Like when the teacher leaves the classroom: A conversation about artist-run programming within exhibitions
Jonas Becker, Dan Bustillo, Joey Cannizzaro, Claire Ruud

Museum programming is often explanatory—the goal is to impart a sense of knowing and understanding. Breaking this mold, institutions are increasingly experimenting with programs that create different kinds of access to the artwork on the walls. The goal of estrangement provides one interesting alternative—to reframe the act of perception, changing the experience from one of already knowing to one of perceiving anew. Rather than creating closure through explanation, programs that operate through estrangement open up new possibilities for radical meanings in artworks.

This conversation takes a collaboration between three artists—Jonas Becker, Dan Bustillo, and Joey Cannizzaro—as a starting place to consider the potential role of estrangement in museum programming. Their collaboration highlights critical questions: What kinds of relationships—other than interpretive—can we create between an artist program and an exhibition? What techniques can create a sense of critical distance from our own tendencies and assumptions in looking at an artwork?

The four of us first met just after sunrise in L.A. during a meeting of the Brutally Early Club, bonding over the challenges and possibilities of radical interdisciplinarity and collaboration. Jonas works in photography and video installation and often uses collectively sourced content in his work. Joey and Dan co-founded two para-institutional projects, Los Angeles College and The Best Friends Learning Gang.

Claire works at the MCA Chicago as Director of Convergent Programming. From our various positions, we discussed the relationship between social engagement projects and art objects in exhibitions, especially the ability each has to shift meaning in the other. When our ongoing conversation materialized in the form of collaborative programming around Jonas's recent exhibition *Westward Bound* at Lancaster MOAH, we got together at his East L.A. studio to discuss the result.

Claire Ruud (CR): The three of you worked together to produce two programs. Can you begin by describing the collaboration?

Jonas Becker (JB): The collaboration came out of a solo exhibition I had at the Lancaster Museum of Art and History (MOAH), where I was showing two video installations. I was interested in working with Los Angeles College (LAC) and The Best Friends Learning Gang (BFLG) to experiment with intersecting our very different modes of creating work. LAC serves as a para-institutional shell for a variety of pedagogical-learning projects, and BFLG uses the idea of the "amateur" to organize workshops. I asked them to collaborate with me to create programming based loosely around my show, but with the intention that the collaboration would be its own piece. To get started, we identified aspiration and immortality as two central themes from my installations to explore in the programmatic components.

Dan Bustillo (DB): So we organized these two events, a workshop with BFLG and a panel discussion hosted through LAC. They were very different, but both prompted an engagement with some of the themes teased out in Jonas's work. BFLG's "Amateur Hour: Immortality" took on an array of ways of thinking about immortality through embodied learning, from the process of mummification to rejuvenating homeopathic creams. We are always both hosts and participants in BFLG's "Amateur Hour" workshops. We don't actually teach anything; we announce the topic of the workshop (like Hypnosis! Immortality! Jailhouse Tattoos! or Becoming Famous!), and then learn along with everyone else.

Joey Cannizzaro (JC): BFLG workshops always feel like a cross between a class and a party. Like that moment in school when the teacher leaves the room and everyone goes crazy.

DB: Afterwards, LAC organized the panel "Tangents on Aspiration", in which we tried to arrive at some kind of tangential meaning-making by bringing in different folks who would address aspiration from vantage points that were both diverse and specific. One panelist gave an earnest motivational speech about applying aspirational thinking within our own lives, another talked about her personal experience with Jainism and some of its theological premises, questioning what aspiration even means in a context where withdrawal and absence are the primary values. The other panelists spoke to aspiration in sitcom set design, community organizing, and gold digging in early American Christianity.

JC: LAC itself is imaginary, but the things we do—and most of the people involved—are real. "Tangents on Aspiration" used a very familiar institutional form, the academic panel discussion, but defamiliarized the meaning of this form by filling it with unexpected content, not just from different disciplines,

but completely different frameworks of meaning and value.

JB: The programs were set up to get participants to question their structure. There is a little bit of this that comes from framing the programming as "artist-" or "institution-" led. For the most part, audiences walk into institutional programs expecting to take them at face value. Introducing the figure of the artist already primes at least some audiences to distance themselves from the program.

DB: In this instance, since we were doing the programming, we were in a sense the institution.

CR: LAC is not an institution in the sense that we normally experience institutions. It prioritizes promiscuity and fragmentation, but museums are more likely to prioritize focus and synchronization. LAC is able to reject the institutional responsibility to reach certain audiences, build long-term relationships, and define and measure impacts.

