

AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN STEPHEN MCLEOD & BRANDON A. DALMER

BD: What's your background?

SM: I grew up in rural Ontario, with a very outdoors oriented family. We had a small property that we planned to (but never did) build a cabin on so I was always thinking about and drawing these imagined future spaces like cabins, houseboats, underground bunkers. I went to the University of Guelph for my undergrad degree - which really turned me on to a more research oriented and experimental way of making art. I also did most of a computer science minor as well as a fair amount of philosophy and experimental music stuff. After that I moved to the big city (Toronto) and formed a collective/studio/artist run centre called VSVSVS. We lived and worked together in a waterfront warehouse for seven years as well as running a residency program, trying to pay the bills, and tending to our individual and collective studio practice. It was fun, stressful, sometimes painful and complicated (try sharing a tiny kitchen and one bathroom between seven people for even a month!). Since then I have done other collaborative projects, spending time with the New York collective/residency Flux Factory and have increasingly found myself concerned with the various structural inequalities that exist within the art world and beyond. My research these days has a lot to do with queer(ing) family, and finding paths towards new art world(s) that are more supportive, collaborative and caring.

BD: Has Covid-19 impacted your practice in 2020? Has it shifted in anyway?

SM: Covid has kept me on my already existing doom spiral of a reading list. It's also made me feel (even more keenly) the irreversible passage of time and the need to find ways of experiencing joy in tough situations. I've been trying to meditate?

I'm always finding things that shift the way I'm thinking about my own work, probably too much so if I was more concerned with commodification of objects haha. I can't think of a specific exhibition, but I have been influenced a lot by the time I spent working with Flux Factory in New York and Aarhus, Denmark as well as the (former) off grid residency in Ontario called Don Blanche. I'm generally more interested in spaces and communities than individual artists or shows. I'm sure there's something else I'm forgetting!

BD: How do you bring about the "new"?

SM: I'm not sure what new really is (after all, it's said that everything has already been done) but I guess for me what I am after is more oriented towards justices than novelty. I am a fan of utopia as a mode of thinking (Ursula K. Le Guin!) so when I think about the future - where new comes into being - the world I imagine might be something that has never existed, but may involve giving up on some of the complex energy hungry technology that we currently rely on. For me often, newness is associated with technological innovation and constant growth, but I'd rather see innovation in the way we relate to one and other than continuing to return to the capitalist death cult of infinite growth. I don't know...solar punk! permaculture! low power electronics and mesh networks...it's complicated?

BD: Your work usually involves a community, either through past collaborative work or even with viewer involvement. Why is this important to you?

SM: To me the entire point of art and the existence of an "art world" or the idea of being an artist is in the creation of new forms of exchange, critical reflection and community. Ideas and ways of being passed between bodies and minds that an artwork facilitates and helps to digest the world. I'm not especially stuck on physical interactivity with an artwork but if it helps to activate the body and the mind of the participant, and inspires conversation and new perspectives on the world then that's what I want to see. I think that sometimes interactive art gets too caught up in it's own technological infrastructure and forgets the whole point of being interactive - to be embodied.

BD: Specifically in regards to the viewer, what kinds of interaction are you looking for?

SM: I'm not necessarily ever looking for a particular interaction with my work. The most general I could get would probably just be that I like to sit somewhere between funny, tragic and wow? But really it depends on the project, I completely reserve the right to make what ever the fuck I want based on what's happening in the world and in my life. I think we artists are too worried about fitting ourselves into a neat box so curators will know what to do with us.

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BD: Have you been able to create anything that you normally wouldn't have been able to? Is there anything art adjacent you've been up to during this time?

SM: I haven't really strayed too far from my usual practice, since I already am pretty research based and do a lot of my work on the computer. I was hoping I would use the time to really get into sewing but that hasn't quite happened just yet. Still time though I guess! I've been working on lots of website projects. Too many websites this summer. Also there is a cute squirrel that sleeps on the railing of my back porch and makes me happy.

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BD: What have you been reading?

SM: I've been reading a lot this summer - though it's very much a distracted sort of reading and a lot of it probably doesn't get synthesized as well as I would like! Big for me now has been readings on police/prison abolition and I'm waiting on a copy of The Skin We're In by Desmond Cole. I've also been reading various bits of poetry, queer stuff, family drama stuff, and lots of theory about economics and ecology. Some of the wild stuff is on cryptoeconomics, specifically related to ways to instil socialist/anarchist philosophy into a system of economics also artistic research on speculation/financialization and neocolonial extraction related to Luxembourg and the new space race. See the website "The Space Offshore" a project from RYBN.

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///// Interview elaborated upon in the attached audio segment!

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