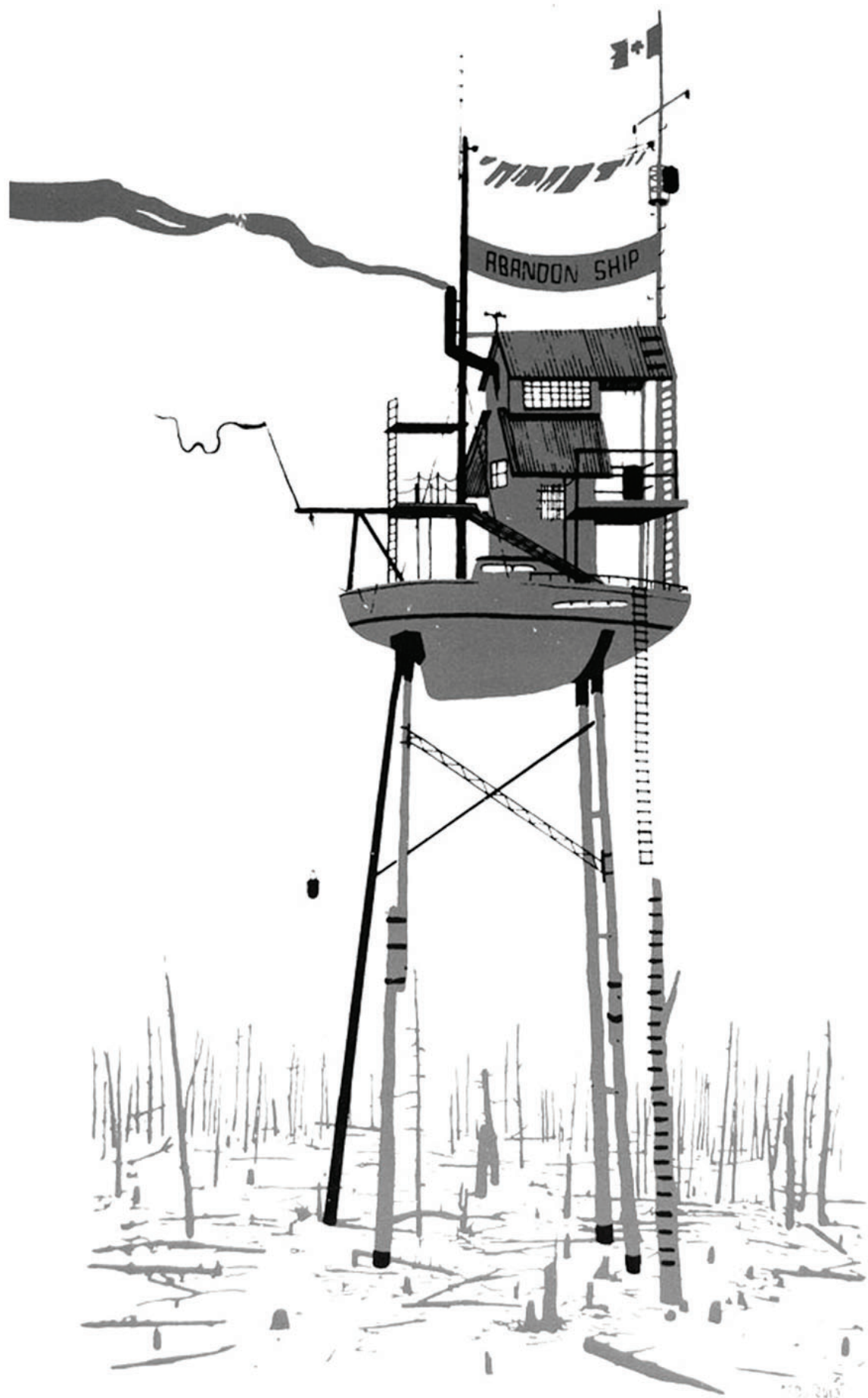


chris foster : frontiers in real estate

september 25 - october 26 2013

2 P M 2 8 S E P T E M B E R A R T I S T I N S T I T U T E

7 P M 2 6 S E P T E M B E R O P E N I N G E X H I B I T I O N



Connexion Artist-Run Centre is excited to present Chris Foster's project FRONTIERS IN REAL ESTATE as a solo exhibition in our main gallery. This artwork uses wry humour and vivid imagination to consider questions of human adaptation and survival, at a moment when monumental environmental and economic changes appear to be imminent. Foster's meticulously crafted models depict custom-built wooden homes mounted on the back of pickup trucks. A series of screen-prints present optimistic visions of a post-collapse society: elaborate dwellings built atop telecommunication towers, or a shantytown built on the underside of a bridge. The exhibition also presents Foster's book-work *New Civilizations* (2012) alongside the book's original collage works, and *Untitled Roof* (2013) which creates a secondary space inside the main gallery – offering a small shelter for conversation and contemplation.

