

Episode 2: *There Is No Magic Formula* with Pamela Edmonds

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Curator, curatorial practice, guest curating, exhibition-making, artists, advocating, Black archives, mentorship, artist-run centers, public institutions, visibility, collaboration, communication, misunderstandings, care, trust, high-pressure environments, compromises, lessons, shared resources, mental rolodex, CARFAC fees, longevity, critical thinking, curatorial research, exhibition proposals, narratives, dialogue, post-human.

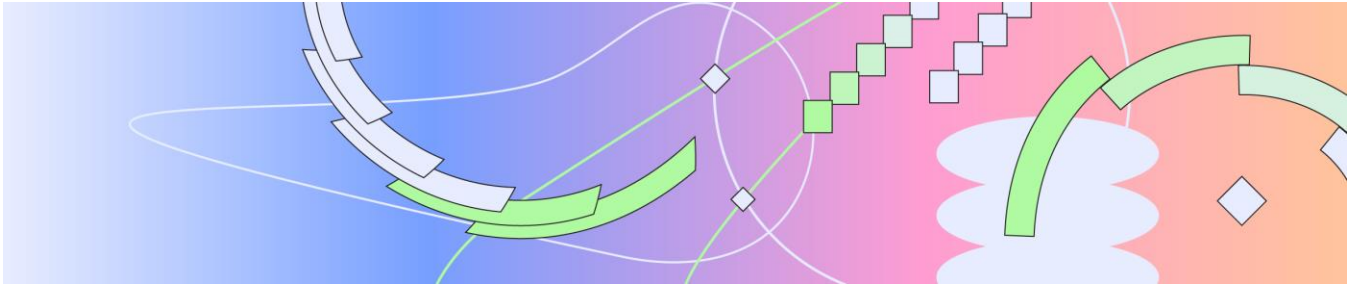
SPEAKERS

Pamela Edmonds, Geneviève Wallen

***Intro* 00:00**

In this episode, *There Is No Magic Formula*, Pamela Edmonds and I delve into the ins and outs of guest curating and trace her exciting career that spans from the late 1990s until now. Edmonds transmits a wealth of information about how she experimented with curation while functioning both inside and outside of mainstream institutions. She also shares the evolving nature of her practice by delineating the socio-political climates that fueled her work. Additionally, we talk about making our own tables and sitting at them and the negotiations inherent to curatorial work. We unpack notions of visibility as Black women curators, highlight the importance of archiving, and finding guidance in other people's cultural contributions. We think through what career longevity can look like. And finally, we tackle how there is no magic formula in curating as each project is its own—we can only learn from our failures and successes. I am thrilled by this episode since Pamela Edmonds is someone I first admired from afar when studying Art History at Concordia in the early 2000s; and let's face it, it was pretty white. And so, I am deeply grateful for Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim¹ for bringing Pamela's MA thesis and her presence in academia to my attention.

¹ Find more information about Alice Ming Wai Jim <https://www.concordia.ca/finearts/art-history/faculty.html?fpid=alice-ming-wai-jim>.



Also, luckily for me, Pamela guided me through my first curatorial gig out of grad school in 2015 and 2016, and I am beyond grateful to call her my friend.

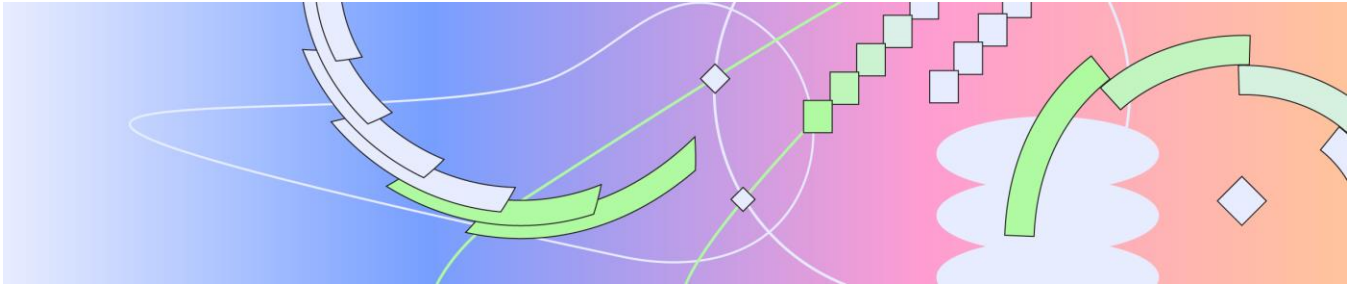
Pamela Edmonds is a visual and media arts curator whose research focuses on contemporary Canadian art and the politics of representation. Her work is informed by critical dialogues related to cross-cultural curating and social practice, exploring the impact of Black diasporic cultures on the evolving geography of global contemporary art. Originally from Montréal, Edmonds holds a BFA in Studio Art/Art History and an MA in Art History from Concordia University. She began her curatorial career in Halifax with programming roles at the Anna Leonowens Gallery (NSCAD University), Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, and the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, to name a few. She has also held positions at A Space Gallery (Toronto), the Art Gallery of Peterborough, and Thames Art Gallery in Chatham, and was appointed Senior Curator of the McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton. Edmonds is now based in Mi'kma'ki (Halifax, Nova Scotia) and is the Director/Curator at the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

We acknowledge that Halifax is covered by the “Treaties of Peace and Friendship” which Mi'kmaq Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet), and Passamaquoddy Peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.

This episode was recorded in the Spring of 2022, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Geneviève Wallen 05:25

Pamela Edmonds, thank you so much for being here with me today and accepting my invitation to explore notions around what it is to be a guest curator. I think it's something that you inevitably do as a curator. You are invited to curate an exhibition with programming, and so, through that invitation, your curator title comes with "guest" (*laughs*), highlighting that you are there for a short time, that you are not part of the institution, but that you have been brought in for a certain mission. But before we dive into that, I think it's crucial for people to know: who are you, Pamela Edmonds? Please describe your curatorial practice. And then we'll go from there.



Pamela Edmonds 05:25

Hi, Gen. Thanks for the invitation. For most of my practice as a curator, I've worked within institutions and outside of them, for over 20 years now. And I've worked in different types of art institutions, from co-ops, artist-run centers, public galleries, museums, you name it. I've put work in grocery stores, in gardens. And it's always been important for me to explore what curating is, and what it does in different spaces. I never really planned to be a curator, and it's interesting, because when I tell people that I'm a curator, folks that are outside of the arts community don't know what that is.

Geneviève Wallen 06:36

It's used loosely for different things, like curating a menu, curating a playlist. So, a lot of people are a bit lost and just wonder, what is curating?

Pamela Edmonds 06:51

Well, I studied art, art history. I actually hadn't planned, like I said, to be a curator.

Geneviève Wallen 07:01

Me neither! *(Both laughing)*

Pamela Edmonds 07:01

But I've always been interested in art. I've always been interested in art since I can first remember, drawing on everything, drawing on walls, or, driving my parents crazy. And I studied to be a painter originally.

Geneviève Wallen 07:24

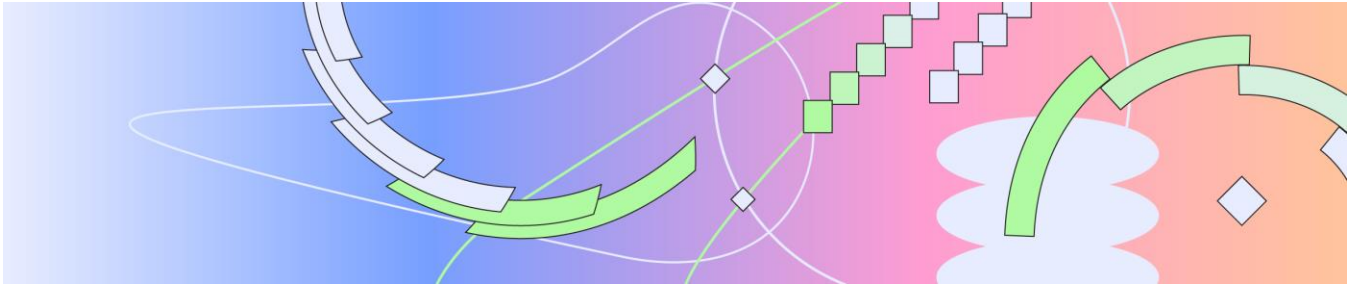
Oh, I did not know that!

Pamela Edmonds 07:25

Yes.

Geneviève Wallen 07:26

All the years we've known each other! What! All these years!?



Pamela Edmonds 07:30

Yes, all these years! (*laughs*) Not a great painter, mind you. But that's what I studied. And I met a lot of really great people, a lot of great mentors. It was at a particular time, in the late 90s, where there was a lot of discussion around postmodernism, poststructuralism, and all those buzzwords around questioning the institution, similar to what is happening today. But on a more underground level, I would say, and there were a lot of artists that I knew of, Indigenous artists, Black artists, queer artists, artists that felt marginalized, that weren't getting exhibitions, and we were a collective of folks who wanted to see our work in the public realm. And we worked together. I think a lot of artists at that time did curating as a DIY approach and putting our work in cafes, restaurants, and in our apartments. And it developed for me into a bigger practice; I eventually went back to school to study art history. I did an MA at Concordia, I did my BFA at Concordia, too, in Montreal, but I was really interested in exploring why there was such a void particularly within the work of Black Canadian artists—very little research, very few publications. There was Alice Jim's thesis, which I treasured. I had that thesis out of the library almost the entire time I was at Concordia. I thought about *Black Wommin: When and Where We Enter*, which was with DAWA², which is amazingly doing a 30-year reunion with Andrea Fatona³.

Geneviève Wallen 08:38

Mhmm I know. It's so exciting.

Pamela Edmonds 09:44

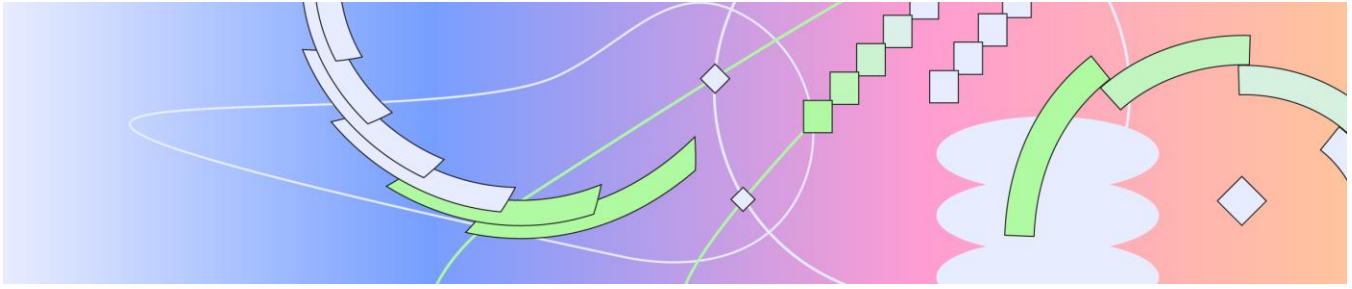
It's so exciting!

