

# Underground in the Aether

*Underground in the Aether* is a one-day symposium responding to the themes of collectivity, selfhood, and communication circuits in the exhibition *Hank Bull: Connexion* (Burnaby Art Gallery).

Assembling speakers from across Canada, the United States and Europe, *Underground in the Aether* launches itself into the entanglements of technology, fantasy and sociality as engaged by an informal and international community of artists from the 1960s to present day.

Seizing upon the terminology behind our present network economy, keynote speaker **Hannah B. Higgins**, Professor of Art History, University of Illinois (Chicago), presents *Aether/Or: The Place of Things and Beings in the Eternal Network*, proposing a rehabilitation of these terms following their use by artists in the 1960s. Presentations by **Vincent Bonin** (Montreal), **Allison Collins** (Vancouver), **Luis Jacob** (Toronto), **Jee-Hae Kim** (University of Cologne) and **Felicity Tayler** (University of Toronto), will respectively investigate the stakes and sources behind artists' turn to the imaginary during times of crisis, how forms, identities and communities are transmuted as they circulate through networks, and how artists' subcultures convened within mainstream and national communications circuits.

With the underground transposed into the aether all is up in the air: upturned and diffuse, yet also aloft, unfixed and in movement. Together these presentations look to artists' practices as a means to consider possible ways of living in and through mediation today.

Saturday, April 8th, 10:00 am to 6:00 pm

Presentations by Vincent Bonin, Allison Collins, Hannah Higgins, Luis Jacob, Jee-Hae Kim, and Felicity Tayler

As part of *Spring Fever: Vancouver Independent Archives 2017* and in response to the exhibition *Hank Bull: Connexion*

Organized by: Joni Low and Robin Simpson (Doryphore Independent Curators Society) with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Burnaby Art Gallery, VIVO Media Arts Centre and Or Gallery.

VIVO Media Arts Centre  
2625 Kaslo Street  
Vancouver, BC



## SCHEDULE

10:00 – 10:30  
Coffee and snacks

### 10:30 INTRODUCTIONS

- x **Joni Low and Robin Simpson**
- x **Elisa Ferrari and Karen Knights** on *Spring Fever: Vancouver Independent Archives 2017*

11:00 – 12:30  
PANEL 1

- x **Allison Collins**, Media Arts Curator, Western Front *TERMINAL Project*
- x **Jee-Hae Kim**, Department of Art History, University of Cologne *"Is it dinnertime yet in Wiencouver?" Some Notes on Entangled Thoughts and Cables*

Discussion

12:30 – 2:00  
LUNCH

2:15 – 4:15  
PANEL 2

- x **Vincent Bonin** Independent curator and writer *Badiou meets Filliou*
- x **Luis Jacob**, Artist, Writer, Curator *Nothing by Mouth: Networked Artist-Communities in Vancouver and Toronto During the 1970s*
- x **Felicity Tayler**, Postdoctoral Fellow, History of Art, University of Toronto *The Spirit of Those Spaces Where Networks Overlap*

Discussion

4:15  
BREAK

4:30  
KEYNOTE

- x **Hannah B. Higgins**, Professor of Art History, University of Illinois, Chicago *Aether/Or: The Place of Things and Beings in the Eternal Network*

5:30  
Closing remarks

## PANEL 1

11:00 – 12:30

Allison Collins, Media Arts  
Curator,  
Western Front  
*TERMINAL Project*

In Fall 2016 [TERMINAL](#) was launched at Western Front as a four-part installation and web project that holds as its challenge the examination of single-user interfaces, and the influence of technologies on the adaptation of artistic forms. The project addresses itself to an idea of what different hardware units, operating systems, and user environments have offered to artists and to the viewers, readers or users of their work. Each iteration has considered a different computer interface, and related artworks (text-based programming of poetry, graphical user interfaces and early digital animation, online peer sharing and virtual space formation, and media 2.0 multi-platform 'saturation').