Throughout the last century New Brunswick has attracted many people wanting to establish alternative 'off the grid' lifestyles. When presented here, Foster's artworks allude not only to an imagined future, but also to past and present lifestyles in this province. In this context, the artworks read as both a celebration of human ingenuity, and an anxious foreshadowing of events to come.

SOPHIA BARTHOLOMEW You've been developing *Frontiers in Real Estate* since 2011, but it seems related to your book project *Some Vehicles of Tomorrow* from 2009, and the poster series you created for Nocturne in 2010. Maybe you could tell me about how the project developed – did it emerge out of those earlier works?

CHRIS FOSTER I guess it started from a small project I did at 161 Gallon Gallery which was in (Halifax artists) Dan Joyce and Ryan Park's hallway. It was a fun idea, and for a number of years I've been trying to negotiate these feelings of escapism and fear about environmental destruction and all of these things ... the collapse of society, all of these nice light topics [laughs] after working with the Khyber (an artist-run centre in Halifax) I was thinking about how to travel and have shows ... how to take that and make a very portable project. A lot of that stuff came out of research that I did with the collage works (compiled in the book *New Civilizations*) and then a lot of that stuff came out of the job I had – working with a heritage carpenter. The vernacular architecture in Halifax informed a lot of what I've been making. And then screenprinting and printmaking had become a big part of my practice ... mostly because of the potential they have for reproduction.

I took printmaking classes when I was in school, and one of the things we read was Susan Tallman's *The Contemporary Print* and when looking at your work I thought of a quote from that book “Prints have become a critical art form because their modes and procedures can articulate so many of the concerns fundamental to recent art. An interest in the mechanics of meaning and communication, a desire to reveal the processes by which an image arises, and a conviction that understanding the workings of reproduction is essential to understanding life.” Is there something about the idea of

reproduction being this central function in our current society that makes printmaking appealing to you?

It definitely resonates with me. I'm feeling critical of printmaking right now, because of the explosion and saturation of imagery available on the internet. Somebody told me the other day that in the last year, there have been as many photographs taken as in the entire history of photography. So as much as I'm maintaining my interest in printmaking, as a way to negotiate this, the saturation of imagery is becoming...

It's a cultural condition.

Yeah. I'm also having issues with the imagery of these sculptures I've been making, because that has also exploded as a topic on the internet, or as a sort of *fetishized* blog topic. When I started making this work, I could find very little of that kind of imagery on the internet, and now it is saturated.

So what does that *do* to the work, for you? How does that shift it?

Um, well it certainly is causing me some existential crises in art-making. I mean ... my interest in heavily conceptual practices involving the internet is zero. I'm not interested in trawling the internet and making a video, you know, like my interest in all that is nil. But that seems to be the only critical path to engaging with that saturation.

There's this really great essay that was helpful for me, in trying to

think through this condition of *saturation*. Susan Buck Morss' essay *Aesthetic / Anaesthetic* (in *October* Vol. 62, Autumn, 1992) sort of chronicles the desensitization which historically starts to occur through the mass-industrialization of the nineteenth century ... and looks at how aesthetics as a word has its root in sensory experience (aesthetics coming from *aisthisis* – the sensory experience of perception in ancient Greek) and asks if it's important to return to a physical, sensory experience of the world? Because that seems to be what's at stake in a highly 'device-oriented' culture.

Totally. My next interest in art-making is trying to figure out how to make work about alienation – or how we are now alienated from natural places ... how the extension of the internet has created this vacuum of place that is nowhere and everywhere.

Yeah, well that seems to be something we've been discussing a lot recently – this concern about being *moveable* and being *portable*. Your exhibition is highly portable, but then you're also presenting these objects that are about, say, building a home on the back of your truck and being able to move wherever, or ... being able to construct this *home* wherever – in these highly unusual places...

Industrial wastelands.

Yeah. Well, I wonder how that relates? You've suggested these kind of *flexible* "house" structures, but it feels like there's this real demand for "home" to be portable too. As young people, and particularly as artists, I think there's this push to be, like, based between Halifax-Toronto-Berlin or whatever, like that has this *cachet*. And when jobs often seem few and far between, there's this pressure to move around for work all the time. Maybe that's a challenge felt particularly strongly in the Maritime provinces ... I wonder if you think about this work in relation to this demand to move around a lot – the kinds of existential challenges it produces?