Geneviève Wallen 09:46

I'll put the details in the show notes (*both laughing*).

² For more information about DAWA, read article by Alice Ming Wai Jim <https://canadianart.ca/essays/making-an-entrance-black-wimmin-when-and-where-we-enter>.

³ Find more information about Dr. Andrea Fatona's practice and the celebration of 30 years since the first iteration of the travel exhibition *Black Wom[mi]n: When and Where We Enter*. <https://momus.ca/out-of-necessity-and-out-of-love-andrea-fatona-30-year-tribute-to-black-women-artists>. Read also (article in French) <https://viedesarts.com/dossiers/dossier-genealogies-collaboratives/collectif-dawa-un-retour-aux-sources-pour-mieux-avancer>.



Pamela Edmonds 09:47

Right! But it was what recorded [as] the first documented exhibition by Black Canadian women artists that traveled across Canada. And Alice wrote about that exhibition with great artists like Buseje Bailey⁴ and Grace Channer⁵ Mosa McNeilly⁶ and other artists, who really were about claiming space as Black Canadian women, creating work that was about their lived experiences and realities. And I was really inspired by that as a young artist trying to figure out my own voice and vision. It has continued to inspire me in the work that I did collectively, like working in a Black women's art collective in Nova Scotia called Sister visions⁷. We did our own series of exhibitions between 1998 and 2001, and the trajectory continues.

Geneviève Wallen 10:53

I was inspired by you (*laughs*).

Pamela Edmonds 10:57

Well, that's great to hear because you're focused and working. I just had a vision inspired by those other women that I saw that took the bull by the horns, so to speak, were not about waiting for the door to be opened, but went in and walked through the door created their own—people talked about that seat at the table, right? they created their own table, and they sat at it (*laughs*).

Geneviève Wallen 11:31

Yes, exactly! What about having our own tables? I was also thinking earlier about visibility. I was thinking, well, the people who are meant to see me are seeing me, and therefore, I actually never felt invisible. That's for myself, and I understand that not everybody would feel this way.

Pamela Edmonds 12:07

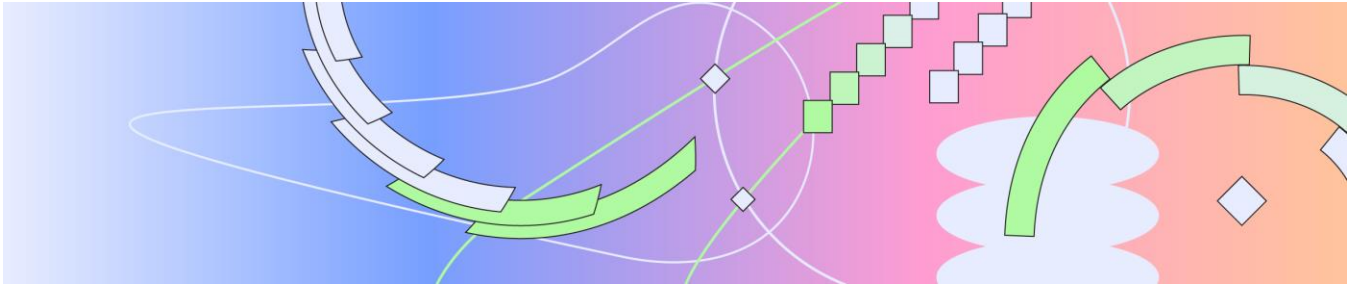
Mmm, mmhmm.

⁴ Learn about Buseje Bailey's work <https://vtape.org/artist?ai=302>.

⁵ Find more about Grace Channer's practice <https://www.gracechanner.org>

⁶ Find more information about Mosa McNeilly <https://www.mosamcneilly.com/about.html>

⁷ See a mention about Sister Vision in this article by Kelsey Adams, <https://canadianart.ca/features/david-woods-black-history-decades>.



Geneviève Wallen 12:07

But I understand, there's a structure of recognition that is in place that we all desire to be part of and be integrated in. And national or provincial or local archives, also, that's where the presence is lacking. But in the question of, who do I want to be visible to? I am visible to people that I want to be visible to. And that's why I say that my position is definitely debatable (*laughs*) in the sense of, who are we archiving? What makes up the broader collective imagination? There's space to debate my definition of visibility.

Pamela Edmonds 12:29

I think it's a question of resources and a question of documentation. Because there's always been artists from many different marginalized communities, making work, having exhibitions, but the question or the issue is that the work isn't being put into the cannon. I consider myself also an archivist, and I think that it's important for the legacy of our cultural communities that we do document. If I never saw [Alice Jim's] thesis, I would have never known about these women, and maybe I wouldn't have been a curator. Who knows, you know what I mean?

Geneviève Wallen 13:59

Who knows?

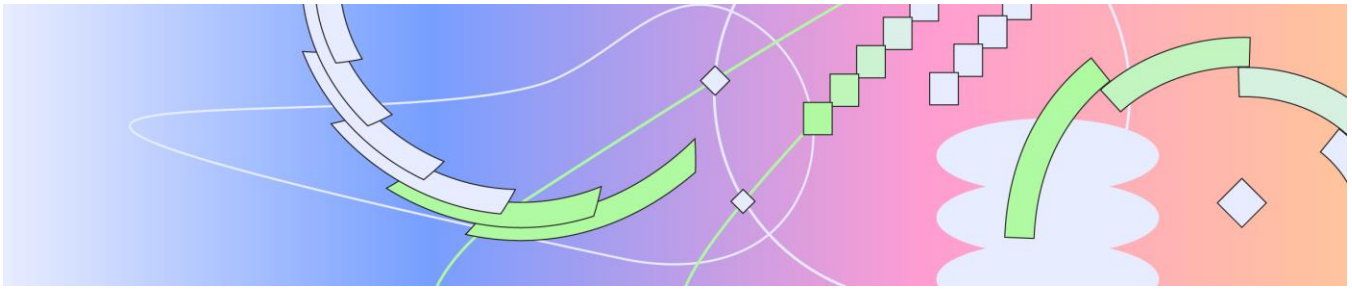
Pamela Edmonds 14:00

One thing led to another, but I understand what you're saying about being within the mainstream and that's why it's important for me to be inside and outside of those organizations. That's why I spent most of my career as an independent because I didn't want to necessarily feel like I was assimilating. I don't know if I'm so comfortable with the idea of my practice being activism per se, because I see how other folks are on the line, so to speak. But for me, I see that what I'm interested in is institutional critique. I see how being within an institution can change; for the past three years I've worked as a senior curator at McMaster Museum of Art. And I've been able to recommend, for example, the work of artists like Denyse Thomasos⁸, like Tim Whiten⁹ and emerging artists like Bidemi Oloyede¹⁰ for the collection,

⁸ Retrospective exhibition at the AGO featuring the works of the regretted Denyse Thomasos <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/denyse-thomasos-just-beyond>

⁹ Learn about Tim Whiten's practice <https://www.timwhiten.com/>.

¹⁰ See Bidemi Oloyede's work <https://metiviergallery.com/artists/82-bidemi-oloyede/overview/>



who, a lot of times our committees are not familiar with. For me those works will be taken care of. They'll be shown hopefully in future with other exhibitions. These artists were

producing work that is important to the broader Canadian story, and that they should be part of these collections, too. So that's part of the institutional change. That's important, right?

Geneviève Wallen 15:56

Yeah. Since we're tracing your career and talking about your practice, I'm very curious: what was your first gig and how did that go? Because, I think [it's] with the first gig [when] you're out of school—or you don't have to go to school to do it. But I'm thinking, it's always then that you're like, okay, I guess that's curating. And it's always a bit more complex than one would think in terms of different variables, with the space, delivery of artwork, install, but also the way that we care for relationships during that time, resources, how they come, and how they're lacking. Can you describe your first gig?

Pamela Edmonds 16:55

Well, when I graduated, I moved swiftly back home to Nova Scotia. I saw that I couldn't make an income here as a practicing artist in Montreal, and I had a young daughter at the time. So, I moved back to Halifax and the first job I had was actually as a Curatorial Assistant at the Black Cultural Center for Nova¹¹ Scotia in 1998.

Geneviève Wallen 17:29

Does it still exist?

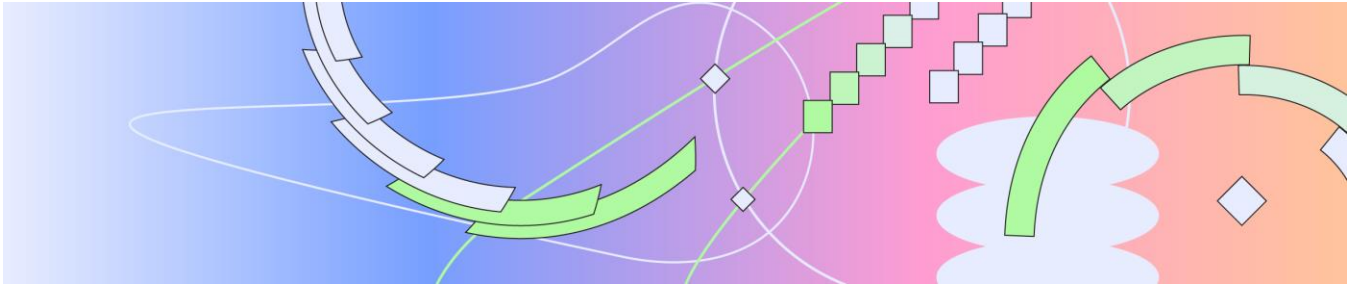
Pamela Edmonds 17:30

It's been there since 1975.

Geneviève Wallen 17:34

Oh awesome.

¹¹ <https://bccns.com/>



Pamela Edmonds 17:35

In Cherrybrook, in Nova Scotia. An amazing cultural center. I was Curatorial Assistant to Dr. Henry Bishop¹². Who was the center's longtime chief curator. And I mostly did education tours, but the museum and center have a library and permanent collections about the history of Black settlement in Nova Scotia, but there's also quilts, theater recordings, ephemera about the communities, and it was just a great place to be. I was there just for a summer, and I recognized the importance of the historical component of curating. But then also, I had the opportunity in Halifax to work on contracts at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery. I had a chance to work on education for an exhibition of Romare Bearden¹³, which was an amazing opportunity. I worked at Dalhousie art gallery, and I just started to build my, what do you call it? My—

Geneviève Wallen 19:06

Your CV?

Pamela Edmonds 19:07

My interests, my skills.

Geneviève Wallen 19:10

Your skills, okay.

Pamela Edmonds 19:11

And I was mentored by a lot of amazing people, and I got to see them at their jobs and how they were organizing exhibitions and, as they say, people don't really learn in school haha.

