Fly”

Jacquelyn Ross

How to Tame A Fly

or

Some Unsolicited Commentary on
Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon's
“A Space For Looking Is A Space For
Listening,” At Western Front,
Vancouver, January 22nd–February
27th, 2016

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Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon, *A Space for Looking* is a
Space for Listening (installation view), Western
Front, 2016. Ceramic, fabric, extruded aluminum,
HSS directional speakers, software.
Photo by Maegan Hill-Carroll.
Image courtesy of the artist and Western Front.

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I write to Steff to tell her about this art review I wrote of the show, and its subsequent rejection. The editor: “We hesitated to ask for a rewrite of your text.” “Finally, due to a large number of texts received, the editorial committee advised me not to accept it.” Then some unsolicited words of wisdom: “If you want to submit a new text for future editions, here are a few suggestions for a review:” “It is not recommended for the review to serve any other means than that of presenting and analyzing an exhibition and the works in the show...”

I’m thinking about that sound that the radio makes when it’s stuck between stations on the tuning dial. Or when a person turns on an amplifier before connecting it to a guitar. The buzz, the feed back: all forms of interference. In the kitchen we have a toaster and a microwave and an electric kettle, but we can only use one at a time, or the fuse blows. Funny that listening to records really loud while blow-drying my hair has never caused it to do this...

I’m apparently unfocused today. My mind is wandering. I take a Motrin to sort myself out; chug a tall glass of water to make it go down.

“Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon’s exhibition at the Western Front is all about the shape of sound,” my prior self writes, three weeks ago under the din of a dying light bulb. I’m squinting at some blurry photos I took of the show a few days earlier; photos I didn’t know at the time would be so bad. “The gallery is carpeted and filled with structures designed to either deflect or absorb: an audio-visual jungle gym of aluminum, insulation, ceramics, wool and foam. Hanging overhead, two small directional speakers emit a high-pitched, metallic hum, while a low frequency reverberates out of a subwoofer resting on the gallery floor. My head is buzzing as I navigate the space. I feel like a fly with a terrible migraine, doing its best to avoid the flypaper.”

Steff says that line of mine about the fly with the migraine sounds like “some very Schjeldahlian neurosis.” I decide to take this as a compliment. Peter Schjeldahl, that aging and (charmingly) whiney long-time art critic at the *New Yorker*, is never shy about bringing himself into the art. He describes his beginnings as a starving poet who wrote art criticism because all the poets did. His writing evades jargon, is rich with anecdotes, and

is seemingly unafraid of designating things “good art” or “bad art,” though he has sometimes been derided as a “populist” critic. Well, I think to myself, if I feel like a fly—a fly with a migraine—then I’m entitled to say so. Schjeldahl gives me permission! Is it relevant to the review, one might ask? Well, I have so many migraines these days. And when I do make it out of bed between the magic hours of 12 and 5, I take the bus, in the rain, to go see art—but my experience of these shows is of one long, sopping, pulsing dream.

And what about this, “I feel...”? I love the provocation of feelings in the face of hard intellect. I am not made of hard things. My stomach is frequently upset. I’m flat-footed and have a painful time walking barefoot across pebbly beaches. If you pinch me, I will yell. I may even slap you.

The editor: “It is more suitable to establish the exhibition and its works within a central theme, a common thread.” The secret is that I have none. I fail to mention that in my reply. It’s some scandal that I’m even allowed to continue writing this stuff.

My former self continues, writing: “The speakers used by Gordon are a weapon of sorts, originating from the Long Range Acoustic Devices used in military communications, non-lethal crowd control, or deterring wildlife from airport runways. They emit sound like a laser beam, cutting through space like a knife...” I’m googling “How to ‘Tame a Fly’ now for inspiration, and am briefly transfixed by a 55-second YouTube clip of a man gently prodding a black fly with the point of a chopping knife. The fly doesn’t budge, too busy clearing itself.

