

AFTER THE END OF THE END OF THE WORLD: *a collaboration & exhibition*

Rachel Epp Buller and Derek Owens



This temporary eruption, a conversation of vague intention

THE PREMISE

Over the twelve months of 2020, we set for ourselves a project of long-distance collaboration. Each month, we sent each other a selection of words from texts we'd been reading. The rule was that we wouldn't disclose where the language had come from, thereby decontextualizing the prose somewhat. This gave the words we sent each other a vaguely mysterious quality—a little like messages in a bottle, or fortunes in fortune cookies. As recipients, we gave ourselves the task of responding to any of these words in visual form. One set of words per month, one work of art per month, twenty-four works in total over the course of a strange pandemic year.

Throughout our collaboration, the sentences and often the words themselves seemed more and more like ingredients to be used in recipes. One phrase paired with another resulted in a hopeful feeling—but connect it to another and the mood became melancholy or ominous. That the meaning of words depends upon their neighbors is nothing new, of course. But to continually mix and match language over the span of a year—to treat all these sentences as if they were scraps of artist papers and ephemera, mixing them like pigment, to be literally cut and pasted and glued together—brought us to a point where the words became more and more abstract, no less materials for art-making than pigment and oil. When we recognize that words and grammar can be materials to chop, mix, obliterate, erase, put back together, glue, burn, whatever—well, writing is no longer something that must sprout from the blank page of one's head, but rather a readily available, unlimited body of supplies that can be added to one's toolbox.



Oh, whoever awaits our news at the edge of time will get an earfull

One day, perhaps, we will learn to control our appetites.

An earful, from A Bee-Morality!

The overall project hints at a new form of criticism, analysis, and reader response. Instead of writing "about" the works of novelists, poets, critics, and philosophers, here their words become artist supplies, their unexpected coherences and surprising echoes just waiting to be fashioned into new forms. Perhaps the most exciting discovery is that, housed within everyone's personal library lies a gallery of latent, invisible art objects simply waiting to be realized. Approaching the books on one's shelves the way an artist opens up her flat files, or selects the necessary inks or pastels for the day's activity, casts the activity of reading into a whole new light. Reading as mining, culling, sifting, scavenging. Reading as the act of making.

This publication documents the fruits of our labors. Our exchange of words led us down meandering paths, toward found materials, collages, artist books, paper sculptures, and installations. We suspended unbound pages, repurposed antique scrap albums, grew word vines that crawled across the wall, inserted tiny bits of text into make-up compacts, folded handmade papers, tucked vintage photos into cigar boxes with captions. Upon conclusion of the exchange, we then revisited all of the words we'd sent each other and mined them a second time as source material for the creative, call-and-response text included here.

Words Rewritten for *After the End of the End of the World*

or

"I have long imagined a grand adventure made by badgers"

i.

Our steps are an unknown language,
a poetry being physically articulated,
always waiting to happen

We walk along a path to embrace paradox.

We reach a corner and allow contradictions to arise.

We turn left to repeatedly disrupt long sentences
and incomplete journeys.

Our path disassembles and rearranges
as if steps were letters.

Listen carefully.

We walk with invisible others,
to engage the dead in the economy of the living.

There are voices outside of ourselves,
spelling words, forming phrases,
jamming the frequencies of meaning,
waiting to be heard.

*the economy of the dead
jamming the poetry of the living
as if words were frequencies
waiting to be rearranged*



The Ephemeral Materiality of the In-Between



Keep still. Wait. This is the moment of no turning back.

ii.

Something is happening underground-

below the rivers we drained,
the ice caps we melted,
the species we drove to extinction.

My left hand trembles.

I'm sort of floating up-
feeling erased,
fading.

Lights out now.

My hand grasps a lone survivor.

Slow deliberate creatures begin another voyage.

These ancient benefactors outlast grief
with elaborate vocabularies
and endless flavors of cooperation.

Keep still.
Wait.

This is the moment of no turning back.