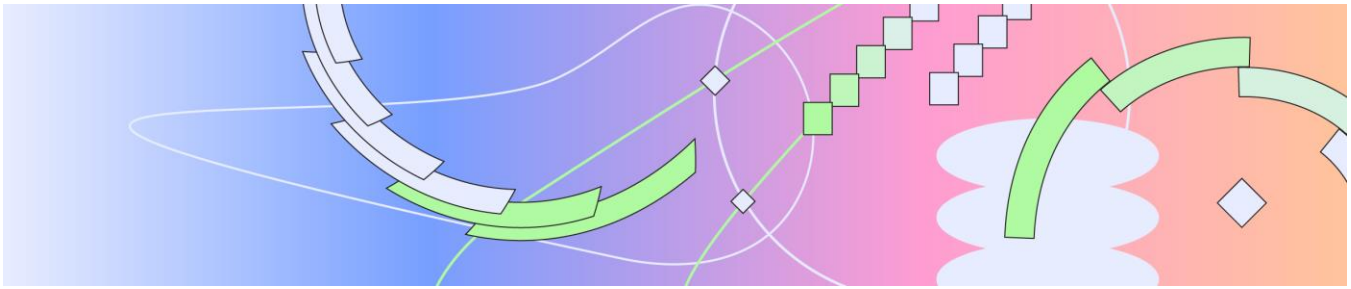
Geneviève Wallen 19:28

That's true, you come out unprepared. You can write a thesis about a show and curating, but there's a lot of things you don't know when you get out of school.

Pamela Edmonds 19:31

¹² Read about Dr. Henry Bishop <https://macpheecentre.ca/profile/dr-henry-bishop/>

¹³ Find more about Romare Bearden <https://beardenfoundation.org/>



Right? There's a lot of things you don't know, and you learn on your feet, and that's what I got to do over time. I was fortunate to have a lot of great mentors. And so, mentorship becomes important to me after gaining my own experience, and that's why I think what you're doing with the podcast, with this project, is really important because people get to hear from folks the lessons that they learned. And it's important for me to mentor emerging curators and work with emerging artists on mentorship programs, particularly with Black and Indigenous curators. Because POC curators, we have a particular sometimes difficulty in the field because we're marginal in the broader scheme of the professional landscapes.

Geneviève Wallen 20:46

Your support was tremendous to me when I started, and still is.

Pamela Edmonds 20:53

Well, your work's inspiring and I feel like I'm a constant learner. Art is one of those fields where it integrates so deeply into so many areas of life: philosophy and poetry and performance. I also studied film and video, so I programmed a lot of video and film screenings in Halifax and was part of a filmmakers' co-op; I was just curious about how programs came together.

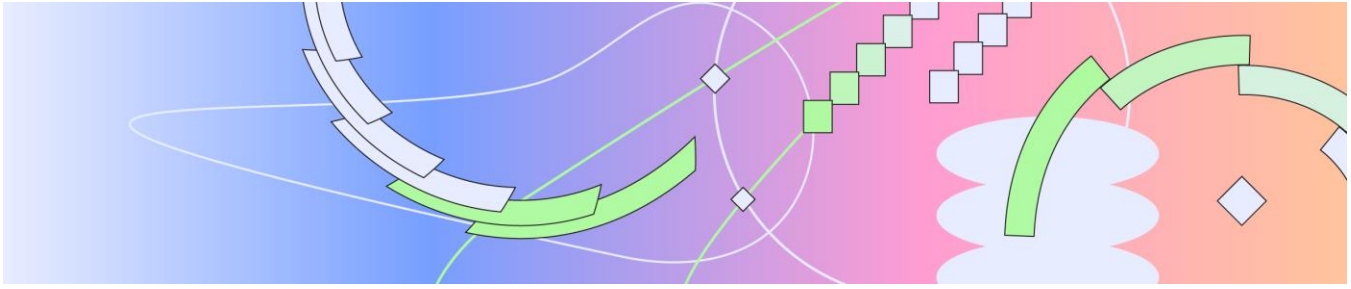
Geneviève Wallen 21:13

Mhmm. You've done so much. I'm curious about that show, when you started, that really encouraged you as a curator. When you did [curate] that [show and] you were like, "Okay, [curating is] what I'm doing".

Pamela Edmonds 21:49

Yeah, it's funny, I had been corresponding with a friend of mine. In 1998, I worked with a curator, he was a cultural intern at the Nova Scotia College Art and Design (NSCAD). And when he called me up, I was working as a program manager at a place called the Multicultural Arts Resource Center¹⁴. It was a small gallery on Barrington Street in Halifax that showcased the work of diverse cultural artists, and he called me up and he's like; Are you interested in co-curating with me? I'm working at NSCAD and I'm interested in bringing together a show that

¹⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/multicultural-association-of-nova-scotia-festival-halifax-1.4153513>



explores the idea of skin as a political boundary; that was the name of the show¹⁵. And it was interesting, because it was looking at art from an interdisciplinary, almost trans-cultural

perspective, which I felt like; “Ohhh, okay. This is what a globalized perspective is.” I think that's taken for granted now, that multi-disciplinary, inter-cultural way of looking at art and artists. But 25 years ago, it didn't happen that often.

Geneviève Wallen 23:19

That's really interesting.

Pamela Edmonds 23:21

We co-curated that exhibition with Janice Kun¹⁶, who's a Japanese artist; David Green¹⁷ a Caribbean-Canadian artist; Kim Cain¹⁸, who's African Nova Scotian. Just an interesting variety of artists, and I really got interested in the co-curatorial collaborative process, because for one, as a young curator the onus isn't all on you, which can be scary.

Geneviève Wallen 23:59

Yes, I did that, it's scary (*laughs*).

Pamela Edmonds 24:01

It is! It can be scary. But then you also have somebody to bounce ideas off, which is nice. To say, “Well, what do you think about this? Okay, maybe we do that.” I have always used collaboration as a methodology. I've always been really interested in that.

Geneviève Wallen 24:23

Mhmm.

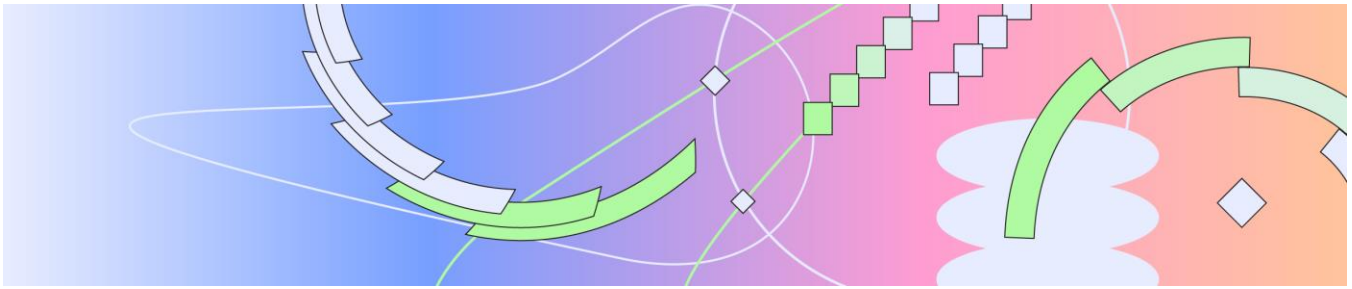
Pamela Edmonds 24:24

¹⁵ *Skin: A Political Boundary* (1998), Curated by Pamela Edmonds and Meril Rasmussen. Read article for more information, <https://visualartsnews.ca/2017/06/unearthing-buried-histories-of-african-nova-scotian-artists>.

¹⁶ Sadly, Janice Kun has recently passed, some information about her work and a scholarship named after her are available here <https://i2iart.com/blog/in-loving-memory-of-illustrator-janice-kun>

¹⁷ Unfortunately, in consultation with Pamela, no information about David Green was found yet.

¹⁸ More about Kim Cain <https://dynamicwomenpursuitempowerment.wordpress.com/kim-cain-artist-educator/>



And I continued to do that. I'm very interested in it as a way to move away from this idea of the curator as this sole authority who's the neutral voice on particular artists or a movement. I've always seen myself more in relation with the artists, and I'm always conscious of that power dynamic, the hierarchy, and I never wanted to be the curator that was selecting an artist and saying, "Okay, we're going to do this." I'm always trying to be in relation with them.

Geneviève Wallen 25:04

In conversation.

Pamela Edmonds 25:05

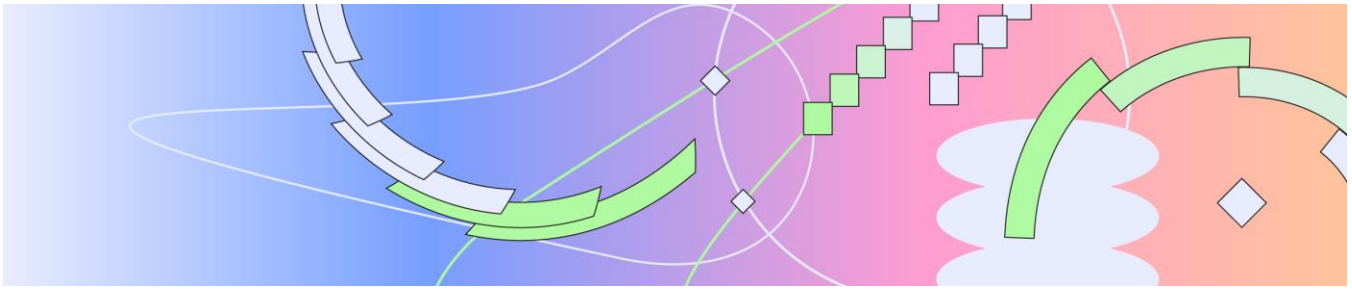
In conversation. Because I think curating is very much about having a trust relationship with artists. And building that over time, so that they know that you got their back.

Geneviève Wallen 25:20

Yes! Especially in the role of being a guest curator, because you're bringing them to an institution, and as also part of your quote, unquote "duty" or responsibility is to protect them as much as you can—and sometimes failing, I think it does happen. It needs to be addressed that despite doing all your best, and really wanting to be caring, there are moments where that care can fall short and sometimes it's not really understanding the resources that you have at hand from the institution that you're invited in. In terms of those lessons of guest curating and thinking through your relationships with artists, something that I think is very salient [is to define] the word "guest." And then, how does that play in terms of the way you navigate institutions, when you are invited? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Pamela Edmonds 26:34

If I'm a guest, then I should be treated *haha* as a guest. And then it's also building a trust relationship with whoever is inviting you into those spaces. And so, for me, I tried to find out as much as I can about the organization beforehand. I don't necessarily need to see or even get to see the artists' contract and know what they're being offered. If I have a good trust relationship with the artist, and I say, "Okay, well, this is the artist fee," I'm advocating for that, at a certain level, because I think you start with the base, right? You go, "Okay, well, this is what's being offered." But there's been instances where I've asked for more and gotten it, so I think it's important to ask. If you don't ask, you're not going to get it. That's the way I learned over time.



Geneviève Wallen 27:48

That's true. That's true.

Pamela Edmonds 27:50

If you don't ask, you're not going to get [anything]. So, I ask. I make not demands, but I request kindly. I think it's important to do that.

Geneviève Wallen 28:02

And when do you do that?

Pamela Edmonds 28:04

From the get-go, way in advance, so that there's no misunderstanding, because I've had incidences where there have been misunderstandings and things can go left, because there wasn't clear communication, and then you're upset, the artist is upset, the organization is upset, because we weren't all on the same page.