That’s what we were like, too, loitering outside the 7-Eleven. Sleepy and high. Immune to prodding. All the girls looking at our chipped nails as we smoked, imagining maybe we looked like movie stars rather than the disillusioned teenagers we really were: our pockets full of stolen sour keys. “I tread carefully through the gallery, guided by this invisible fencing,” I write, “and am reminded of the high-frequency speakers that were similarly installed outside the 7-Eleven by my old high school, supposedly to discourage teenagers from loitering at the entrance. The ‘teenager frequency,’ we called it, though I can’t remember now whether it had any effect—only that it symbolized for me an entirely new level of dystopic reality: one that traded visible barriers

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for invisible ones.” What kind of dystopia might have awaited me, I wonder, had I remained there, loitering in the parking lot? Some of those kids got into a lot of trouble later in life, I know. Others became cops. But who gets to be the protagonist in this story?

“Two large sculptural apparatuses dominate the gallery, eerily titled Tammy IV and Barbara (2016),” I concede. Am I learning, for the first time, the kind-of-sexy first names of teachers formerly known only as The Disciplinarian, or Mrs. X? The video’s up and I’m led down a black hole of Related Videos on “How to Tame Flyaways”. Tammy and Barbara are probably the kinds of women who are immune to things like flyaways. The editor: “It is important to describe before analyzing to better allow the reader some thought on the matter.” So I try it: “In the first work, a freestanding aluminum structure supports a strip curtain of translucent vinyl, a flesh-coloured ceramic slab attached to a heavy pivoting bracket, and a hanging panel composed of insulation, woven wool roving and a veil of long, blonde hair. An HSS speaker directs a beam of high-frequency oscillator tones at the ceramic panel with an intensity that I experience with discomfort as I cross its path...”

I recall learning about a female astronaut named Barbara Morgan who was on TV a lot in the early 2000s. Apparently she started out as an elementary school teacher, but had been selected in the eighties to train alongside fellow teacher Christa McAuliffe as part of NASA’s Teachers in Space program. Christa was set to be the first Teacher in Space, but was killed on her first mission, when the 1986 Challenger exploded mid-air. Eventually it was Barbara after all who became the first Teacher in Space, two decades later. Could the Barbara in the exhibition have been a prototype for someone? Interference has a strange way of controlling destiny.

“The exhibition as a whole has a disquieting aesthetic,” I write, “in its combination of metal and textile, industrial and handmade constructions.” I am full of speculations now. I’m trying to say something about the show’s metallic stillness, or its fleshy deconstructions of something post-post-human, but my mind is contaminated by the blazing afterimage of the Space Shuttle Challenger. “[The exhibition] has a feeling of

recycled air, of sterilization, institutionalization,” I try, “like an insane asylum padded for noise-reduction and the prevention of self-harm...” But what I’m actually thinking: that metallic hum—my friendly fly—could that really be the sound of outer space?

In her essay “Madness, Rack, and Honey,” poet Mary Rueffel talks about the notion of metaphor as an event in which energy is exchanged between two things. She cites a few lines by a Persian poet who reflects on having written something “so sweet” that “the flies are beginning to torment [him],” and I’m thinking about this idea as I revisit Jacqueline Gordon’s exhibition and my own struggle to come to terms with it through writing. I don’t know whether this is a “good” review or a “bad” review. Because I’m too busy thinking about how an object’s sweetness can be exchanged for ecstasy, and then flies, and then torment, shifting erratically between incongruous things in a continuous, equivalent conversion. What kind of energy is being exchanged here? I wonder, as I put the kettle on to boil and pop a brave slice of bread into the toaster simultaneously. As if to say, “This kitchen fuse may blow, but I’m still hopeful that, one day, these things will coexist!”

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Charcuterie strives to provide a forum for experimental writing and informed polemics without pedantry. It assembles a polyphony of inquiry and documents the messy landscape of opinion and critique that unravels in close proximity to where we work, live and make art in Vancouver.

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