*the deliberate rivers
the floating ice
the elaborate species*

*the endless underground
the erased benefactors
the ancient grief*

this moment of no vocabularies

iii.

A friendship could be imagined
from this temporary disruption,
a conversation of vague intention.

Sown seeds have not yet germinated
in this collaboration of minds,
becoming-more,
becoming-other.

Ongoing conversation makes a world
inhabitable, hopeful,
a continuous forward movement.

Collaboration makes us unrecognizable.

Words summon up a life to come.

The provocation to think otherwise
maps new possibilities,
endless variations,
incantations of the future

*Do words make us unrecognizable?
The future thinks otherwise.
Seeds imagine new incantations,
minds summon their maps,
and the vague world germinates.*



We walk with invisible others, to engage the dead in the economy of the living

iv.

It was a fine old forest, invisible and formless.

Box elder and red maple depend on each other
in a present tense,
speaking to one another of the land and its secrets.

In smooth sumac we sense a strong presence
of the in-between,
always contingent.

Hornbeam and black birch help us reorient,
imagining how we could walk differently.

These interactions are ephemeral,
philosophical,
indivisible,
beyond expectation.

*the ephemeral forest
reorienting its secrets*

v.

Past and present are breaking down,
time rustling, like tissue paper.

A lost alliance has folded back on itself.

Words have given way to a strange wordlessness,
like wild grasses upon the lake.

We are heading toward the storm,
a crushing sense of the future.

There is no present.

Time has stopped, empty and full of wonder.

*A future folds back upon itself,
crushing time, emptying the lake
of tissue and wonder.*



Between Listening and Receiving



A strange malaise

vi.

I have come to answer your fervent prayer.

I walk through puddles of ink,
feasting on cardboard and wallpaper
as ancient footprints vanish into darkness.

Your uprooted memories struggle to reach the stars
but every tale is carved in rock.

Our ghostly company changes and disintegrates-
hanging from strings,
woven into spider webs,
inscribed on autumn leaves.

We do not need any sympathy.

We have weathered stories.

*I come to you, a ghost hanging from
strings.
A spider's prayer, a puddle of ink.
An ancient sympathy
inscribed on weathered stars
and autumn wallpaper.*

vii.

Lately I have become curious about a lingering disease.

In its terminal stages, victims retreat into a hibernating self,
convinced that they had once been astronauts.

The illness takes roots spontaneously,
sending and receiving signals all over and through the body.

There is a taste for wayward movement and sound,
an exchange between listening and receiving,
symptoms of this strange malaise.

Every cell, every bone, every organ is alive and listening,
unaware of the world.

Drowsy passengers start a new voyage,
collecting fragments to become present.

Withdrawal is no more than a self-protective response.

*The drowsy astronauts withdraw
into the roots
of a hibernating world
tasting every cell and bone
of our strange malaise.*



The sigils are drawn from the same trees, an experiment in magic



To Have Been Astronauts (The Black Hotel)

viii.

Anything we consider implausible probably isn't.

Stands of goldenrod, accented by stardust.

Lanes of wild crocuses, attempting to rearrange themselves
into something new.

Irises, asters, and Queen Anne's lace,
smashing against one another
like words and syllables
rumbling on the ground.

One day, perhaps we will listen
to ground cover and trees,
learning as though our lives depend on it.

We will get an earful.

*Queen Anne, smashing syllables into stardust,
listens to the irises rearranging our lives.*

ix.

I have long imagined a grand adventure made by badgers,
network of burrows more luxurious than gorsy undergrowth.

Fugitive rabbits come closer, taking refuge in the soil.
Creatures wander through a vast empty space, without agenda.
Ghosts softly flock within a frame of stillness.

I understand it now.

It is not about austerity.