Geneviève Wallen 28:28

Yes.

Pamela Edmonds 28:30

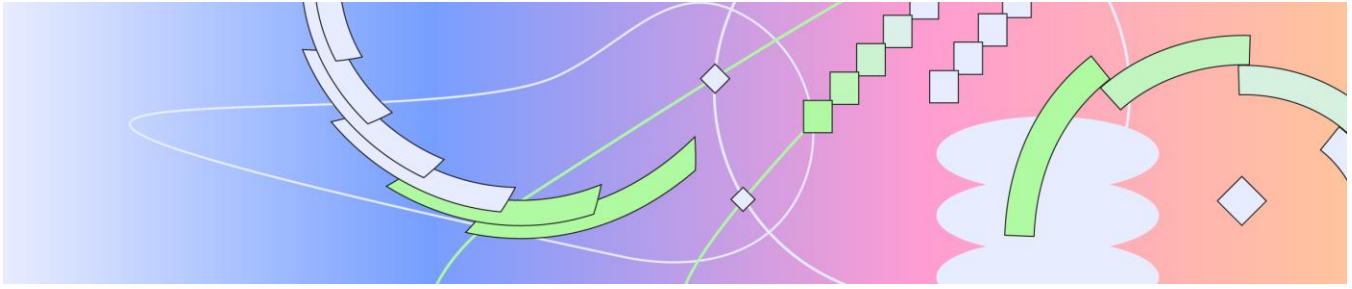
Even when working with Black artists, for example, we've got this stereotype of, a lot of our exhibitions happening in February, for Black History Month. And there's been instances where I said, "I'm not—or, depending on my mood," *haha*.

Geneviève Wallen 28:42

Yeah, I'm more on, "I don't want to open in February," or if it opens in February, "Keep my show up for three months." It's not only Black history.

Pamela Edmonds 29:01

Yes, exactly. So, I've asked to have exhibitions shown at a different time, and folks have agreed. And I've asked for—



Geneviève Wallen 29:13

Sorry to interrupt. We should have another conversation about Black History Month (*both laughing*).

Pamela Edmonds 29:23

You could do a whole podcast, yes, that's a thing. But I feel like I had this conversation with artists recently, more senior artists who used to work for Canada [Arts] Council. And there's the issue of CARFAC and the standards. And it's just a baseline, it's just a guide, and they were talking about how emerging artists get the same fee as the senior artists. And I never really thought about it, but it's like, yes, why aren't there levels?

Geneviève Wallen 30:03

It's true, yes.

Pamela Edmonds 30:03

Right? It's like somebody who has 30 years' experience is getting the same recommended fee as somebody who's been showing for three years or less and it does make a difference. And artists, as we know, do not get paid for what they do, really, in the grander scheme, in terms of what they put into the work. And so, for me, I'm advocating for as high of a fee as possible, and then if that's not possible then I'm advocating for a publication. I'm advocating for technical resources. But like I said to you before, I have my mental rolodex.

Geneviève Wallen 30:49

Yes! Let's talk about that rolodex! I don't have one, I need to create one.

Pamela Edmonds 30:56

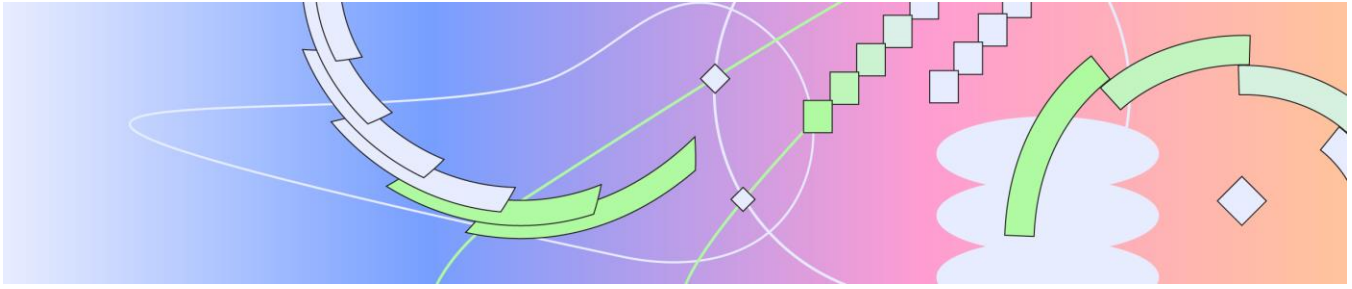
Haha you need one, you need one.

Geneviève Wallen 30:58

I need that rolodex of who to call if I have technical problems. Or who to call if I fall short of enough staff for what needs to be done. Who to call for, like, express vinyl.

Pamela Edmonds 31:03

Who to call, yes That's right, that's right; [for] framing.



Geneviève Wallen 31:18

Yes, like anything really.

Pamela Edmonds 31:20

It's true because it's our job to troubleshoot, right? It's our job to problem solve. And it's like, okay, well, if I can't get a 40-inch flat screen from the gallery, then can I borrow something from another organization, I know the curator there? There's a lot of favors you need to call on as an independent curator. Because a lot of times, depending on the type of organization you're in, they might not have the resources, so I think it's about learning to advocate for yourself first: what are you comfortable with, and not being afraid to ask, and making sure that you find out from the artist what they're comfortable with, because I've had also incidences where there was a misunderstanding, for example, about artists getting installation fees, where in my experience, a lot of public galleries still don't pay those.

Geneviève Wallen 32:29

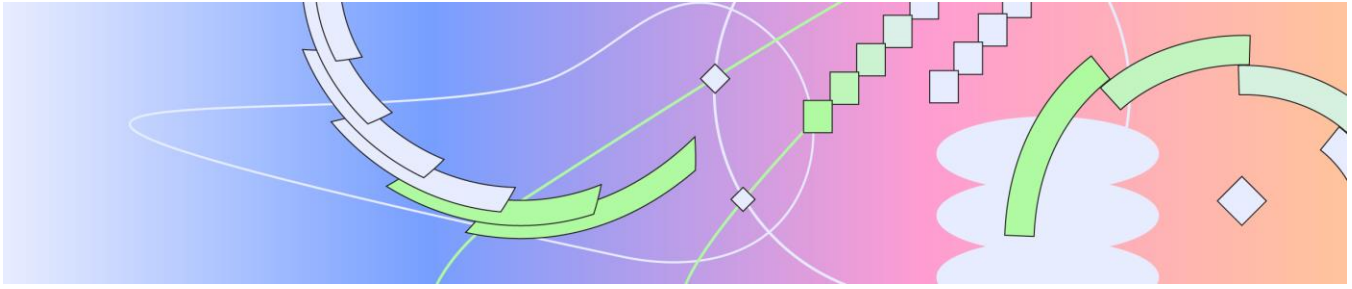
No, it's never really in the budget.

Pamela Edmonds 32:34

Right. They're thinking that the gallery is paying them to be there to install per day. And oftentimes, that doesn't happen. And then, there's a misunderstanding there. And then also understanding that it's your responsibility to get that work up and presentable. So, I know lots of Senior Curators, like me, who get on ladders, paint walls, and do all that, because it's our responsibility. So, if people leave at five, then I have to be in there. I'm not just showing up to say, "Oh, yeah, it looks good." I'm in there, I'm putting labels up. We can't always expect the institution [to do it], I mean, hopefully, there's an understanding, but at the end of the day it's on me and if I have to put a nail in, I'm going to be doing that.

Geneviève Wallen 33:27

Yes, and then I think sometimes you're caught off guard, because you don't always know until when you can stay. And sometimes the gallery is far from where you're staying. So, you even have to plan when you can come back, and these are things that sometimes you don't think through when you do your own project timeline, that you have to think through. When you're a guest curator and you're not there every day, [you have to] to be very clear with the artists that you're bringing in. Sometimes it's challenging because artists are not always working at the



same pace with the same type of schedules. Some people prefer working later in the day. Some people more in the morning. Sometimes that's when misunderstandings also happen, it's because you're getting to know the people that you're working with. Sometimes you know them like they're your friends, but you don't know them as professional artists.

Pamela Edmonds 34:35

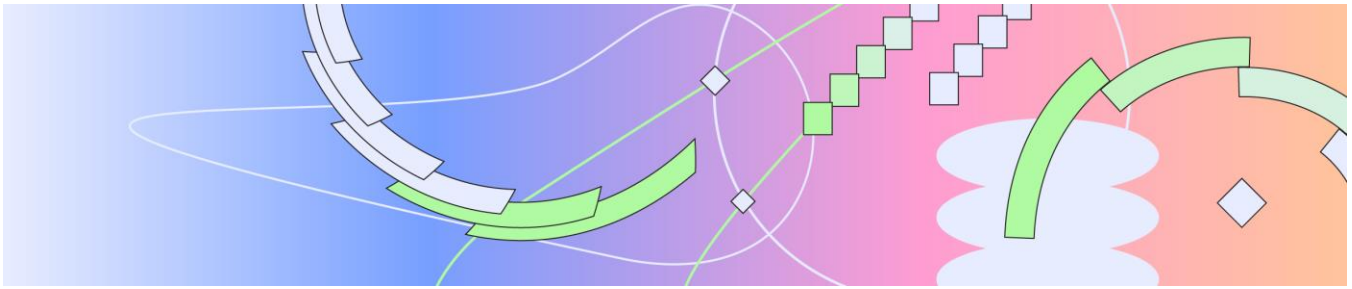
Right! Things can change very differently. From the person you know personally, and then how they work.

Geneviève Wallen 34:42

Yes, yes. You cannot make assumptions about how they work. We always come together and get to know each other while working in an environment that is high pressure. You got to put a show up!

Pamela Edmonds 34:59

But I think what is important to do is to be as clear in your communications as possible and to always consult with the artists. I've had this happen where a work was installed incorrectly in a group show that I was in and the artist shows up at the opening is, like, *livid*. And then the director's pissed off and then it's just like, oh, my gosh, and this was before the time of cell phones, right? Nowadays, we could send the artists a picture if they're not there. I think it's important to do a video walkthrough or take pictures, or [show them] this is how it looks. Always say, "[I hope you're] happy with the install." But then you also need to assert yourself because sometimes, as the curator, it's also your vision, too. And you need to be able to say, "You know what, no, I think it's better like this." And I've had curators fight with artists a little bit, to say, "No, I think it's going to be better like this." And then they come to me after and say, "Yeah, you know what, you are right. The work looks better like this." And I say, "Okay, trust me," because when you're so close to your work, making it and presenting it are two very different things. And that's part of my job: I'm here to make the work look good. I want people to understand the relationships [between the works] and so trust me that this vision, we'll work it out collaboratively. But if I have an idea, as a curator, then let's work out a negotiation, or consensus.



Geneviève Wallen 36:48

Yes, there's a lot of negotiation in our role and I am also curious about [this] and want more of those lessons [from you].

Pamela Edmonds 37:00

(Laughs)

Geneviève Wallen 37:01

We're getting into the thick of it, because every show is different and every show, we're learning something new. I've curated exhibitions, co-curated exhibitions, in U-haul trucks, I also did one at the Hearn for Luminato, and learned different things there.