JC: Yes, LAC and BFLG address a troubling pattern: the obsessive desire to measure and control everything through standardization on all levels of society.

DB: In some way, I feel like when artists do the programming, there is an amount of luxury that comes with not having to think about the metrics. We can afford to be myopic in a good way because we don't have to think about measuring success. There's a certain amount of charm that the effectiveness of our tangential discourse relies on. In a sense, that's how we were approaching a lot of this, in a very sober but wild way. That's not always appealing to someone who's thinking of things in terms of responsibilities and metrics.

JB: Not only that, the goal of museum programming is often to elucidate the artwork. It is *about* the artist or artwork. It's *interpretive.* The programs we ran weren't interpretive at all. We created new work together at the intersection of our practices.

CR: So if the relationship was not interpretive, what was it? Can you be more specific about the interaction you wanted to create between the artworks and the programs?

DB: I think our intention was to arrive at a way of engaging ultimately with Jonas's work via estrangement. Both programs offered oblique yet relevant entry points to thinking about the work. So if our programming seemed to be off in connection to Jonas's show, or strenuously related at best, then that kind of enacts the first part of the estrangement process.

JC: Historically, estrangement was defined by Victor Shklovsky as a technique, and an aesthetic to a lesser extent. His estrangement was about the writer, the artist, making the experience of the thing less natural, and specifically more labored, as a way to allow the audience access to new ways of seeing and thinking. So everything we were ranting about in regard to the kaleidoscopic day that we had at the museum fits within the bounds of this technique.

JB: I think the potential for mutual estrangement between the installation and the programs arises out of their differences in production and reception. Temporally, we developed the works over different time spans. Also, the installations have an indefinite half-life, and the programs are ephemeral. Besides that, their systems of creating meaning are different—the videos create meaning in direct relationship to a singular viewer, while the programs create meaning collectively and contingently. These temporal and discursive differences become particularly interesting when the works are created in a closed circuit with each other, reframing each other as if in a mirror room, which in the end estranges us from the structure and content of both works.

CR: I experienced that when I saw the work at the opening, and then again as part of the programming. The layering distanced me from the content and form of both, creating space for new meanings. Can we talk about the specific strategies you guys used, or discovered, to create this defamiliarization within the programs?

JB: We designed the panel and workshop to be myopic in subject—in terms of aspiration or immortality—but promiscuous across modalities and language. The audience was constantly being interpolated through these different modes of address, so they had to continually renegotiate their position in relationship to both the programming and the installation.

DB: In terms of the panel, we talked a lot about crossbench praxis as a technique.

In *The Nightmare of Participation*, Markus Miessen proposes that in stepping outside of your field and putting one foot in someone else's field, you establish a place for this kind of crossbench practice to occur. It means that I am allowed to be the non-expert in someone else's field, and that becomes a point of convergence.

JC: As we experienced during "Tangents on Aspiration", this can be a useful approach to an abstract concept, estranging it by putting it through disciplinary transmutations.

Crossbench praxis also has a relationship to the "undisciplinary", another strategy that is part of the theoretical framework for BFLG's amateur hours. We always choose a topic we hardly know anything about and pretend to be taking a "how to" approach—which is partly what we do—but really we'll approach the topic from as many different angles as possible, encouraging everyone to grasp it in whatever way interests them rather than insisting that only one approach is "scholarly", is producing knowledge, and therefore valid.

DB: In this case, the fact that we are all collectively trying to learn how to do something we don't know how to do means that we all have to be ama-

teurs. So that initial distance of estrangement is already a prerequisite to our formula.

JB: I think the kind of estrangement we are talking about is specific to para-institutional artist projects whose medium is public engagement. Because these projects oscillate both inside and outside of institutional tropes, there is an inherent estrangement with both process and content—in this case, from both the process of interpreting the artwork, and its principal themes of aspiration and immortality.

CR: I think we should also address the fact that not everyone was estranged from the idea of aspiration or their approach to the work. At least one audience member was completely taken with the motivational speaker. She did not see the conflicting layers you set up, right? She saw a panel organized earnestly by an earnest institution. So, in terms of this goal of estrangement we've set up, it was variously successful. It may depend on the preparedness of the audience to be estranged. Maybe some of us are walking around with a massive sense of irony about our lives that not everyone shares?

JB: Right, I appreciate the critique of irony as a privileged position. But we can't make gross assumptions. There were other uninitiated audience members who it was clear came away totally seeing all the layers. We created this perpetual oscillation between the earnest and the ironic, the institution and para-institution, between different modalities and rubrics, which prevented a fixed position from the audience.