Definitely. The work has definitely come up

because I have been entrenched in Halifax for so long. The work is critical of culture, but it's also pretty emotional for me. I mean, these sentiments aren't central to the work but ... I guess that I am trying to negotiate that distance (now that I'm moving to Toronto in October) I'm trying to take a place with me. I've become very attached to these neighbourhoods in Halifax and I'm leaving them now, but then I'm taking these things on the road. The work is going to Dawson City (ODD Gallery artist-run centre).

And it was in St. John's, at Eastern Edge (artist-run centre) earlier this year.

Yeah, So it's sort of going from one side of the country to the other, which is interesting.

So does that operate as *content* for the project – the fact that it's travelling now?

I think that it is at least part of the humorous metaphor of the work – that the subject matter of the work is about escape and travel, and having to be portable or mobile, and then the undertones of the show, particularly the collage works, is all about environmental destruction and change. But I do feel like I'm playing an old card now, like I feel like my ideas from 2010 are ... you know, we had a massive hurricane that destroyed part of New York City! Or, like, the Fukushima nuclear disaster after that earthquake in Japan ... it's

insane. And it feels kind of uncanny how time unfolds ahead of you, and these themes of *doom* and *escape* are becoming everyday ...

In my first reading of the work there seemed to be, well, on the one hand, this earnestness, but on the other hand, it seemed like you were also making fun of 'survivalist' culture, or a kind of age-old desire to escape society ... Are you being a little bit cheeky here?

I think there's a sense of humour in the *exaggeration* in some of the works, or there's a little bit of absurdity or fantasy. All of the things that I'm presenting are not entirely over-the-top – they definitely walk that line though – verging on absurdity.

Like they're not impossible, but many of them would be difficult to actually execute.

Totally. But the more research I do, the more realistic they seem – the more examples of these types of structures that come up. Like somebody in the '70s built this, or there are these towers in Russia that have been done in the exact same way as what I'm representing (in my prints). I'm always interested in seeing what the work does in different contexts, with different audiences ... like when I bring these things to Dawson City, I don't think they will be that strange to the people that live there. But if I showed these things in downtown Toronto, I

think that the fantastic elements of the work would be more exaggerated.

Yeah, one of our members (Fredericton artist) William Forrestall was looking at images of your work and saying "when he's here we should build something!" – taking the work, not as something *abstract* but rather as something real that we can act on – something that we can actually do here.

I'm working on a structure right now actually (similar to those represented by the models and prints), while I'm here at Struts (an artist-run centre in Sackville) doing an artist residency. The natural progression of this work would be for me to buy a truck and build something on the back of it ...

Yeah, well that's an important question – why this project takes the form that it does – models, prints and collages instead of ... do you see these works as a step toward building "the real thing" ?

I think I'm more interested in these things as cultural artefacts, than I am actually doing this in real life.

Why?

Why? I think that my situation – as a professional artist in Canada – and my approach to art-making have led me to believe that making these things for fun and for show is way more viable than making them in real life. Or ... the realities of owning a truck and maintaining one of these things are not what's interesting to me. And now, as time had passed and I've made a bunch of them I feel like I've kind of gotten it out of my system.

Seems like a lot of artists whose work concerns itself with this issue of environmental degradation are concerned about consuming materials... Does that type of concern inform the shape of your practice?

I do think that one of the reasons I'm making this work small and portable is because I find the

excess and decadence of art objects to be disgusting. Almost all of the materials that went into the sculptures have come from Dalhousie's architecture school – at the end of each semester, I go and dig through all of their lovely garbage.

So these huge warehouse installations that use so much *material*, that's something that's appalling for you?

I find it appalling. Like I find 10 x 10 foot oil paintings to be kind of a disgusting excess at this point. Or platinum-plated Jeff Koons sculptures to be really incredibly offensive.

Well do you think that's a moral position? Or do you think you can make that kind of moral claim?

Yeah, I guess I am able to continue as a visual artist largely because I occupy a position of privilege, and so ... I do think there's a fine line there ... my work still serves the decadence of the white cube gallery and the excesses of the art world, but I feel like it also serves a conversation, and that is what is important.

I find it's problematic trying to make a claim of being morally superior or taking a position of innocence because you've decided to work in a particular way.

No, I don't think I like to frame things that way. There's always compromise – you have ideals, but then there's always

compromise. I don't know. I also consider this work only one part of my creative practice, and so there are projects that I am involved in, like the White Rabbit Open Air Art Project (in Upper Economy, Nova Scotia) where we feed thirty people for a week on entirely organic, locally-sourced food, and that kind of work is a little more meaningful in that way.