Pamela Edmonds 37:24

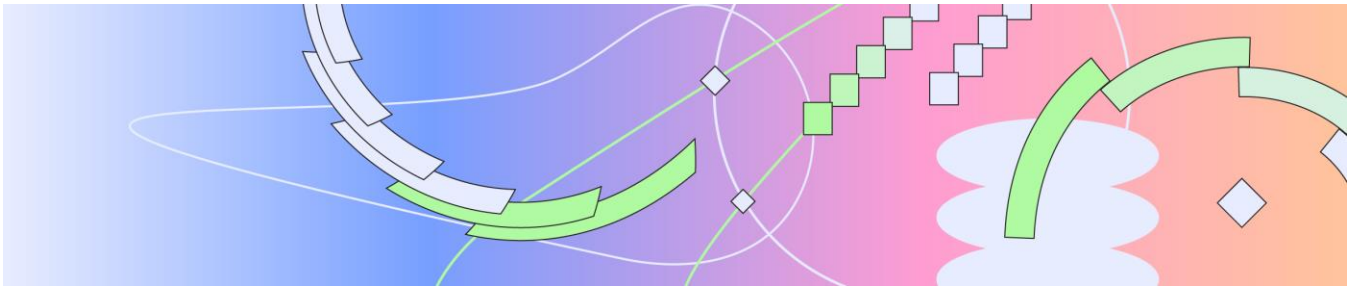
It's not a perfect science.

Geneviève Wallen 37:27

Ha, no, it's not!

Pamela Edmonds 37:27

When you put something out there into the universe, into the public realm, it's going to take on a life of its own, so you have to let some of it go. And say, "You know what, I did the best I could." And in some circumstances, you're not going to get what you want. It is what it is, you know what I mean? You try to the best of your ability, because as artists, and as creative people, we have a vision in our mind that's like, "Okay, this is what I want." And then as a curator and artists, [there's the reality of] "This is what I get," and it's like, "How can I get closest to that vision as possible?" While realizing there's going to be some frustration, you're working within a team environment and you just try to prepare and plan as much as possible ahead of time, because it's a high-pressure environment when you're working towards a deadline. And you have to get something up at a certain time and you have to work backwards. And if you can plan ahead as much as possible for those kinds of things, then it gives you time to troubleshoot, because you can consult, you can make things if you need to build something, and you're not under the pressure cooker, of trying to pull something out of your hat at the last minute, which drives everybody crazy.



Geneviève Wallen 38:50

A lot of things are last-minute, *haha*.

Pamela Edmonds 38:53

Oh, we're used to that!

Geneviève Wallen 38:55

There's always something coming up. I'm always flabbergasted when it's [a] smooth [install].

Pamela Edmonds 39:03

Oh, me too, I'm like, "This is too easy! Something's up."

Geneviève Wallen 39:07

Something's up.

Pamela Edmonds 39:09

When it's too easy, I get uncomfortable. It's like something's going to happen. Something's going to pop up out of the blue.

Geneviève Wallen 39:15

Or you're like, "Did I make it?" (*both laughing*) Is this what it looks like when you make it [as a curator]?

Pamela Edmonds 39:19

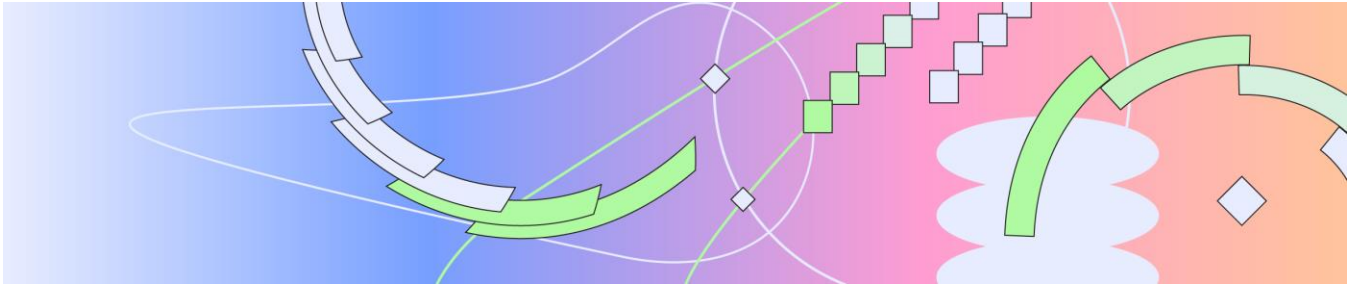
Yes. That's right.

Geneviève Wallen 39:24

Ha, maybe your install is easy [when you succeed in the field] (*laughing*)

Pamela Edmonds 39:26

Yes, yes, sometimes it is. We're in a small community, generally, and I think in a lot of cases, people want to work with people that are easy to work with, because it's such a high-pressure environment. Folks that are successful are not only folks that are talented, but they are people that can get along with people, you know what I mean? You have to be able to be a good



negotiator, you have to be confident, you have to be able to advocate for yourself and for the artists. And you have to be able to accept a “no,” also. That's part of it. Because we're working within constraints and it's a competitive environment and most of us don't have a lot of money in our organizations unless we're working at a major one. But those spaces don't often have guest curators.

Geneviève Wallen 40:36

Right, it's true.

Pamela Edmonds 40:37

A lot of them have full-time curators, and so we're often going into spaces because the director-curator doesn't have time because they're so swamped with administration that they don't have time to curate their own exhibitions. That's happened to me many times when I've been in an environment where I was the director-curator, and it's like, I can't do the management of this organization and create shows, because we know how long it takes to do that.

Geneviève Wallen 41:06

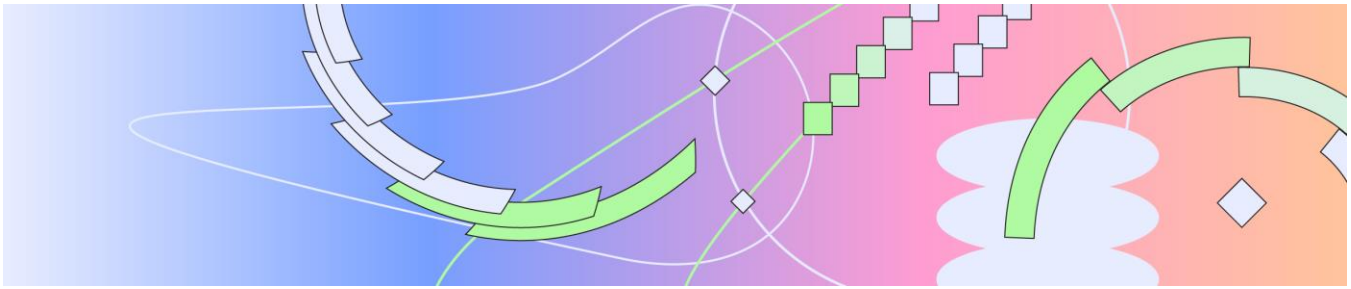
But also, I think it's interesting when an institution has a director-curator, but also being self-aware that always having the same voice, even if you're treating different subjects, it's still the same way of thinking that goes into it.

Pamela Edmonds 41:26

Yes. yes. Right, right

Geneviève Wallen 41:27

It's not that they're going to make the same show all the time, but it's just thinking through, what else, how other conversations can be taken up. And then in some ways, it's vivifying the institution in bringing somebody new; it's a roster of artists that maybe like yourself, you wouldn't think of, and themes can be tackled differently, because it's outside of yourself. But I understand it's true when you're a guest curator, usually, it's for smaller institutions, rather than bigger [ones]. And then if it's a bigger one, usually, it may be for a specific event.



Pamela Edmonds 42:18

But what's so great about it is that you get to go into so many different types of organizations, you get different people, you get to be challenged into different kinds of spaces and architecture and troubleshoot and then you can leave (both laughing). You're not stuck there with those people if you're like, "Okay, I don't know if I'm into this" (both laughing). I can bounce. I'm out of here.

Geneviève Wallen 42:43

You don't get the passive-aggressive post-it about cleaning the microwave (both laughing).

Pamela Edmonds 42:50

Exactly. I've had instances where I've done a guest curatorial project and then maybe a couple years later, actually, I'm working in that space. You get to see; "this is a nice environment, and the people are great." And then if a job comes up, then you get to test the waters, if the same people are still there and say, "You know what, I like this place, and I wouldn't mind working there." You get to go in and out of a lot of different environments and spaces and get to know about the environment of the art world, that's really nice.

Geneviève Wallen 43:31

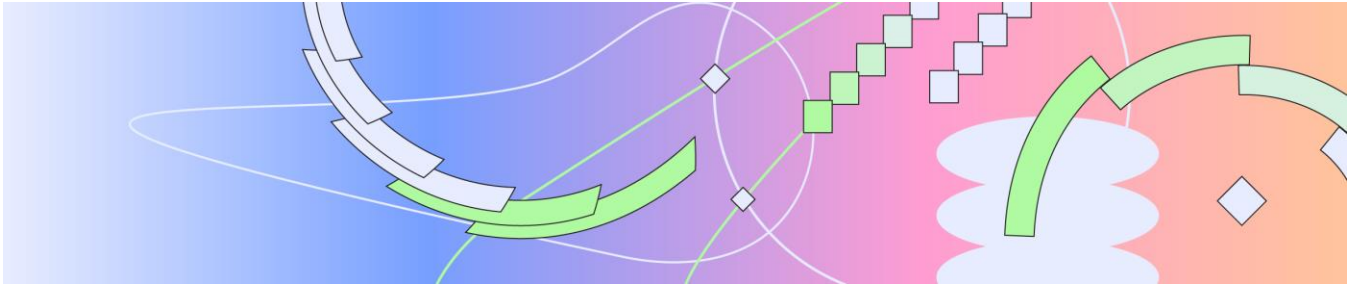
You've been curating for over 20 years, right? Since 1998. How did you make it for yourself, as a guest curator, because I believe a lot of people would think that maybe being a guest curator or being in the gig economy is something you do only for a short period of time. You've done it for a while, and I would love to hear more about how you've been juggling guest curating and other projects and if you have tips around that.

Pamela Edmonds 44:16

Mhm. Well, I had short intervals, maybe four or five years at institutions, so I have had experience working full-time, which is nice to have benefits and things like that haha.

Geneviève Wallen 44:37

Oh, it's so nice. I miss my benefits (both laughing).



Pamela Edmonds 44:42

Right? It's nice to also have those things, especially as one gets older. But I think it's about, for one, maintaining good relationships so people invite you back. I've curated for the same organizations before, multiple times.

Geneviève Wallen 45:05

Amazing. I just love to hear that, in thinking through the longevity of a career and sustainability, that you can curate more than once for the same institution.

Pamela Edmonds 45:20

Yes, for sure.

Geneviève Wallen 45:20

It's incredible to hear it, it's great to hear, it's also comforting to hear.