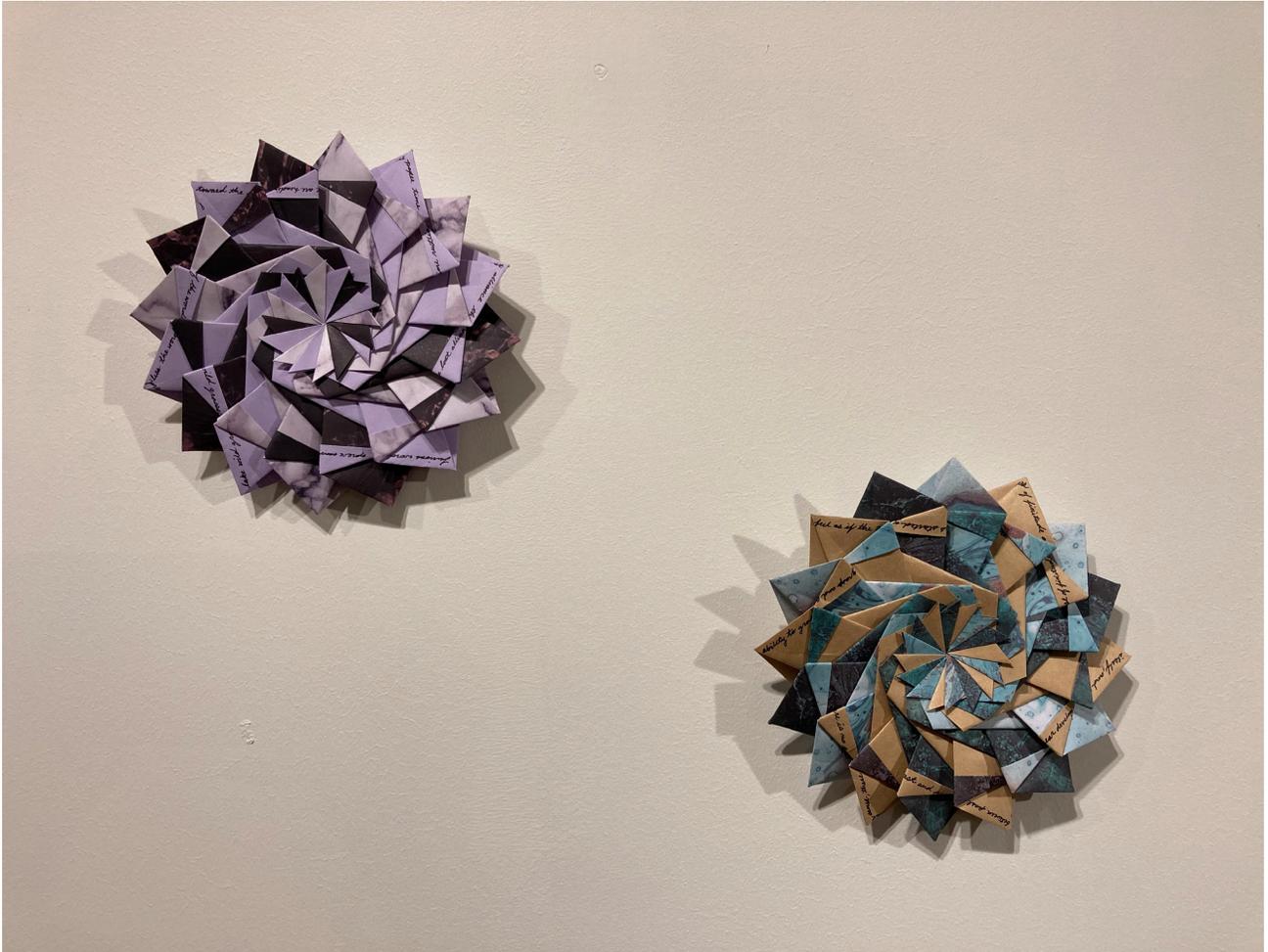
In an age of distraction, a path might carry memories,
going nowhere,
wet with tears from the world.

Walking these old ways makes sense of everywhere else.

*the luxurious tears of rabbits
going nowhere
wandering the memory paths
of the vast wet world*



Queer as a Two-Dollar Bill



time has stopped, empty and full of wonder

x.