JC: Well yeah, and the rate at which we moved between topics amplifies the absurdity.

DB: Juxtaposing all these different modes of address allows a participant to be pretty suspicious of the currency of the institution, and understand the programming itself as a piece.

CR: I keep pushing on what was doing the work of estrangement, because I'm wondering whether institutions can (or do) create programs that do similar work. Museums use artists as their programmers, too, for example Pablo Helguera or Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who have robust artistic practices *before* they have institutional positions. Educators, too, think about creating space for criticality and different perspectives on the work.

DB: Yeah, if you look at the Hammer's *Made in L.A.* in 2012, you will see a number of collectives for whom programming was their practice. For example KCHUNG Radio, a decentralized, non-hierarchical radio network, was given a space in the museum lobby where they sub-programmed a number of shows during *Made in L.A.*, acting as a kind of Trojan horse to bring in so many other artists into the biennial, and change the context of the work in the exhibition.

JC: Or look at Machine Project's "field guides" to various institutional spaces, in which they more or less take over the campus of a place like LACMA and create a program that might otherwise not happen in those spaces, that intervenes in your experience of the artworks. Giving up a level of control to an outsider can be a way of creating space for the unpredictable within a system that demands consistency.

DB: Having an artist project that engages other artists through programming acts as a buffer between the institution and the artist, and consequently opens up many possibilities for estrangement to occur.

CR: I think we've hit upon a few of the things— the figure of the artist, the para-institution, the tangent, the rapid oscillation of mode of address, freedom from the goals of interpretation and impact—that really produced the estrangement, so that most of us walked away with a distance from our own aspirations, an awareness of the operations of aspiration within capitalism. I can think of other artist-run pedagogical projects that use similar strategies, but the call and response between *Westward Bound*, "Tangents on Aspiration," and "Amateur Hour: Immortality" offered particularly interesting possibilities for expanding the ways we look at art objects in institu-

tions. Working inside a museum, it made me want to bring social artworks into conversation with art objects more often.

Captions

1 Jonas Becker, *Almost Always*, 2013. Photograph by: Jeff Mclain. Courtesy of the artist.

2 Best Friends Learning Gang, Digital poster for "Amateur Hour: Hypnosis," 2014. Courtesy of the artists.

3 "Tangents on Aspiration" at MOAH Lancaster, 2015. Courtesy of the artists.

4 "Amateur Hour: Immortality" at MOAH Lancaster, 2015. Courtesy of the artists.

Jonas Becker *is an interdisciplinary visual artist whose photography and video installations explore how desire and belief are formed around specific sites and geography. Recent projects focus on the relationship between humans, technology, and the environment, questioning the concept of what is "natural". He is based in Los Angeles and has recently exhibited in solo shows at the Lancaster Museum of Art & History, the Craft & Folk Art Museum, and Shulamit Nazarian Gallery. His work has been featured in Art Ltd., Artillery, the Los Angeles Times and the Los Angeles Weekly.*

Dan Bustillo *is an organizer in* neverhitsend*, a host and member of* The Best Friends Learning Gang*, a facilitator of L.A.-based Crypto parties, and an advisor on the Financial Aid Department of the parafactual institution, Los Angeles College. Their practice is at once a collaborative, collective, and individual investigation of power dynamics. They are currently writing a letter and a book. Dan holds an A.A. from Miami Dade College, a B.A. from Hunter College, and an M.F.A. from the Art and Technology program at California Institute of the Arts.*

Joey Cannizzaro *is an undisciplinary artist, curator, and critic. Cannizzaro, along with Dan Bustillo, started The Best Friends Learning Gang, an experiment in disorderly, amateur education, as well as Los Angeles College, an imaginary college that supports areas of knowledge that are neglected by the academy. He is also a member of neverhitsend, a collective that performatively researches communications ideology, surveillance, and privacy. Cannizzaro's work has been seen at 356 Mission, Machine Project, Centre Pompidou, Flux Factory, Lancaster Museum of Art, 221a, ForYourArt, some times, and a lot of*

other places. He holds an MFA from California Institute of the Arts and is a professor at Los Angeles City College.

Claire Ruud *is Director of Convergent Programming at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. She has previously held positions as deputy director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art and associate director of Fluent~Collaborative in Austin, Texas. She holds an MA in contemporary art history from the University of Texas at Austin and an MBA from the Yale School of Management.*