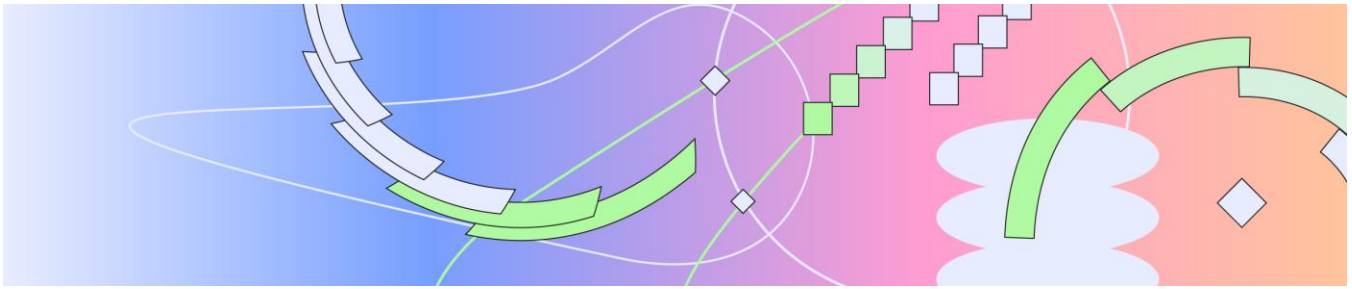
Pamela Edmonds 45:24

Yes. And then you also need to be proactive for yourself. Like, for me, I've pitched things to other organizations. I'm like, "Oh, I have an idea. What do you think about this?" Instead of just waiting for an invitation, you could write a grant proposal, in consultation with an organization. So I'm very interested in partnering to present something, especially if an organization doesn't have the budget, to fundraise to do something, maybe perhaps larger than that organization has done, if they don't, say, do publications, and you're putting your time and experience into writing a grant application or, maybe looking for opportunities from, say, foundations, like Partners In Art¹⁹ and other organizations like that, who are very much interested in collaborations. So, it's always keeping your ear to the ground, looking for opportunities to see what's being put out there. But like I said, being proactive and if there's a space that you feel aligns with you ideologically or you just like the space, or the artists, their programming, I would say—and I've done this—just contact the curator or the director, and say, "I have an idea."

Geneviève Wallen 46:59

Ask for a meeting.

¹⁹ <https://partnersinart.ca/>



Pamela Edmonds 47:01

Yes, I mean hustle a little bit. You got to hustle.

Geneviève Wallen 47:05

Yes, you got to hustle haha.

Pamela Edmonds 47:06

Because you're your next paycheck; [your livelihood] depends on what you're doing. You can't wait. And you're planning exhibitions one year, two years in advance, sometimes more. I was always trying to plan it so that I got two or three gigs going on at the same time. And you got to be super organized because you're thinking, "Okay, this one's going to be coming up in a year. Okay, I can cover such and such for this." Or there's also residency programs, though not a lot for curators.

Geneviève Wallen 47:13

Yes, I know, right? I'm like, why aren't there more? We need space too! (both laughing)

Pamela Edmonds 47:50

Well, yes, that's the funny thing because people don't realize how much research goes into curating. Like, it's not just putting up the exhibition; [you're] researching artists, researching the thematic, going to exhibitions, doing lots of reading, watching, looking.

Geneviève Wallen 48:15

Note-taking, digesting, conversing.

Pamela Edmonds 48:19

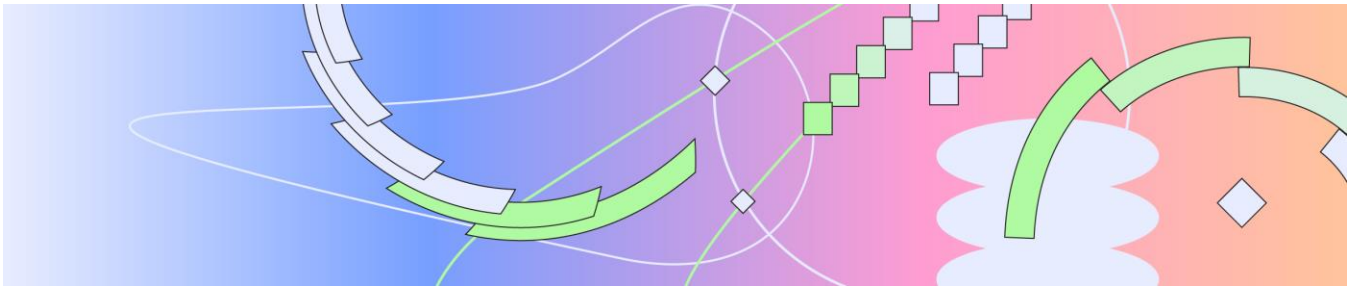
That's right. But we don't often get paid for that part.

Geneviève Wallen 48:22

Oh, no.

Pamela Edmonds 48:22

Like, in part, we don't get paid. We get paid to put up the show.



Geneviève Wallen 48:28

Yes.

Pamela Edmonds 48:28

We get a fee, but we don't really get paid to research.

Geneviève Wallen 48:32

Oh, no one in the creative industry gets paid to research.

Pamela Edmonds 48:36

Very rarely.

Geneviève Wallen 48:36

But there's a line in CARFAC for that, it's just never added up.

Pamela Edmonds 48:41

It doesn't add up, yes.

Geneviève Wallen 48:42

There are all these suggestions in CARFAC²⁰, but we never get the full CARFAC spectrum of fee when approached.

Pamela Edmonds 48:44

No.

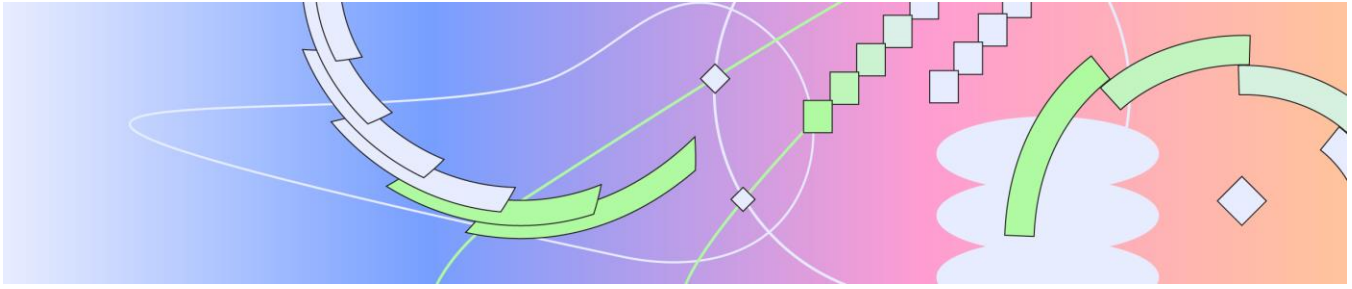
Geneviève Wallen 48:50

Because that's the thing: CARFAC is a tally, and not just the end.

Pamela Edmonds 48:58

It's a minimum standard.

²⁰ <https://carfac-raav.ca/2023-en/>



Geneviève Wallen 49:01

Exactly. Oh, this is so rich. I'm so happy. *(Pamela laughing)* And now I'm like; "Oh, maybe we should have more conversations also about—"

Pamela Edmonds 49:13

Residencies.

Geneviève Wallen 49:15

Oh, residencies for sure. You and I, we've been talking—

Pamela Edmonds 49:20

Yes.

Geneviève Wallen 49:21

We are shenaniganing *(both laughing)*.

Pamela Edmonds 49:26

For sure.

Geneviève Wallen 49:27

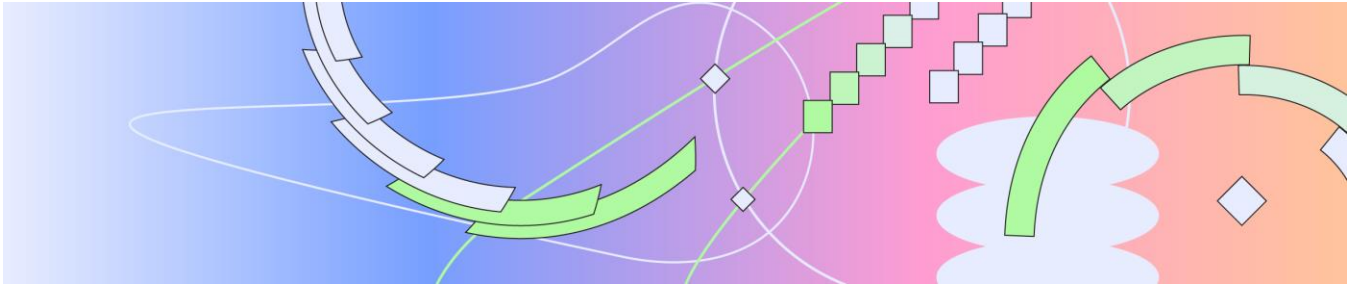
We're plotting.

Pamela Edmonds 49:28

Yes. Yes.

Geneviève Wallen 49:29

We're plotting in that realm, but I was also just thinking about how it's challenging for artists, but for curators, it can also be challenging: how do you draft that email exactly, that hustle-ly email, to talk to a gallery? But also, exploring all the ways that you can make money, and using your skills for other types of contracts and mixing short-term gigs with long-term gigs, so that you can sustain yourself. That's a full other podcast conversation.



Pamela Edmonds 50:18

It is, it is, it is. From what I've learned from being on both sides of the coin, or spectrum, or whatever you want to call it, is that a lot of us within institutions are really overworked.

Geneviève Wallen 50:39

Oh god, yes.

Pamela Edmonds 50:40

Especially if you're a director or a curator and in a management kind of position. It's a field of competition, and I feel that a lot of curators and directors are constantly being approached with "come see my work," getting proposals. Back in the day when there was paperwork, and not on computer, I used to have a box of proposals under my desk, like, just piles of stuff where I'm like, I don't know when I'm going to have a chance to read all of these. So, for an email, you just have to be succinct. You're not writing a book. You know what I mean? Like, you're not. Just get quick into the point: this is what [it is], would you be interested in? And then if they're interested, you can send more info. And I've done shows that way, where I was like, "You know what? This comes in at the right time." I like the approach, and I wouldn't have reached out, but they presented an opportunity for me, and it worked out. You never know.

Geneviève Wallen 51:20

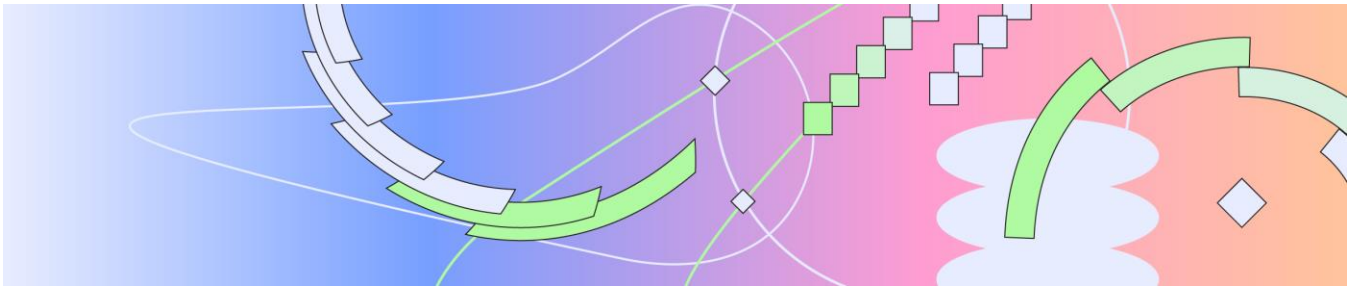
Yes. Yes.

