

Roundtable Title: Labors of Love and Organizing for Solidarity Within, Across, and Beyond the Cultural Industries

TIME: Friday, March 28 1:30 - 3:00 pm

LOCATION: Conference hotel, le Centre Sheraton Montréal. Room: Kafka-Lamartine

Participants & Contact Info:

Lee Bishop (Denver Museum of Nature & Science)

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Haley Bryant (President Lincoln's Cottage Museum; Ph.D. Candidate, University of Toronto)

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Greig de Peuter (Wilfrid Laurier University)

Carolyn Jong (Game Workers Unite)

Bonnie McDonald (President & CEO, Landmarks Illinois; NCPH Labor Task Force member)

Amanda Tobin Ripley (Ph.D. The Ohio State University; co-researcher on the Museums Moving Forward Art Museum Unions Index) amanda.tobin.ripley@gmail.com

Withdrawn due to conflicts but vital participants in the development of the roundtable nonetheless:

Steff Hui Ci Ling (PhD Student, Simon Fraser University)

Dr. Nicole Cohen (University of Toronto)

Salma Geneidy (Newberry Library; AFSCME Cultural Workers United)

AGENDA:

Introduction (5 min) - Amanda

Facilitated Questions (55 min)

1. What concrete ways can we build solidarity right here and now at NCPH?

2. One critical component of this trend is the growing embrace of creative and cultural labor as *labor*, and workers' self-identification with the term "worker," as opposed to "museum professional," "artist," "designer," and so forth. These identity shifts bear implications for effective grassroots organizing and coalition-building for social change. How have establishing worker identities or standpoints been instrumental in campaigns for organizing with professional workers and workers that may not have historically identified as part of the working class?
3. What are common working conditions in these sectors that drive unionization campaigns?
4. I want to turn to the particularities of labor organizing within the cultural sector. I'm interested in how the cultural sector's contested and contentious ability to shape, record, and communicate culture influences the conditions of work, social movements, and broader society.
5. How do the experiences of organizing and solidarity shape our work (is there an influence on the kinds of stories that get told)?
6. Of course, it's also important to speak to some of the challenges these campaigns are facing, both internally among workers, within institutions, and externally, in terms of labor law and what a friend of mine has been calling "The Situation" that is the current state of affairs in the U.S. What kinds of challenges and barriers have your communities encountered?
7. What questions does our discussion today raise for the future of our fields? How are we teaching about our fields to emerging professionals?
8. What does organizing in this sector look like beyond formal labor unions?

Questions from the audience (30 min)

Steff Hui Ci Ling, Standpoint on Worker Identity and Settler Colonialism

From where I am organizing, we have a lot of independent and informal DIY projects and spaces that have historically been very remote from grounded labour politics. Many are not equipped to deal with racial, gendered and class violence that could be examined and addressed by occupational health and safety literacy and a collective agreement. Many community and artist-led projects either disappear or undertake professionalization by registering as non-profits and small-scale institutions, having served as a kind of organic training ground for the next generation of curatorial assistants and museum directors, who often end up becoming the employer or representing them as managers. We're at a critical conjuncture where either

antagonism or solidarity is dialed to escalate between precariously contracted cultural workers and professionalized cultural workers.

Although art workers are very skilled at community building, forming collectives, and sharing resources, only now has unionization become increasingly explored if not as a skeptical last resort, then simply a logical thing to learn about. Some art workers I organize with recently hosted a town hall centered on hearing from workers who had unionized their workplaces. When attendance was briefly surveyed, the majority of those who attended identified as freelance workers, many of which we also knew are employed at unionized and non-unionized workplaces. Overall, very few people knew previously that these galleries are unionized.

In organizing with art workers in the non-profit arts and cultural sector, I have been asking two questions: what is our relationship to the working class and what is our relationship to settler-colonialism?

I started to broach the first question with an art workers' inquiry — I asked art workers if they identify as an artist, art worker, or worker (or all). 54% did not identify as a worker, 45% did not identify as an artist. 2% identified exclusively as a worker, and 10% identified exclusively as an artist. These responses reflect that while most did not identify as workers, the majority also did not identify as artists. This implies that more than half of the respondents do not think what they do is work. Interestingly, 74% identified as an art worker which implies that while labour by-itself does not resonate as with art workers, the specificity of working in art does. Put more simply, if we don't think we are workers, we may think of ourselves as a specific kind of worker, and we retain that specificity by distancing ourselves from things that would signal work, or the working class — such as unions.

With respect to the question of what is cultural work's relationship to settler-colonialism, I asked in the same inquiry what workers would do if they could use their skillset to destroy private property? On this question, many art workers conflate destroying private property with what they understand as pro-social land use, such as appropriating private property for things like community gardens. Others conflated it with committing contemptuous action against various institutions such as establishment art, the police, the university, and the state. This tells me that we disagree with how land is used as private property, but contempt for how land is reproduced as private property is not part of our political imagination. Private property is not about land use, it is the social relationship between capitalism and land, the same social relationship that capitalism has to our labour power. It commodifies, exchanges and extracts profit from both co-constitutively.

If we understand that the Canada Council for the Arts was an endowment established upon the death taxes of two Canadian finance capitalists Izaak Walton Killam and James Dunn who

profited from leading infrastructural and extractive projects on occupied Mi'kmaq territories (colonially known as Yarmouth, Nova Scotia), and we are still dependent on the Canada Council to fund the institutions or grants that employ or contract us, then our relationship to settler-colonialism as art workers is qualitatively and quantitatively non-beneficial.¹ Our jobs are very insecure and our worksites are poorly resourced. Therefore, art workers in my sector have a profoundly antagonistic relationship with settler-colonialism. How we understand this antagonism with settler colonialism is contingent on whether we struggle as workers to interrogate our role as workers in the reproduction of private property. We can start by looking at the character of our labour process and in our negotiations of exchange for our labour power.

With professional and creative workers becoming proletarianized and now increasingly unionized, a cultural workers movement established upon a collective worker standpoint cut across the division of labour between freelance, waged and salaried workers. In all cases, whether contract, waged, or salaried — our jobs rely on receiving a distribution of surplus value that the settler-colonial elite extracts from other sections of the working class and the land of Indigenous nations.

So, if I am to answer my own questions, I would say: I organize from the standpoint of the working class, I am in solidarity with the broader working-class struggle and I consider settler-colonialism a labour issue.

For the roundtable, I'm interested in whether establishing worker identities or standpoints have been instrumental in campaigns for organizing with professional workers and workers that may not have historically identified as part of the working class.

RESOURCES:

Museums Moving Forward Art Museum Unions Index:

<https://museumsmovingforward.com/research/projects/union-organizing/introduction>

Amanda Tobin Ripley (2023), "Not Just for Coal Miners:" Unionization in U.S. Art Museums, *Curator* (open access article) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cura.12574>

¹ Capital accumulation projects included being granted 983 acres of land upon settlement, banking, railway companies, colonial incursions through maritime trading in the West Indies and financial investment in a holding company that controlled electricity markets in various South American countries. See Anthony Thomas Williams, "The Political Economy of the Canada Council" (Department of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University, 1974).

Jessalyn Aaland (2019 - present), *Organizing Power* zines
<https://jessalynaaland.com/Organizing-Power-2019-present>

Cultural Workers Organize - "[Digital Media Unionization Timeline](#)"

Cultural Workers Organize, Communication Workers of America Canada, and Better Creative
(2022) "[Organizing Digital Media](#)." 3 min. Video.

NCPH [History@Work](#) blog

Bonnie McDonald, "[Relevancy Guidebook](#)"

