

(In)Visibility

Impressions du tête-à-tête: la face cachée de la visibilité

Last Summer Andrew Tay invited Angie Cheng, Rhodnie Désir, Phoenix Wood and myself to co-facilitate a 5-day tête-à-tête by and for BIPOC (Black and/or Indigenous and/or people of colour) artists, academics, activists and cultural workers at the Centre de Création O Vertigo. From September 4th to 8th we occupied the studio of the CCOV and unpacked the often-converging dynamics of our professional landscapes. We were joined by Marilou Craft, Mélanie Demers, Dana Michel, Lara Kramer, Roger Sinha, Robert Abubo, Mark Sawh Medrano, Charles Kohenero and many others who shared their insights on art practices as well as the socio-political contexts in which they evolve. I was thrilled by this invitation and still can't believe I had the chance to hold space with people who inspire and amaze me in this way.

I first encountered Andrew Tay's curatorial practice at *Piss in the Pool*, a series of site-specific dances in an emptied indoor pool, in the summer of 2011. I knew very little about *the dance world* and imagined dance, in its professional/institutionalized form, to be a science of precision that allowed little to no room for spontaneity. Needless to say, my understanding of this art form was complexified during *Piss in the Pool*. That night, I was particularly struck by Dana Michel's performance of *Yellow Towel*, which was a work in progress at the time. I had never seen a Black dancer move through public space in this way. This performance, and many others that evening, made me question what defines a dancer and what – beyond popular aesthetic notions – constitutes dance. This opportunity to witness bodies holding public space in ways I never had before allowed me to consider the ways in which I inhabit my own body and the spaces I navigate. This provided me with new pathways for personal and artistic exploration. During the *Tête-à-tête: la face cachée de la visibilité*, Andrew described curation as encouraging contexts where artists and publics can take risks. This is what I witnessed in 2011 at *Piss in the Pool* and again in September 2018 during the tête-à-tête.

I spent the week of September 4th in dialogue with artists and thinkers who each, in their own way, helped me reflect on how my body and my practice are codified while considering my agency in the process of codification. I am grateful for the insights of Andrew Tay, Angie Cheng, Rhodnie Désir and Phoenix Wood whose experiences coloured our conversations and led to reflexive work that ripples far beyond this intervention. Throughout the tête-à-tête I felt a lightness of being, one I had only felt during smaller and briefer gatherings with fellow BIPOC creatives. This feeling had always been fleeting until the tête-à-tête, which

represented the first 5-day intervention by and for BIPOC professionals I ever participated in. As the week progressed, I delved further into an introspective space that allowed me to share an unprecedented vulnerability with the group. I then considered all the factors that enabled me to access this place within myself and how circumstances could conspire once more to (re)create such an experience.

Something visceral happens to me in the physical absence of hegemonic whiteness. I am softer, calmer, more willing to take risks. I am able to access a younger, more vulnerable version of myself. This is exactly what occurred during the tête-à-tête, I accessed and shared a more honest self that then allowed me to co-create candid moments with everyone in attendance. I am struggling to articulate to you, who were not invited, how rare it is for me to access this part of myself while occupying public space. I am struggling to make you understand that what took place at the CCOV from September 4th to 8th was made possible by your absence.

When I say you were not invited I mean, more precisely, that this was not for you. And yet, you remained at the periphery of every conversation – unconsciously threatening to de-centre us from our own narratives. This is why we could not invite you, because you have a funny way of permeating all spaces and conversations, those that are and *are not* about you. Because we needed to gather without the weight of your presence so that we might properly engage with that of our own.

So often in artistic, academic and activist circles people strive to be part of *the solution* without acknowledging the various and subtle ways they may be contributing to a problem. Such is often the case in conversations about race and racism. Many white people want to be perceived as anti-racist and/or *intersectional* and rush to demonstrate a certain social proximity to their BIPOC counterparts without considering the cost of this closeness. This desire to be BIPOC-adjacent prevents introspection and encourages the projection of insecurities and suppressed racial ideologies onto us, your BIPOC counterparts while (re)producing culturally unsafe social climates. This unsafety stems from a fear of mistakes and an assumption that one might be capable of moving through life without perpetuating varying forms of systemic oppression. During the tête-à-tête we acknowledged the absurdity of this notion while stressing the importance of mistakes. When mistakes are approached with honesty and integrity a problem becomes an opening. We are all conditioned to (re)produce the inequalities of colonialism and global capitalism and therefore extremely prone to making mistakes on our

path toward different modes of collective existence that value the lives of BIPOC. What matters most is how we learn from these mistakes and create new relational contexts rather than rearticulating the ones we seek to change.