Pamela Edmonds 52:00

You just never know, it's worth it. It's worth just putting it out there, but it's short, concise, without the pressure of, like, "You need me," you know what I mean? It has to be diplomatic, if you can use that word.

Geneviève Wallen 52:23

Gentle approach. Dipping-toe-in-the-water approach, not being too forceful with it. Assertive, but not hitting people over the head.



Pamela Edmonds 52:41

If they say no after the fourth or fifth time, it's time to give up. I've had [persistent] people like, this person again, like, oh, my gosh. I'd be like, maybe it's better for another organization, but it's not fitting. It's not going to fit.

Geneviève Wallen 52:56

It's hard. I know that everybody in the arts is so overworked. And as you said, there's competition, and I think what people don't hear a lot is competition in the institution that you're working in. How, actually, even if you're a curator, if you're working in a public institution, national institution, the time that you get to actually have a show, it can take a really long time

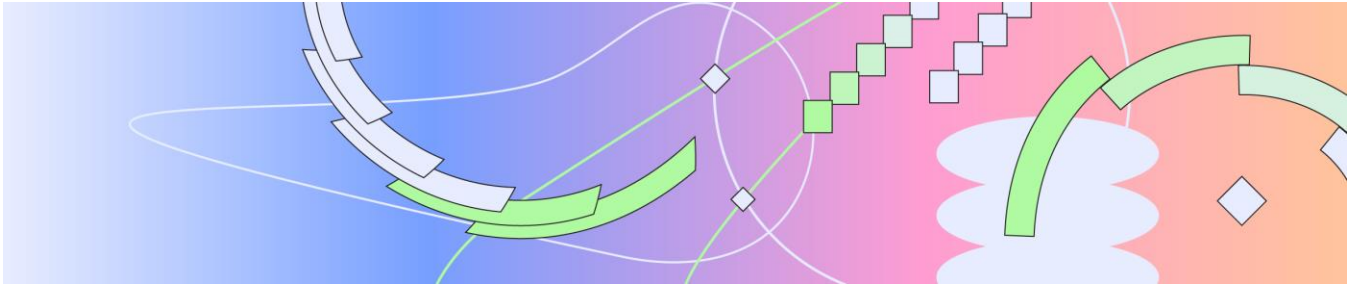
before you curate your first show, in your position as a curator, because you are actually pitching against other curators. Only X amount of shows are facilitated and fully funded per year. And there's this whole question also of marketing: is this show marketable? Would that drive big numbers of audiences [into the institution]? And there's all these other factors that we're not really talking about, how actually it can be hard to navigate. Big institutions are like cruise ships; it just takes a long time to shift to one side and get things done. That's a whole other conversation.

Pamela Edmonds 54:19

And then there's also the question of the landscape in Canada, which is a big country, geographically, but small in terms of how many centers for exhibitions we actually have. People sometimes don't understand if they showed the work of one artist, say, two years ago, they're not going to show them again, maybe for another [while], unfortunately. Or if they showed artists that are at a gallery that's close to that area geographically, they might not show that artist for a while either because it's like, "Oh, well, we've shown that work." Because it's a very strange way that things get programmed sometimes, in terms of what's being seen and shown, in some centers—I'm not naming names—where you see a lot of the same names over and over, and I'm just like, "There's so many artists out here, who are not getting exhibitions. Why isn't so-and-so getting a show?"

Geneviève Wallen 55:33

Sure, yes.



Pamela Edmonds 55:34

But then you're seeing the same person, they're having shows all across Canada because people think, "Oh, okay, well, they probably work well, they probably produce on time, they're good to work with. And their work is good." There's a strange combination of factors: it's not just about being talented, it's not just about doing good work. It's also about the ecology, and who's being seen, and when. So, I think, as a curator part of our job is to be tapped into what's happening. Also being able to think forward to say, "Oh, this is an innovative idea that I haven't seen and I'm not repeating the wheel, I'm presenting what I feel is an interesting idea." Or [what] I feel is in conversation with what people are thinking about culturally at the moment, and maybe people want to explore these ideas a bit more, with these artists, and what these artists are working on. It's about knowing what else is going on, within the art world, if you can call it that. So, reading, and listening to podcasts—

Geneviève Wallen 57:08

Yes, listening to my podcast (*laughs*).

Pamela Edmonds 57:10

Right? Like yours. What are people taken up with? For me, for the last couple of years, I've been thinking a lot about this idea of the post-human.

Geneviève Wallen 57:24

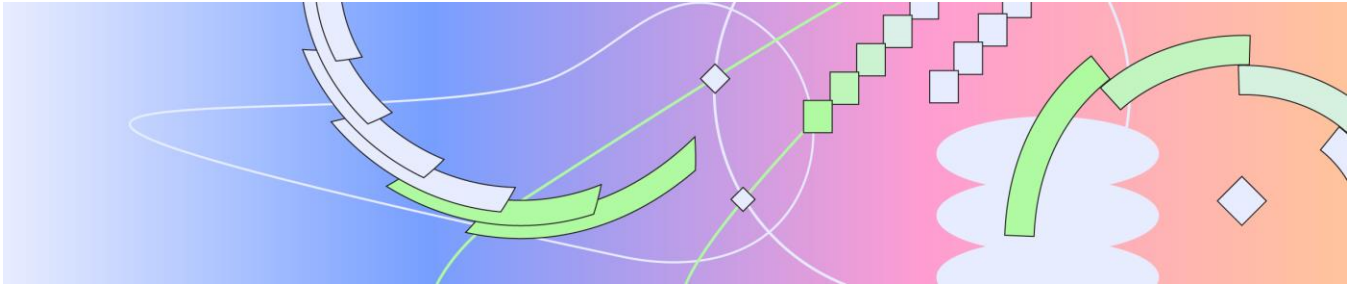
So, like, following the conversation with what Thelma Golden was trying to do in the early 2000s. And picking it up from there?

Pamela Edmonds 57:30

Yes, yes! Well, this idea of how the whole ideology of the museum and how it's built into this civilizing mission about who's primitive and who's not, and who's human and who's not, and how people are treated as objects, and all of this relates to social capitalism, and it relates to art in a deep way. People sometimes don't understand.

Geneviève Wallen 57:59

Or forget easily.



Pamela Edmonds 58:01

Or forget. So, when I was really fortunate to go to Venice a few weeks ago, to see the Biennial, and a lot of the conversation there was around the post-human and I go, “What is it about this idea that artists are still taken up with?” And you start to feel like, “Okay, well, maybe I’m tapped in, somehow, to this,” and I felt affirmed, in my own curiosity around these things, because people are looking at this new definition, good or bad, about who we are as people in this world. And I think that’s what a lot of art tells us, [it’s what] the artist is communicating. You know, what is this? What is this work saying? I think that part of our job as curators is to be storytellers. And in a way, also, to create narratives and to put these works in context. It’s not just putting something up on the wall or in space or whatever, but what is it actually saying?

Geneviève Wallen 59:14

Together. In the space of dialogue, and one that is opening up for visitors to contribute to that dialogue. And feeling like they can be part of it as well.

Pamela Edmonds 59:15

To converse, right... Yes, therefore I don’t have an issue if someone [a visitor] is upset with a work.

Geneviève Wallen 59:41

Of course, yeah.

Pamela Edmonds 59:42

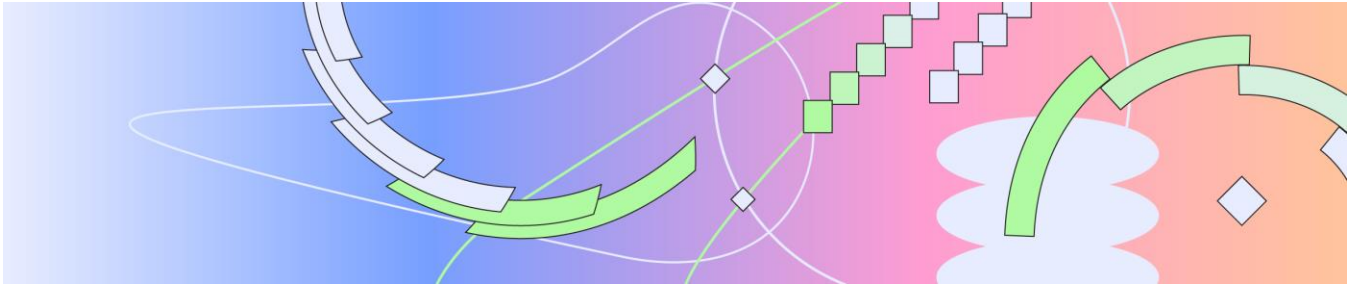
If that’s what they bring to it, I kind of like it in a way.

Geneviève Wallen 59:46

Because we don’t always agree when we are in conversation.

Pamela Edmonds 59:49

No, and we shouldn’t. I don’t think we should. And especially if you’re dealing with work that’s a little bit more politically charged. Then someone’s going to get upset, what you need is the support of the institution, which in some cases, for me hasn’t happened. Which is another thing to explore more because who’s going to pick you up if things go left? If someone’s upset about the show?



Geneviève Wallen 1:00:21

Yes, oh my god, yeah.

Pamela Edmonds 1:00:21

Then they're not going to hang you out to dry and say, "Call the curator." They got to say; "We made the decision to show this work because we believed in it. This is the artist's interpretation, but we stand behind it." Because I've seen things go left with people who put it all on the curator or the artists, and—

Geneviève Wallen 1:00:45

[Throw] people under the bus to save face.

Pamela Edmonds 1:00:48

That's right.

Geneviève Wallen 1:00:49

Which is not correct.

Pamela Edmonds 1:00:51

Not good. That's another thing I advocate for (*laughs*).

Geneviève Wallen 1:00:58

Yes! Pamela I can talk to you for ages (*Pamela laughs*) because that's just our vibe.

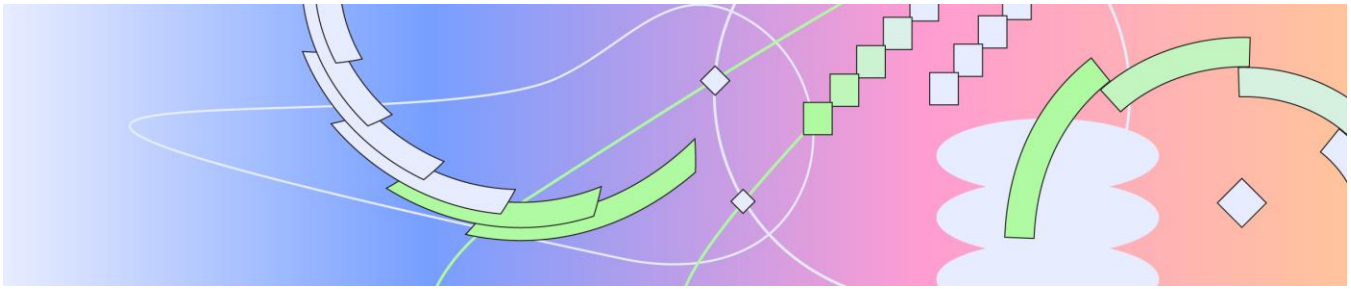
Pamela Edmonds 1:01:05

That's our vibe.

