

## WHY SHARE BOOKS?

[A condensed and revised version of a talk delivered at YYZ Artists' Outlet on May 29, 2013]  
by Adam Lauder

### Introduction

Lending libraries have rapidly come to symbolize everything that threatens the Harper state. How did we go from an image of libraries as dusty, staid places to one of muzzled librarians whose routine activities are viewed as potentially destabilizing government operations and interests?<sup>1</sup>

The increasingly contested status of libraries as sites of community access, empowerment and knowledge production is reflected in a series of recent Canadian artists' projects that place everyday information behaviours front and centre. Works by Michael Maranda, Lee Rodney, Mike Marcon and Derek Sullivan are prescient indexes of an emergent politics of access to knowledge that speaks to a deepening crisis in expressions of publicness in Canada. But the picture is not all dire. These artists' projects simultaneously suggest ways of activating the library, the book, and the document as tools for reanimating the social that, it is hoped, will inspire creative engagements with YYZ's new Lending Library.

### Artists and A2K

This essay situates the library as a topos in contemporary art against the backdrop of concerns articulated by the global access to knowledge movement (A2K). As described by Galle Krikorian and Amy Kapczynski in their groundbreaking anthology *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*,<sup>2</sup> A2K is defined as a diverse set of claims and commitments rather than a coherent body of theory. Uniting the various interests mobilizing under the A2K banner are a common set of questions about how access shapes the contemporary social landscape. These questions began to arise with increasing urgency during the 1990s in response to a sweeping expansion of intellectual property rights inscribed in international copyright legislation such as the 1995 TRIPS agreement (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights).<sup>3</sup> Spearheaded by the aggressively profit-driven World Trade Organization (WTO), TRIPS was crafted to supersede unenforceable treaties overseen by the UN-administered WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization). Adoption of TRIPS which incorporated expanded copyright and patent protections and terms as well as concrete dispute-resolution mechanisms absent from WIPO became a mandatory condition for states seeking admission to the WTO. The bolstering of IP protections under TRIPS and related free trade legislation is sometimes represented as a second enclosure: a colonization of the dematerialized goods of creativity and knowledge recalling the enclosure of physical commons during the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Another effect of implementing TRIPS was to intensify disparities between northern states/home to the corporate interests who lobbied for IP reform and the Global South: a north-south divide already exacerbated by the rise of an informational economy that substitutes a trade in knowledge for traditional manufactured goods.<sup>5</sup> Critics argue that in the name of free trade developing nations traditionally marked by conditions of low intellectual property protection are forced into a position of dependency on their neighbours to the north, from whom they purchase the majority of their intellectual goods. In some cases, this redistribution of wealth includes an

outright appropriation of indigenous knowledgesuch as the controversial patenting of traditional agricultural products that has led some critics to suggest analogies between the current regime and historical narratives of *conquest* (in contrast to the more pastoral resonance of the enclosure metaphor).<sup>6</sup>

A focal point for resistance to these neo-colonial currents has been the access-to-medicines movement, which challenges pharmaceutical companies' ability to monopolize life-saving medications under current patent law.<sup>7</sup> The movement arose in response to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, with IP activists teaming up with humanitarian organizations including Medecins Sans Frontieres.

to challenge the \$10,000 price tag initially charged per patient per year for access to antiretroviral medicines. The demand for access articulated by early AIDS activists was a potent precursor of A2K's championing of the *right* to copy as the cornerstone of a vigorous *copyleft* philosophy.<sup>8</sup> The generic copy developed by Indian companies operating outside American jurisdiction as an alternative to the costly antiretroviral cocktail originally promoted by US companies remains a potent symbol of the principles of distributive justice informing A2K. The all-in-one pill also embodies critics' claims that patents actually impede, rather than encourage, innovation.

If the victories of the access-to-medicines movement speak to the power of direct action, A2K activism equally encompasses more oblique tactics, such as the project of developing a counter-discourse capable of challenging the philosophical foundations of IP law. Concepts and terminology promoted by A2K advocates including commons, openness, public domain, and sharing are intended to undermine neoliberal rhetoric of incentivized innovation as well as the despotic dominion account of intellectual property as an exclusive right.<sup>9</sup> By stressing the benefits of collective effort, this common language also implies a criticism of romantic notions of the lone creator, operating through inspiration rather than by building on the gradual accumulation of collective knowledge. The ethos of openness simultaneously implies a questioning of the hierarchical forms of organization characteristic of institutions traditionally responsible for knowledge production and stewardship, such as corporate R&D departments and universities, as well as conventions of knowledge representation, including library classification systems.

