

# **FLOW TILLA THRILLA**

## **by Hank Bull**

*Not since the Thrilla in Manila has there been such a gathering as Flotilla.*

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### **Keynote remarks delivered by Hank Bull**

Flotilla Artist-Run Centres and Collectives Conference  
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, September 23, 2017

Thank you. Good morning everyone! It is indeed an honour for me to be here.

I would like in particular to thank the people providing simultaneous translation to French and American Sign Language. It's amazing what you do. Today, here in Charlottetown, we find ourselves in the midst of several languages and cultures: Mi'kmaq, Cree, Métis, French, Acadian, English, and probably some others.

I want to acknowledge the fact that we are meeting on unceded Mi'kmaq land, and at the same time recognize the inadequacy of that statement.

There are so many gaps, exclusions, invisible barriers, sometimes not so invisible. Our communications are imperfect. There is always a certain amount we don't get, a certain amount withheld. There are things we can share and things we can't share.

"We are always in translation," says Sarat Maharaj.

Translation between languages. Between cultures. Between senses—the visual, auditory, touch. Between thoughts and emotions. Between the imaginary and the real.

First Nations traditionally used sign language, a system that functioned throughout North America, from the Gulf of Mexico to northern Quebec.

### **BOATS**

Flotilla is such a great name for a conference! Go with the Flow Tilla!

Flotilla is actually a Spanish word. (How would you say "flow" in Mi'kmaq?)<sup>1</sup>

Here we are at Flotilla. In fact we *are* the flotilla.

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<sup>1</sup> "Flow swiftly" in Mi'kmaq is "gesigawitg," according to the Mi'kmaq-English Dictionary at glosbe.com. — Ed.

Each artist-run centre represented here today is like a little boat. Each boat is unique, each is on its own course.

There are big boats, little boats, old boats, new boats, probably a couple of leaky boats, certainly some fishing boats, plus freighters, sailboats, dories, canoes, even surfboards.

A flotilla is kind of loose at the edges. We are not a fleet, certainly not the navy. We are not operating under one central command.

We're a flotilla—basically, a barely organized mess of boats of many kinds.

And all these boats are going in different directions! But somehow they are also going in the more or less the same direction.

### **NOMADS**

This flotilla on the move, nomadic. "Nomad" is another image that appears on the conference website. Ocean meets Land.

But as soon as one uses this metaphor—nomad—it's important to acknowledge that this term is also appropriated, that there are in fact real nomads out there, and to recognize the fact that the nomadic lifestyle is becoming more and more difficult to sustain, even forbidden, that we are more and more stuck in one place, pinned down, positioned by GPS, observed.

To some extent, the nomadic lifestyle was always forced, by climate or colonialism. Moving was a question of survival. Today the nomad has been replaced by the refugee, or the migrant worker, persons displaced by war or fleeing natural disaster. (Yesterday we heard about the Haitians—110,000 who fled the earthquake to go to Brazil. Then they kept on moving, 10,000 apparently now waiting in Baja Mexico to enter the U.S. And this summer several hundreds crossed the border into Canada.)

Where are we going with all this moving around? Is there a destination? What is it that holds this little flotilla together in spite of our many differences?

### **STRATEGY**

What brings us together if not a strategy?

In 1986, ANNPAC, as ARCA was known back then, organized an international conference called "Strategies for Survival" that brought artists together from Poland, El Salvador, Japan, Germany, many countries, to talk about the different ways artists get by, negotiate censorship, confront persecution. Looking back even further, to the beginnings, it is interesting to note that the Canadian network of artist-run centres took shape more or less at the same time as the Cultural Revolution in China. It was born of a strategy for revolution. The idea of revolution was very much abroad in the land in the late 1960s, and, some would argue, it is back with us again today.

The early manifestations of artist-run centres were not a network; in fact, many didn't even know of each other's existence. The group first came to self-consciousness and formed an organization in 1975. The network was infused with an ideology, that everyone was, or could be, an artist, that the joining of life and art could be a revolutionary force, that art could transform society, that another world is possible ("un autre monde est possible") beyond the forces of market and state. Collaboration, experimentation, a spirit of play would rule the world. Any activity could be seen as art or poetry and be imbued with the power to deliver the realization of a meaningful being-in-the-world. We called it the Eternal Network (after the concept coined by Robert Filliou).

Only a few years later, however, it became clear that the artist-run centres had failed to take over from the museums, just as the students had failed to take over the university, the unions had failed to take over the corporations, and the people had failed to overtake the state. By the early 1980s, the unions had been busted and you needed a university degree to make art. The new regime of neoliberal globalization was installed. Painting was back, the art market was back, and we were told that the era of "alternatives," which had embraced performance art, mail art, video, and artist-run centres, was over.

And yet, the number of artist-run centres continued to grow.