Ces enjeux se compliquent au Québec, province des *nègres blancs d'Amérique*¹ où l'oppression du peuple blanc québécois éclipse celle de tout autre groupe dans plusieurs conversations. Comment puis-je être noir.e dans la province des *nègres blancs*? Comment puis-je vivre pleinement ma complexité en tant que personne et en tant qu'artiste dans une ville qui repose sur les idées des *nègres blancs d'Amérique* tout en prétendant d'être anti-raciste, féministe et intersectionnelle. L'idée même du *nègre blanc* est une idée raciste qui rend invisible les enjeux raciaux du Québec où l'esclavage et le colonialisme sont inextricablement reliés au statut hégémonique des québécois blancs d'origine française. Ce bagage historique est ressenti dans les espaces publiques où l'on prétend que tout geste vers le soulèvement de la *diversité* et du *multiculturalisme* (euphémismes pour la différence) est une action optionnelle plutôt qu'une démarche nécessaire dans la progression de la vie commune. Ces enjeux sont omniprésents dans les espaces artistiques, académiques et militants – qu'on le veuille ou non. C'est pour cela que *le Tête-à-tête : la face cachée de la visibilité* représente une opportunité rare de se rassembler sans immédiatement ressentir le poids de ces enjeux et de partager nos expériences tout en imaginant des nouvelles créations individuelles et collectives.

Lors du tête-à-tête nous avons parlé des obstacles auxquels nous faisons face avant d'atteindre les *portes ouvertes* de plusieurs intuitions *progressistes*. Les espaces culturels de cette ville prétendent souvent d'être ouverts aux projets/initiatives de BIPOC (personnes noires, autochtones et/ou racisées) sans considérer les efforts requis pour consciencieusement intégrer et/ou représenter nos voix. Pendant nos discussions nous avons souligné le fait que plusieurs organismes savent absorber les projets de leurs invités BIPOC et non comment supporter ces mêmes projets sans se les approprier. Ici les rapports entre personnes blanches et BIPOC sont inscrits dans des structures coloniales. Ces structures permettent aux personnes blanches de façonner (in)consciemment leurs identités en chosifiant et en consommant celles de leurs homologues BIPOC. Ce façonnement identitaire inconscient me donne parfois l'impression que les institutions qui m'invitent à partager ma voix pensent me faire une faveur sans considérer la réciprocité de notre échange. Comme si elles n'ont pas

¹ titre de l'essai autobiographique de Pierre Vallière publié en 1968 qui inspirera grandement le mouvement de libération nationale québécois

besoin de collaborer avec des BIPOC pour légitimer leurs statuts socioculturels et assurer leur accès continu aux ressources financières d'organismes qui *promouvent la diversité*.

This distortion of relational dynamics often stems from a dismissal of individual and collective histories. During the tête-à-tête Charles Koroneho expressed a desire for his destination to observe his journey and this idea strongly resonated with everyone in the room. We discussed what it would mean for institutional practices to consider and reflect how we come to hold space together and why certain roads that lead to the very same open door can vary in length and navigability. More importantly we addressed what it would mean for institutions to recognize and actively challenge the ways in which they lengthen and complicate the roads we must travel to reach them. This goes hand in hand with recognizing how difficult it can often be for BIPOC to come to voice and share their practices in predominantly white spaces that have histories of racial inequality, silencing and distortion.

I believe institutional practices that go beyond acknowledging systemic racism and that actively resist the (re)production of racial inequalities can lead to more generative interracial dialogues. It is in this spirit that I ask you to risk discomfort by occasionally leaving the room. Leaving the room is different from leaving the conversation. Leaving the room allows the conversation to flourish in your absence and take new directions when you come back to it. Leaving the room allows us to address what we tend to avoid or embellish in your presence and move closer to a place of honesty so that we may all eventually come together and speak sincerely while lessening the burden of perception. I ask that you occasionally leave the room so that underrepresented artists, academics and activists may gather and encourage each other's practices without the burden of institutional distortion. I ask that you occasionally leave the room because certain things quite simply cannot occur in your presence.

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