This paper will map some of the issues addressed by recent artists' projects onto three defining concerns of the A2K movement:

- Access
- Commons
- New organizations

These themes should not be mistaken for an exhaustive summary of the multi-faceted discourses comprising A2K. Nor is it implied that the artist's projects addressed here were directly inspired by A2K (as far as I know, they were not). Rather, my intention in bringing these projects into dialogue with the principles of A2K is to stimulate further discussion about artists' growing engagement with the politics of information access. But while all of the artists' libraries presented below are inspiring models of social engagement, this text will also advance criticisms

that speak to broader weaknesses or contradictions within A2K identified by Krikorian and Kapczynski.

#### Access

Toronto-based artist and curator Michael Maranda is best known for his philosophically savvy artists' books. Although earlier projects addressed issues of knowledge production as shaped and constrained by the institution of the printed word, the 2009 AGYU title *Waging Culture: The Socio-Economic Status of Canadian Visual Artists* evinced a new resonance with the access-driven imperatives of A2K.<sup>10</sup> *Waging Culture's* densely packed statistical tables filled glaring gaps in government-generated data, thereby rendering the precarious condition of artists in this country open to scrutiny by all.

A less sociological approach characterizes Maranda's *ARTFORUMx* (2012), which applies data visualization to bring into representation the progressive commoditization of art discourse. Brazenly conflating the conventions of historical non-objective painting and contemporary infographics, the centerpiece of *ARTFORUMx* is a facsimile library of every issue of its iconic namesake published between 1962 and 2010. While retaining the magazine's original layout intact, the facsimiles cunningly substitute blocks of solid black for advertisements, while replacing the expected columns of criticism with blocks of red evocative of Malevich's utopian *Red Square* (1915).<sup>11</sup> The result is an instantly legible index of the growing hegemony of commerce in the production and reception of contemporary art that recalls an accountant's ledger. Dan Adler's claim that Maranda's environment displays a lack of declarative and detailed value as an information repository<sup>12</sup> overlooks the strategic intent of the artist's representational tactics: the 177 unframed watercolour paintings that serve as a ludicrously hand-crafted supplement to the industrially manufactured library apply an identical principle of conversion to transform the contents of *Artforum's* March 2007 issue into a ready reference on the state of commercial interference within the ostensibly disinterested domain of free expression.

Where Maranda's facsimile library and paintings succeed in demonstrating the potential for visualization to function as an instrument of accessibility, Adler's reservations about the semantic opacity of *ARTFORUMx's* presentation of raw data echoes a central debate within A2K, which Kapczynski formulates thus: is A2K a movement about knowledge, or about information?<sup>13</sup> Although A2K activism has historically tended to mobilize around demands for access to proprietary information (such as medical discoveries controlled by private industry), the very name of the movement suggests that its ultimate goal is more ambitious than mere dissemination of data. As Krikorian and Kapczynski underline, the term knowledge implies an exercise of individual or social capacities rather than an external object that can be possessed and manipulated.<sup>14</sup> While Adler's criticism overlooks the strong informational content of Maranda's visualizations, it also highlights the auxiliary expertise required to interpret them. Maranda's work risks being read (and dismissed) as a fetishization of data. On one hand, this danger speaks to the persistence of social hierarchies within alternative structures (addressed in greater detail in the next section). But it also highlights the proximity between artists' projects that marshal informational tactics in the name of social equity and their political other (ironically, the Harper government's rule by demographics and tightening of controls over information comes to mind).

#### Commons

Based in the troubled Detroit-Windsor corridor, Lee Rodney and collaborator Mike Marcon's *Border Bookmobile* (2009- ) is an inspiring embodiment of the A2K values of sharing and openness.<sup>15</sup> Cleverly taking a critique of physical borders in North America as a jumping off point for an exploration of alternative models of knowledge as a non-proprietary good, between 2009 and 2012 a Windsor-made Plymouth Voyager Minivan served as the peripatetic home to the mobile archive and exhibition platform. More than a physical repository for donated books and research materials devoted to the history and politics of borders, the *Bookmobile* was conceived by Rodney as a community memory project linking a growing network of researchers with residents on both sides of the international divide. Interviews with visitors to the minivan who were invited to borrow from its collection of books were subsequently edited into the 35-minute oral history, *Without You I'm Nothing: Conversations Between Windsor and Detroit*, presented as part of a 2013 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Windsor that also included an expanded archive and public reading room.