Channeling when the light goes out is a type of perception.

Darkness and sunlight become impenetrable,
a living intellectual tradition.

The sigils are drawn from the same trees,
an experiment in magic.

Foliage carries magical theophanies,
riding with the four winds.

Sun and moon pierce through the veils we have in common,
yet most of us remain strangers.

*The stranger in the moon
(an experiment in impenetrable foliage)
rides the four veils, drawing sigils in the wind.*

xi.

It seems ridiculous to lose everything,
as so many old people do.

You think you need to choose-
love or war,
the rock or the hard place.

Are you wondering how long it takes?

Do you know most of what there is to know?

Forget everything.

I can tell you the answer is enough to forget.
I won't live long but I've forgotten already.

I'll have been gone a long time.
No time at all.

I'll never forget that.

I'll probably keep it to myself, but there you go.

That's what happens.

*Ridiculous old war,
wondering what there is to know!
Forget the rock. Forget the hard place.*



an exchange between listening and receiving, symptoms of this strange malaise



I have come to answer your fervent prayer

xii.

Let's end with fiction, shall we?

Earth is a disaster.

We cannot tell the spiders from the insects;
friends and family are fossilized in amber.

We have witnessed these things firsthand.

But let us move forward to a far different here.

We have at least two strands of eternity:
the agency of the future
and the now that will be.

When the earth shatters,
dream spiders will appear in the air
deployed as spirits to reveal structures
and gain memories.

That is how one survives the beginning of the world.

*(this is how one survives
the beginning of the world)*

Bios

Rachel Epp Buller engages in a range of critical and creative practices. Formerly fastidious about maintaining separation between her art historical and artistic endeavors, these days she seeks out intersections and overlaps. Her new research-creation project, *Slow Practices for Speculative Futures: Embodied Listening in Contemporary Art*, is directly informed by multidisciplinary explorations as well as by collaborative thinking. She is an artist, writer, and professor of visual arts and design at Bethel College (KS).

Derek Owens is an artist, writer, and professor at St. John's University, New York. He works in a range of media and literary genres. His book *Memory's Wake* was published by Spuyten Duyvil; *The Villagers*, a collection of fables and short fiction with collages by Caroline Golden, is forthcoming from Animal Heart Press. Information on his art, writing, and teaching can be found at derekowens.net.

Derek and Rachel have collaborated through words and images since 2016. Despite wildly differing aesthetics, they both view language as mysterious and malleable, and share interests in mining books, letters, archives, flea markets, and historical ephemera for artistic inspiration. In 2018, following a three-month period of weekly exchanges, they created *Correspondence(s): Past Present Future*, an episodic art installation that they presented at Flutgraben artist space in Berlin. They also published a collaboratively written research-creation essay, "'our hopes lie in a time of alliances': epistolary praxis and transdisciplinary composing" in *Something Other's* special journal issue, *On Correspondence*.



Six Duets



I'll have been gone a long time. No time at all.

After the End of the End of the World was exhibited at the Regier Art Gallery, Bethel College, February 4 – March 5, 2021.

***With thanks to the following writers for their inspiring words: Fredrik Backman; J. G. Ballard; Muriel Barbery; Sue Burke; Joanna Demers; Stephen Ellcock; Mark Fisher; Elizabeth Grosz; Judith Halberstam; Lafcadio Hearn; Laird Hunt; NK Jemisin; Erin Manning & Brian Massumi; Robert Macfarlane, Stanley Donwood, & Dan Richards; David Mitchell, Jon K. Shaw & Theo Reeves-Evison; Erin Morgenstern; Pauline Oliveros; Pico Oyer; Richard Power; Ernesto Pujol; Rebecca Solnit; Jack Spicer; Hito Steyerl, Miriam Toews, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, & Nils Bubandt, Salome Voegelin, Roy Wagner, Alan Weisman, Christine Wertheim & Matias Viegner