Geneviève Wallen 1:01:07

That's our vibe, and I always think that we have rich conversations, and as I said I've learned a lot from you in the past, and I was excited to meet you. I remember when I saw your show. I think it was with your collective W5²¹.

²¹ <http://www.pe-curates.space/#/w5-tracings/>



Pamela Edmonds 1:01:30

Oh right, yes.

Geneviève Wallen 1:01:31

Yes, a while ago. Yes, and Andrea Fatona did the introductions, and I was all shy (*Pamela laughs*) because I knew that you studied at Concordia, and I thought, maybe I could be a curator too.

Pamela Edmonds 1:01:58

We're a unique brand of people (*both laughing*). We really are...

Geneviève Wallen 1:02:05

Look at us, unique brands (*both laughing*). It could be a T-shirt. And (*laughing*) I have so many ideas for T-shirts I've been juggling with my friend Eve Tagny²², we might have an art line, who knows?!

Pamela Edmonds 1:02:23

And do tote bags, too, because I like those, if you think of it (*laughs*).

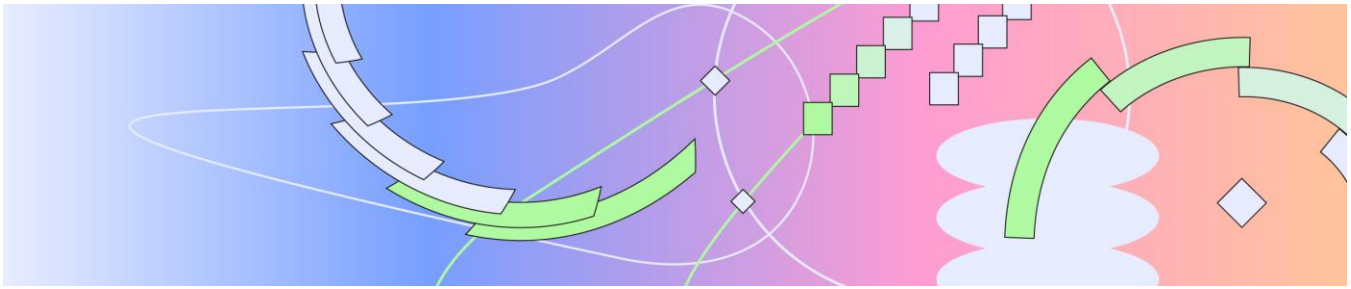
Geneviève Wallen 1:02:28

Ok. We'll throw in some tote bags (*laughing*). I don't want to keep you longer. My last question is what excites you and what are you working on? You talked about those delicious ideas of the post-human and what you have observed in Venice. I just wanted to know, is there one last thing that you want to share with our audience? This conversation is gold! And I'm sure I'm going to say that for all the episodes because I truly believe in the people I've invited. And definitely thinking of continuing all these conversations. Is there something else that you would like to share, something that is coming up for you? I mean, it's launching later than when we meet, but I don't know.

Pamela Edmonds 1:03:27

That's okay. I've been thinking about a lot about collections, the last couple of years, and it's not something that I really have done a lot of, except when I was working in institutions and working with museum collections, but I had the opportunity in 2019 to do an exhibition, called

²² Find more information about Eve Tagny's practice <https://evetagny.com/>



*it's from here that the world unfolds*²³, which was an exploration of one of our largest collections in the museum, of a collector called Herman Levy, who donated millions of dollars' worth of art focused on the European canon. And for me, I was like, how do I deconstruct this work? How do I put it in conversation with the ideas that I'm interested in? And I've always been interested in artists, and curators, like Fred Wilson who did *Mining the Museum*²⁴, to look at these juxtapositions.

Geneviève Wallen 1:04:24

Mhm, iconic.

Pamela Edmonds 1:04:26

Iconic, I love [it]. Then also at the MoMA, I had an opportunity to see their rehousing of their collections, seeing work like Picasso's next to Faith Ringgold²⁵ and seeing the relationships between those works. And I'm working with my colleague at McMaster, Rhéanne Chartrand²⁶, who's the curator of Indigenous art, and we're doing a big show called the *Grand Detour*²⁷. It's a major exhibition in all four of our galleries, which is a play off the aristocratic journeys that men used to take in the 18th century through the European centers as part of their education in the arts.

Geneviève Wallen 1:04:29

Oh yes.

Pamela Edmonds 1:04:30

And we're unpacking, we're doing a detour, we're doing a deconstruction of—like, I was talking before—the civilizing mission and the ideology of the white cube, the idea around Orientalism and Indigenous worldviews, how we can look at our collection that we have from that lens, so I'm pretty excited about doing that.

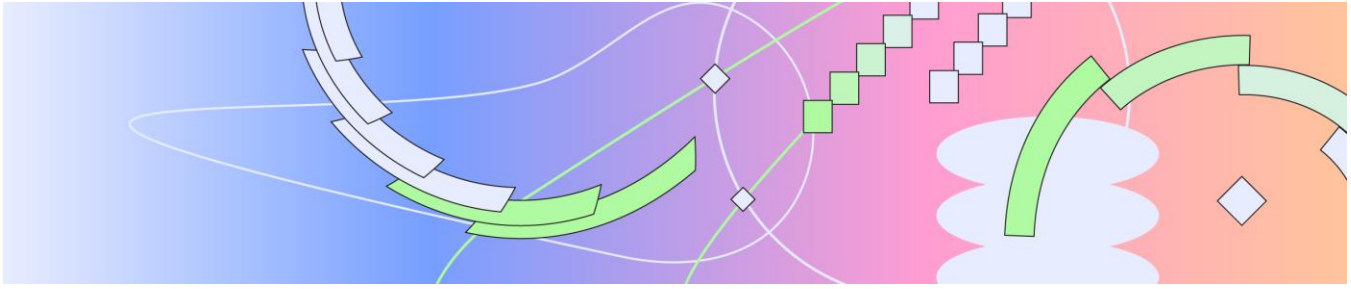
²³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V15npr7mADs&ab_channel=McMasterMuseum

²⁴ <https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html>

²⁵ Explore Faith Ringgold's work <https://www.faithringgold.com/>

²⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYBDejJJYg&ab_channel=McMasterMuseum

²⁷ Due to unforeseen circumstances, the exhibition folded into Chasm and is co-curated with Betty Julian. <https://museum.mcmaster.ca/exhibition/chasm/>



Geneviève Wallen 1:05:40

Oh, god, that's so exciting. I can't wait, I want to hear more. I love the connections that you are making. [What made me] want to know more about Museum Studies is when I first understood the missions of museums and how they were created, and why, but I also like the idea of not only tackling those ideologies, like in the practice of building the Museum, but also what were the types of pilgrimages that were done to also engrain that mythology of civilization. I think it's not something that is really tackled; the side that is [most] talked about is [only] those rich young men going to different cities to be in awe of Greek civilization and Roman civilization, re-narrating their quote unquote “supremacy” to themselves (*laughs*).

Pamela Edmonds 1:06:50

That's right. [We're] unpacking all of that: unpacking the sexual escapades and the misogyny of those journeys. It's about reconsidering what an institution like a museum is, putting that in a more critical light. And, considering, what kind of institutions or museums or gallery spaces—or whatever we want to [name] them—what calls do we want to have into the future?

Geneviève Wallen 1:07:40

Yes, yes, that's true. And I will, again, insist on saying that critical thinking, and critical revisioning is activism because there's a reason why, right now, things are going down the way they're going down in the US with critical thought and critical race theory.

Pamela Edmonds 1:08:05

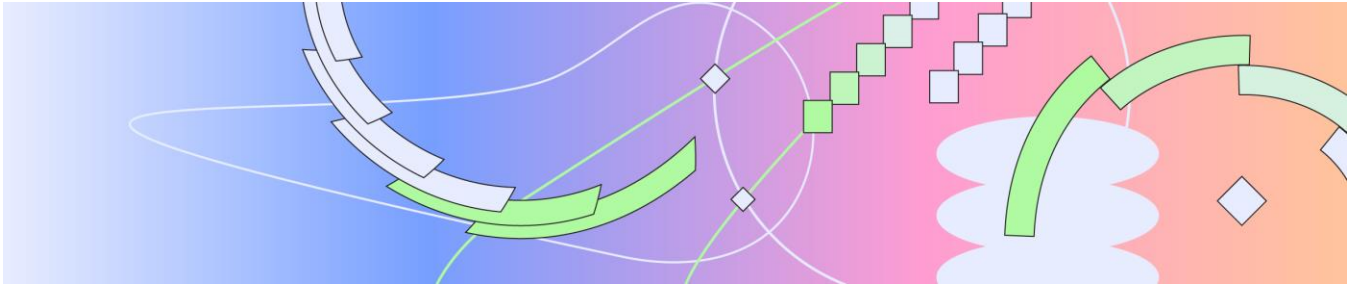
That's right.

Geneviève Wallen 1:08:05

It's bringing dialogues forward in places that are basically turning the world as we know it on its head. So, it's a different type of activism. It's not the frontline one but there are different levels, not “level” in terms of a hierarchy, there's just different ways of creating a revolution. Ours is in the gallery space and the ways that we are relating to each other, and I think this is activism.

Pamela Edmonds 1:08:38

Okay, amen to that. I concur.



Geneviève Wallen 1:08:39

Amen to that! (*laughing*) You concur? I want more moments for me to just say “I concur”!
(*Pamela laughing*) I know you have things to do, a life to live and people to meet and love today, and so I think we'll end here, but again, always a pleasure talking to you, seeing you and sharing space with you.

Pamela Edmonds 1:09:07

Thank you so much.

Geneviève Wallen 1:09:08

Thank you for being here with me in this conversation. In this thing I'm trying to put together (*laughs*).

Pamela Edmonds 1:09:17

Thank you so much. I am really inspired and I'm looking forward to hearing the other conversations. It's an interesting moment we're in, an important revolutionary moment. The arts are as important as ever and our roles are as important as ever, and let's advocate for ourselves.

Geneviève Wallen 1:09:48

Let's advocate for ourselves! Oh, my god, yes. Let's leave with “let's advocate for ourselves.” I love it. Okay. All right. Have a good day. Bye.

Outro: This episode was made possible through the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and The Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora. I send my deepest gratitude to my collaborators and invited guests. I am grateful for your presence, labour, and for embarking on this adventure with me. I recorded this episode in Tiohtiá:ke, which is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, and long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations including the Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron-Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. The theme music is [Raindrops Unearthed](#) by Chanteclair.