Inspired by the security and surveillance complex that has militarized the once porous boundary between the sister cities in the wake of 9/11, Rodney and Marcon's project is predicated on the conceit of reactivating a hypothetical cross-border bookmobile service from the Roosevelt-era of grandiose public works. This historical fiction was lent an instant aura of credibility by Photoshopping a vintage photograph of an LA bookmobile. These historical associations speak to Rodney's initial impulse to build on the wave of optimism in a possible 21st-century New Deal that accompanied Obama's 2008 election. As reflected in the community outreach dimensions of the *Border Bookmobile*, for Rodney the necessity of investing in public works is first and foremost a question of social infrastructure. In this respect, the civic ambitions fuelling the *Border Bookmobile's* exercise in community knowledge sharing echo A2K theorists' calls to construct a commons of the mind.<sup>16</sup>

The genuinely dialogic character of the interactions documented by Rodney and Marcon in *Without You I'm Nothing* come closer to fulfilling the A2K movement's demands for a shift away from static information products to a renewed focus on knowledge as a dynamic set of capacities for social empowerment. However, the scholarly language employed by project researchers in press materials, in addition Rodney's appointment of *Border Bookmobile* Fellows (chiefly consisting of fellow academics, including Marcon), speaks to the potential for power imbalances to persist even within non-hierarchical structures.<sup>17</sup> Rodney and Marcon's sensitivity to their documentary subjects has ensured that the threat of exploitation inherent in relational projects (perhaps greater here, given Detroit's seemingly inexhaustible capacity to generate spectacular forms of ruin porn) is successfully avoided.<sup>18</sup> However, disparities in power are nonetheless inscribed in the project's interpellation to potential readers and viewers.

## New Organizations

Artists' books are central to the practice of Toronto-based artist Derek Sullivan. But unlike the dogged materialism of Michael Maranda's meticulous interventions, Sullivan's approach to the book is animated by an interest in reader affect and experimentation with non-traditional formats. The latter concern recalls the efforts of A2K activists to develop alternative models of governance consistent with the relational ethos of the commons. Such models are often characterized by relatively flat hierarchies in which all participants (users as well as creators) are

invited to participate in decision making on equal terms.<sup>19</sup> An allied vision of collective management is legible in projects by Sullivan such as *Endless Kiosk* (2005): a quasi-replica of Brancusi's iconic serial sculpture *Endless Column* (1918) cum public poster kiosk. By inviting viewers to employ the *Kiosk* as a DIY public address system, the artist orchestrates a space for expressions of publicness answering the demands of A2K for a culture of openness.

*Albatross Omnibus* a 2011 exhibition held at the Power Plant in Toronto was a more baroque elaboration of the social concerns driving *Endless Kiosk* that set out to explode the physical limits of the traditional codex through print-on-demand technologies and other non-linear strategies. Sullivan's ambitious installation of poster drawings and a site-specific series of artists' books adopted as an organizing principle the thesis that the book becomes unique by virtue of reading.<sup>20</sup> By privileging the open-endedness of reader behaviours over a concern with the limits of media or library classification systems, the artist invited viewers to confront knowledge organization and representation as embodied processes permanently open to renegotiation.

A visceral encounter with the printed word was facilitated, on one hand, by the artist's canny transformation of the ubiquitous white cube into the folded space of a monumental accordion book. Sullivan orchestrated a more athletic relationship to the text through his decision to hang the 52 titles comprising the show's eponymous series of artists' books (one title corresponding to each day in the exhibition period) from the gallery's ceiling. This tactic required visitors to employ a stepladder to access titles: a situation that literally put the reader on display.<sup>21</sup> The self-consciousness stimulated by this encounter was intended to inspire an awareness of reading and knowledge as capacities requiring active participation: a recognition answering A2K theorist's move away from a focus on the static entity of information toward a renewed commitment to knowledge as socially-embedded process.

*Albatross Omnibus* is an inspiring expression of the optimism fuelling the A2K movement's search for communal spaces and non-hierarchical decision-making structures. Moreover, the artist's emphasis on the role of embodied experience in knowledge production invites reflection on gender, sexual orientation and ethno-cultural identity as factors in access to knowledge that are largely absent from the projects of Maranda, Rodney and Marcon. But like Rodney and Marcon's *Border Bookmobile*, Sullivan's project risks camouflaging the new types of inequalities<sup>22</sup> generated by an information society as well as the reinscription of disparities in power within the commons. Where Sullivan succeeds in proposing utopian alternatives to the centralized, top-down structures being implemented by the Harper government as part of its sweeping modernization of Canada's knowledge infrastructure, his inattention to the sorts of questions posed by Maranda regarding the material barriers to free expression in a proprietary information milieu exposes blind spots in his conceptualization of the politics of knowledge.

## References

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21. Derek Sullivan, Lecture.
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