Besides the production of *objects*, what are the other aspects of your artistic practice?

Working with the Khyber Centre for the Arts (an artist-run centre in Halifax) has been a big thing – working with the Board (of Directors) there, and working with artists – doing programming and shows and events and working together with the music community at the Khyber. Working with the Bus Stop Theatre in Halifax has been a big part of my practice, and just trying to make opportunities for emerging artists to stay in Halifax has been a big thing for me over the past few years. And that has led into the Periodical Project (a quarterly broadsheet publication promoting Halifax artists) where I saw an opportunity for exposure for emerging artists and went for it (co-founding the publication with Natalie Slater). And I've had some qualms around producing a paper-based publication and making 2000 copies of each one, each time, but compared to what's happening in the rest of society it's a joke, it is negligible, it's a drop in the bucket.

I was working at a small restaurant a couple of years ago and I was recycling and composting at home – but then I would go to work and we would produce as much waste as I recycled at home in a month, in one night. And there were all these disincentives keeping the restaurant from changing that practice.

Yeah, growing up in Toronto I worked a lot of retail jobs, and then after I graduated from NSCAD I worked in a lot of restaurant situations, and these jobs really relieved a lot of my concern about my individual consumption. So I guess that



it comes full circle ... I still believe that what is now a global culture is a cultural problem. I think that a big part of what is going on with our economy is a cultural problem. My interest in making art, and the foundation from which I started making art, has been in trying to engage with these cultural problems.

There also seem to be playful propositions being made ... for the future. Do you think part of what art can do is imagine the world differently? Is that proposition important, do you think?

I do think it's important ... I was taking a David Howard critical theory class (at NSCAD) at one point, and he was talking about how one of the biggest problems we have in trying to instigate cultural revolution and meaningful cultural change is ... our inability to imagine the future after the revolution – he was talking about how ‘the radical imagination’ has been greatly reduced. Maybe because of the saturation of imagery and the saturation of possible outcomes. I've always had an interest in trying to imagine these more humble futures ... but now I find that I'm doing it at a time when *so is everyone else*.

And it wasn't that way when you started this body of work?

I think my awareness of it has been expanded through research, and I think there's been an explosion in the popularity of ‘doomsday’ subject matter.

Where do you see that coming from?

Mostly through films. It seems to be ... a reaction to how quickly society and technology are moving forward. There are also some pretty amazing authors who have delved into these realms for a very long time – books like *The Road* (Cormac

McCarthy).

Yeah, you're in Sackville right now, and they have (Radio Canada International) short-wave radio towers just outside of town there that they're tearing down (RCI discontinued its shortwave radio service in 2012). It's this amazing technology in terms of being low- electricity input, and achieving pretty far- reaching global communication. If energy continues to be a big concern ... who knows, in twenty years it might be really viable again. It just seems short-sighted to erase all of that expertise and infrastructure.

Yes, I totally agree.

Your poster design for Sappyfest 6 (2011) used images of the radio towers ...

Yeah, I'm obsessed with those radio towers. They're so beautiful.

If you could propose something – a proposal to keep those towers – what do you imagine doing?

One of the artists I was introduced to recently is Peter von Tiesenhäusen (who incidentally had a solo exhibition at Connexion in 2004) and he works on and owns property in the centre of Alberta somewhere. A few years ago, maybe ten years ago, he had an oil company approach him and say “we're going to put up a pipeline through your land and there's nothing you can do about it.” He mulled this over for a few months, and then he went and had his land copyrighted as an artwork and took the company to court – claiming the land as his intellectual property, and he won. And then a few years later some other company went onto his land, and he took them to court and won a million dollars. And he immediately spent that money on more land.

To claim as his artwork.

To expand his art project. He's a land artist, he has all these temporal installations on his property and he travels all over the world talking about these things. But I think it would be interesting to try to protect that site (the RCI shortwave relay station outside of Sackville) as some sort of cultural communication hub ...

Well you were there at the Atlantic Symposium in Halifax (April 2013) ... I thought one of the most interesting things that came out of that weekend was the proposition about *audiences* – that audiences aren't a predetermined group of people; rather, that art and art writing are things that *bring an audience into being*.

Totally. I'm interested in making work that isn't necessarily for 'the initiated' – work that doesn't necessarily lead with *discourse* or pre-established subject matter that is only familiar to those deep inside the art world. I'm excited about kids engaging with my work and finding it exciting! And I'm interested in what seniors have to say about my work! What I've discovered in trying to make work that is both accessible and critical, is that you can't stab people in the eye with a fork – at least not right away. You've got to draw them in with *the work of the hand*, with things that are familiar to them, or things that are fantastic and funny. Humour is a good way to bring people into the conversation.

