

## Rehab: Weaning Youth Arts off Corporate Crack

Let's face it: there isn't enough money floating around to sustain critical art practices, especially if you're young.

Government cuts to cultural funding promote the notion that corporations are ideally suited to relieve the situation through sponsorship. After all, a steady reduction to corporate tax rates is what deteriorated the public sector's financial base. However, the divisive consequences of this economic model have long since become apparent. Institutions feel increasingly compelled to present blockbuster-type exhibitions in effort to capture a larger "market share", effectively stifling creative risk. The need to court prospective funders also breeds various forms of censorship: funding might have strings attached, or to avoid hurdles, institutions might proactively self-censor by downplaying political content. And, while the amount of public funds available to artists/organizations continues to diminish, young artists and new groups find it tougher to participate.

There are exceptions, yet overwhelmingly, circumstances affirm that the best way to realize cultural work is to compromise individual and collective values. How can we create work while retaining our perspective and our integrity?

Inspired by the well-known maxim, "if you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything," *Rehab: Weaning Youth Arts off Corporate Crack*, is an experiment. It is a playful framework designed to posit the notion that if we can understand social reality and read it in light of the principles we want as guides for our creative practices, then we can push for genuine opportunities to work critically and sustainably.

*Rehab* employs the context of a five-step program designed to help cultural producers rescue themselves from reliance on the belief that the only way to succeed is to sell out. In a cabaret-style presentation of video and performance art, artists have produced work to embody each of the steps. Framing a context and selecting artists is the extent of curatorial intervention; in many cases, participating artists have taken free reign to interpret the steps as they wish, and in all cases, their work has been included sight unseen. The process of relationship building through common cultural politics and dialogue is of primary significance.

Milena Placentile  
Curator

### Step 5:

#### Presenting the new and improved, corporate crack-free "you"

The time spent considering the nature of the world in relation to individual goals as a cultural producer can be daunting. The possibility of this process fostering deeper cynicism is an unavoidable risk. However, what is important is recognizing the power that comes from knowing where you stand, or at least being fairly sure. In the way some people won't discuss politics because they are concerned about the opinions of others, it's understandable that producers might feel wary about stating their newly found positions. Will doing so limit future opportunities? The point is to have a system of values, to create a plan, and to develop the confidence to negotiate.

To overcome a natural feeling of apprehension, Reed and Tanaka have invited a gymnastics coach to teach them how to land. The "strange and symbolic" act is a declaration of presence and accomplishment; it's a demonstration of calm after great rigor, and it anticipates a moment of judgment. As the artists explain, getting to Step 5 doesn't always work out smoothly, but it's still important to present yourself as if it was all great and worthwhile. This is a part of developing the confidence necessary to keep going.

**Helen Reed and Maiko Tanaka, *Landing: Stick it!*, 2007.**

**Performance.**

**Wednesday, June 13: 1:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.**



**Erika DeFreitas** is a Scarborough-based emerging artist whose practice is primarily conceptual. Through performance, public interventions, relational exchanges, and photographic documentation, she explores the influence of language, loss, and culture on the formation of identity. She has exhibited projects in artist-run centres in Canada and the United States. She is currently a candidate in the MVS graduate program at the University of Toronto. Contact info [defreitas.erika@gmail.com](mailto:defreitas.erika@gmail.com).

**Amber Landgraff** is a recent graduate of the studio art program at the University of Guelph. She recently co-coordinated the University's annual *Juried Art Show*, where she received 10th place. Other recent exhibitions and performances include *Visualeyez 2007* (Latitude53), *Most Difficult 2007* (Art Metropole/University of Guelph) and *Everyday and Other Dilemmas 2006* (VMAC space, 401 Richmond). Landgraff's work often takes the form of performative gestures and artist multiples. She resides in Guelph.

**Joshua Miller** is a nomadic Canadian video artist and subcultural anthropologist. For over six years, he has been traveling through the wilds of the Canadian urban frontier documenting various endangered urban subcultural specimens. His most recent feature length film, *Children of the National Dream*, examines the exploits of Canadian graffiti artists and will be released at the end of this year. When not scouring train yards across Canada, he enjoys sipping brandy while taking nice warm baths and composing experimental video works.

**Helen Reed** enjoys company and coworkers. Presently, she and Maiko Tanaka are developing *doublebounce*, an online archive of performance collaborations across geographic distance ([doublebounce.org](http://doublebounce.org)). This past March, 20 works from *doublebounce* were exhibited in Brooklyn, NY. Last summer, Reed ran an artist residency program out of her tent trailer called *The Weekenders* ([theweekenders.org](http://theweekenders.org)). She is particularly interested in social activity and the potential of being with others.

**Maiko Tanaka** is a Toronto-based independent curator and artist interested in collaborative and community-based art practice. Past activities include co-publishing the independent art and design magazine *Eat Your Friends*, curating education art projects for *The Afterschool Supplemental*, and producing various social engagement projects in New York during an intensive program at The Kitchen. Most recently, she and Helen Reed co-curated *doublebounce*, an exhibition in Brooklyn that brought together 20 performance-based collaborations by artists from Canada, the U.S., and Europe. Tanaka is currently working on finding ways to link sports and art.

**Patrick Thompson** is a multi-disciplinary artist who has exhibited his work worldwide.

**J. Something Something Traz** (artist/musician/actor/dancer) enjoys writing bios almost as much as he enjoys stiff lipped veggie tray small talk. When asked for a C.V., he produced a cinnamon venus, a cesarean vole, and a crouton volcano. His credentials are only a subterfuge to his work, which not only speaks for itself, but for you, too. He is subject to availability and can be contacted at [cheddarnut@gmail.com](mailto:cheddarnut@gmail.com).