By the mid-eighties, there were forty or fifty across Canada, and we were well organized, with a national administration. But then, in the Mulroney years, the grants were cut. Some people lost their funding altogether.

And yet, the number of artist-run centres continued to grow.

By the early nineties, there were over a hundred. But inevitably, things get complicated, bureaucratic. Problems arose from within. As it turned out, the network wasn't quite so eternal, not so neutral. There were exclusions, unequal distributions of power, systemic racism. It all came to a head at the annual general meeting in Calgary in 1993. A coalition of Indigenous artists and artists of colour, the Minquon Panchayat, presented proposals for long-overdue reforms. These were refused by the administration. The Minquon Panchayat walked out. West coast centres quit soon after; so, too, did the prairies. Québec had already seceded in frustration the year before. ANNPAC collapsed. It was over. There was no national organization.

And yet, the number of artist-run centres continued to grow.

Slowly over the next few years, things changed. Urban Shaman started up in 1996. SAVAC, the South Asian Visual Arts Centre, was founded in 1997. There were others. It is important to know that several of these centres were started by women, and that women have played a leading role in the artist-run centre movement right from the beginning.

By 2002, there was momentum, renewed and expanded regional groups, including the Aboriginal Region, which, interesting to note, is "non-geographical." It's a region without a region, connected to the land, and also connected in cyberspace.

## **ARCA TODAY**

By 2002, the Internet was happening. New voices were heard, artist-run businesses of all kinds appeared, hybrids. There were new strategies for survival. And again, the number of artist-run centres continued to grow.

Today, the Artist-Run Centres and Collectives Conference (la Conférence des collectifs et des centres d'artistes autogérés), or ARCA, represents more than 170 artist-run centres and collectives across Canada.

Looking south for a moment, to the U.S. under Reagan, we called it the Culture Wars. Federal arts funding was cut off entirely, and alternative centres all but disappeared. The Washington Project of the Arts, 911 in Seattle, Hall Walls in Buffalo, 80 Langton Street in San Francisco—these were great galleries, all gone. The National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO) itself ceased operation in 2001. But today there is a new organization, called Common Field, representing over two hundred members, with a conference planned in Los Angeles for November 2. You can go!

Look to Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, you see a similar story. The movement is international.

It is worth rehearsing this history, partly because we forget it (or maybe never knew it), and partly because it poses the question: in spite of attacks from outside and discord within, how is it that this movement continues to grow, continues to prove its resilience and its viability over and over again?

## **AUTOGESTION**

It's not the money that makes the network work. It's something else. So, what is it? As Todd Lester said yesterday, "It is important for us to have confidence in our own models." So, what makes us tick, out here on the margin, out here on the beach, where the ocean meets the land?

Actually, the margins are quite okay. We like it here on the edge, outside the box. Margins are, in fact, essential. It has been shown that, in terms of ecology, margins are where the action is. Where forest meets clearing, or at the edge of a stream—that's where you get the most species interaction, the most diversity. The same goes for the cultural ecology.

Healthy margins make for a healthy mainstream. Well, actually, as Glenn Alteen said the other day, "There is no more mainstream." We're it. With our history and our credibility, we have as much claim to the centre as anyone.

We may be small, almost invisible, but we're everywhere.

Artist-run centres are often called sites of resistance: resistance to the forces of capitalism, cracks in the pavement of commodity culture, sprouting weeds. In our best moments, we are models of possible futures, organizations without organization, regions without region, parts of a self-managing system. This is the idea of auto-gestion explored by philosophers like Henri Lefebvre, or, as they call it in Quebec, "le Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec."

Auto-gestion comes from below, a kind of anarchism, a leaderless revolution like the Arab Spring or Idle No More (another movement started by women), Black Lives Matter, or the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong—quite a few by now. These are models of governance based on collaboration, improvisation, and experimentation, just like the artist-run centres of the 1970s.

Artist-run centres are more than sites of resistance. Art can be more than politics. Art can connect you to the world like nothing else. When you experience a work of art, you experience the Real. It throws you out there into some deep reality. Art is a destabilizing force. It's subversive, it goes against the grain, against the useful, the practical, the instrumental. It takes you into the unknown.

Artist-run centres should not be a structured system supporting the status quo; we should be spaces for emancipation—self-realizing, plastic.

The conflict, disagreements, misunderstandings, failures are all part of it. The issues of representation—race, gender, sex, and class—remain under constant negotiation. Identities are always “with,” and they are more and more hybrid, fractured. Artist-run centres should be places where these negotiations can take place. They should be supportive spaces, where difficult questions can be discussed openly and safely.

Don't look for a resolution, because it isn't necessarily there.

And remember that not everyone wants to be included. That's okay, too.

Surf the change. Go with the flow. Go with the Flow Tilla.

And, while in Charlottetown, be sure to tune in to Radio Warren 102.5 FM, the floating radio station.