And maybe some of those maybe some people never enter 'the conversation' ...

Yeah, and that is fine, I think that rich aesthetic experiences are enough, and I think that conversation is under-served in contemporary art – and in the

conversation about who is the audience for this artwork.

Well there's something that came up at that (Atlantic) symposium, and it came up again at the East of There conference in Saint John (June 2013) in a discussion about art publications – there's this idea that how things circulate in the world and part of their value – that printed matter circulates differently from digital publications ...

Yeah, I'm finding an interesting shift right now with printed matter, in that the only way to maintain privacy is in the transfer of information is through print. Like, how our conversation right now (on Skype) is being recorded and we're being spied on by the NSA. All of our emails are being recorded a ...we're being spied on by foreign entities, we're being spied on by our own government, we're being spied on by our regional governments. So if there is anything radical in whatever information you want to disseminate, the only way to do that with anonymity and privacy is through printed matter, if you want to do that on a larger scale. It's even the case that all of our mail is photographed, at this point. The US postal service photographs every piece of mail that goes through the entire mail service and it's all catalogued and data-based.

If there's that level of surveillance, do you then develop some sort of alternate network of distribution?

That's what I love about Allison Creba's City Mail project, it's so sentimental and rich and engages audiences in this really lovely way – it's like "here's some mail from you're friends!" – but the subtext of that project is all about do-it-yourself autonomy and there is this critical core of

that project which is about autonomy and independence from those larger structures of society. She's putting up a show now at the Owens (Gallery in Sackville) and she and I are going to work on a book about it this winter. Writing essays about that project will be exciting I think.

You seem to have done a bunch of self-publishing – book projects – and what's the appeal of that for you?

I like that I can make a whole bunch of things and then have them for my own personal archives, and give them to people, and sell them, and have them for a long period of time. The satisfaction of process is really important to me, and printmaking is all about process, or you know, putting together things is all about *process*. And so most of our culture is obsessed with immediate satisfactions these days, instant gratification, and I'm finding that as time goes on, it's process that's keeping me grounded, in my art practice. Like I really enjoy going to the studio and having four hours of folding to do, or whatever it is. So there's physical satisfaction through that, and also critical satisfaction through that. And as print becomes antiquated, it's becoming more powerful, in a way. New print is becoming so much more coveted.

Do you think about the time that you spend printmaking and folding – these repetitive tasks – is that a reflective time for you? We've been talking about being stimulated, or maybe over-stimulated, but maybe 'reflective time' is a change to consider that otherwise-constant stimulation.

I really find it an important time in my life, yeah, the making of these things. I also am putting together an artist talk right now and came to the realization recently that as a kid growing up in Toronto, my first job *ever* was a paper route, and so from a young age I was folding papers together, so taking these bundles of fliers and folding them together and putting them all in stacks. It's just one of those things where you realize these aren't conscious things that you're doing, necessarily, but ...

You were brainwashed!

Yeah, I also find it interesting that we are the last of the analog generation, so there's this knowledge and experience that has come from witnessing what had transpired over the last fifteen years and how, when we were growing up, television and typewriters and all of those things were still ubiquitous, and all of those things have slowly evaporated to the point where children now are so in tune with the iPad that it's like a dawning of a new age ... It's really bizarre.

CHRIS FOSTER is an interdisciplinary artist working in illustration, installation and print. His work employs a dark sense of humour to negotiate conflicts of hope and hopelessness in contemporary politics and culture. Foster's projects celebrate do-it-yourself resourcefulness while questioning popular notions of 'progress.' His process is rooted in production-based projects, multiples and editions – taking aesthetic cues from specific regional vernaculars, historical imagery and old magazines. Foster has presented work at Eastern Edge Gallery (St. John's), White House Gallery (Toronto), the Khyber Centre for the Arts (Halifax), Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax), Eyelevel Gallery (Halifax), the Anna Leonowens Gallery (Halifax), Thunder & Lightning (Sackville) and 161 Gallon Gallery (Halifax), with an upcoming exhibition at the ODD Gallery in Dawson City, Yukon. In the weeks before his exhibition at Connexion, he was the artist in residence at Struts Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick.

SOPHIA BARTHOLOMEW is a contemporary artist currently based in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and is the Associate Director of Connexion Artist-Run Centre.

CONNEXION is a dynamic community of people, meeting to engage with contemporary art, and with related issues of social urgency. As Fredericton's only artist-run centre, Connexion is a supportive, open, and equitable space for the generation and discussion of contemporary art.





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