**Milena Placentile** is a contemporary art curator and writer. She was recently affiliated with SMART Project Space (Amsterdam), and prior to that, she fulfilled a one-year term as Curator in Residence at the Ottawa Art Gallery. Milena holds a Master of Museum Studies from the University of Toronto and she is a member of the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art. Forthcoming projects include *No Time to Lose*, which will be hosted by Peacock Visual Arts (Aberdeen, Scotland) in 2008.

With special thanks to the Canadian Youth Arts Network and Devon Ostrom.

## REHAB:

### Weaning Youth Arts off Corporate Crack



Curated by Milena Placentile

June 12 – 13, 2007  
Room 204 @ the Gladstone Hotel, Toronto  
Presented as part of the Canadian Youth Arts Network Launch

## Step 2:

### Understanding the social and political circumstances that have led to the problem

The Canadian art world is not sustainable, and the causes for this are numerous. Some causes are circumstantial and could change with a different government, but others are much more deeply rooted. The dominant economic model undervalues the time, energy, and expertise involved in the production of art, and the prevalence of opinions that art is trivial, wasteful, or futile make critical dialogue extremely difficult.

DeFreitas has observed how frequently artists are expected to be satisfied with meager compensation, or to donate their time and work. Fundraising auctions exemplify this because they are widely regarded as chances to acquire artwork at below market value. So few artists have expendable time and resources to participate in these events, yet they feel obligated to demonstrate their support for a cause, or they are in need of opportunities to circulate their name and work. Why do we live in a society where it's common to think that art should be cheap, or even free? To draw attention to this issue, and with the aim of turning a dilemma into a positive exchange, DeFreitas has established an agency designed to solicit donations from visiting audiences that are matched to artists in need. It would indeed be wonderful to connect lawyers, accountants, mechanics, and other professionals interested in donating some time and skill to individual artists as a show of support.

**Erika DeFreitas, *Break Me Off A Piece of That (Please)*, 2007.**

**Performance.**

**Tuesday, June 12: 3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.**

## Step 3:

### Identifying personal/organizational values

It's not easy trying to realize creative impulses while maintaining a practice that satisfies the requirements set by public funders and the interests of prospective corporate sponsors. With so little resources available, some artists don't even try to compete for grants, especially not if there's a chance that a marketing or advertising agency might take notice of what they do. To prepare for such possibilities and to avoid being overlooked, artists sometimes neutralize the content of their work by avoiding overt societal critique, and concealing or removing political commentary. Avoiding the creation of work that challenges conventional systems, or that might be considered "too abstract", in an effort to win financial support is a form of self-censorship. Even more distressing is when artists self-censor to avoid being sued for supposedly "infringing" on registered trademarks, or for "defaming" the character of a recognized corporate offender.

As a reflection on the intensive process of assessing the principles motivating individual creativity in a complex world fraught with media, commerce, entertainment, and politics, Traz's video, *The \$ Dance*, demonstrates the challenge of finding yourself while determining what options exist, and which need to be redefined. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

**J Something Something Traz, *The \$ Dance*, 2007. Digital video (5:25 min).**

**Tuesday, June 12: 6:00 p.m. – Wednesday, June 13: 10:30 a.m.**





#### Step 4:

##### **Mending old relationships that have been harmed through corporate crack affiliation and forming new, enlightened ones**

Producing artwork in a system that pits people against one another to compete for limited resources creates all kinds of obstructive tension and drama. It is important to realize that positive relations between participants in any art scene are critical to creating solidarity, which in turn creates more opportunities. It's not uncommon to avoid mentioning a funding opportunity lest someone grab it first, or to keep tight-lipped about plans in case someone takes it and runs before we can mobilize. To be truly successful, we need to feel confident about our individual ideas and abilities, and we need to find the right partners for mutually beneficial relationships. This takes effort.

Landgraff seeks to keep channels of communication open, and to create connections between all the things and people that she can potentially love. To begin reaching outward, she offers the service of writing love poems on the spot about any subject requested. Produced on an old, broken-down typewriter Landgraff's poems suggest that meaningful links are possible through sincere enthusiasm, despite limited means.

**Amber Landgraff, *Love Notes*, 2007. Performance.**

**Wednesday, June 13: 10:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.**

#### Step 1:

##### **Acknowledging the problem**

There is little patience for alternative thought in a society that functions for the economy, so it's no surprise that cultural practices capable of rousing people from the slumber of their routines are discouraged. Symbolizing people lost in the "machine" of society, the man featured in *The Joy of Work* might prompt viewers to ask if he knows who he is, or if he has accepted monotony as a way of satisfying who he *thinks* he should be. For five months, Thompson sat at the same machine pumping out pie shells in an environment nothing like a traditional bakery, but a far cry from being a "mega-factory". The place itself was a kind of limbo, and being there drew a staggering amount of endurance to stay focused... not only on the droning task, but also on the big picture of life. The big picture is one that involves a desire for novel ideas, social meaning, and the chance to enjoy some amount of economic security.

The repetitive motion of pie shells being stamped can be read as society's preference for conformity in attitudes, actions, tastes, and consumption for the sake of predictability, productivity, and [dare we say] obedience. If we cultural producers are the dough and the mechanical press is current mainstream society, we need to realize that if we allow ourselves to be formed at the will of the corporate world without negotiating mutually-beneficial terms, or by accepting "strings-attached" sponsorships, we're just going to get stamped.

**Patrick Thompson and Joshua Miller, *The Joy of Work*, 2007. Digital video (29:45 min).**

**Tuesday, June 12: 9:30 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.**