## Jee-Hae Kim

Department of Art History,  
University of Cologne

*"Is it dinnertime yet in Wiencouver?"  
Some notes on entangled thoughts  
and cables*

In the work of Hank Bull encounters are fostered in real life as well as in the electronic space of telecommunications networks, and in the realm of the imaginary envisioned in the aether or through the screen. Those situations emerge within the mutual entanglement of people, technologies, shared ideas and also meals. Binary divides between artist and non-artist, human and nonhuman, theory and practice, art and the quotidian are playfully ignored in favor of a more integral approach that focuses on the aesthetic potential of cooperative action.

## PANEL 2

2:15 – 4:15

Vincent Bonin  
Independent curator and writer  
*Badiou meets Filliou*

We can gather from the curators' statements and some artists' works in the exhibition *Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures* (Vancouver Art Gallery) that there is a recent surge of interest in the imaginary as a rubric to renew autonomy during a time of economical over-determination. At first, it seems that artists' reinvestment in surrealist tropes is an escape attempt by distancing themselves discursively from methods of analysis, based on the understanding that the imaginary in psychoanalysis is always tethered to the symbolic and the real. Although a politic of representation is still at play, cultural misrecognition

and value attribution, at the core of the making of so many critical works in Vancouver, seem to no longer represent the starting points of these practices.

Concurrently on view in neighbouring Burnaby is *Hank Bull: Connexion* (Burnaby Art Gallery). Bull is one among many local artists closely associated with a loose international network whose common project in the 1970s through 1980s was to rehabilitate the vocabulary and subject positions of the historical avant-gardes. During a period less economically depressed than today, they played with signs and myths in order to carve out an imaginary space of autonomy for the establishment of "institutions of the possible." In this presentation, I will suggest how methodologies can intersect to reappraise these utopias of the recent past and understand a "return" of the imaginary in contemporary art.

## Luis Jacob

Artist, Writer, Curator

*Nothing by Mouth: Networked  
Artist-Communities in Vancouver  
and Toronto During the 1970s.*

Michael Morris's *Nothing by Mouth* (1971) was made as a contribution to Dana Atchely's correspondence-art project, "Space Atlas." As its title suggests, Morris's work suggests a new conception of community defined less by proximity (the nearness of mouth-to-mouth communication) than by mediation (the network of the mail system). This insight on the mediated character of networked communities proved crucial for the artist-collective General Idea. In their performance *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (1978), mediation opened the way towards performed identities and art-scenes that we the product of artifice—a scenario where 'form follows fiction.'

## Felicity Tayler

Postdoctoral Fellow, History of Art,  
University of Toronto  
*The Spirit of Those Spaces Where  
Networks Overlap*

Taking Hank Bull's article "The Relican Wedding," (*Centerfold*, July 1979) as a case study, I will address the politics of publicity that are enacted in a transitional moment for news media, intermedia art, artistic subcultures and national culture. "The Relican Wedding" parodies news reporting, exploiting the print culture form of the magazine for the documentation of a live performance event, which was also recorded using the electronic medium of video. We could think of it in today's terms as a cross-platform event that took place between more than one networking technology and/or social imaginary. Initially published as a tabloid newsletter by Arton's, an artist-run gallery

founded in Calgary in 1975, earlier issues of *Centerfold* (1975–1979) covered the activities of artists, musicians and poets who, like Hank Bull, identified with Robert Filliou's post-national concept of the Eternal Network. *Centerfold* was distributed for free amongst this affinity group, using mailing lists similarly activated to circulate correspondence and video art. Bull's Relican "reporting from Vancouver," on the other hand, was published shortly after the magazine had relocated to Toronto, a city that was positioned as the communications centre for a networked national geography. Following the move in 1979, *Centerfold* was reinvented as a subscription-based artists' news magazine, *FUSE* (1979–2014).

## KEYNOTE

4:30

## Hannah B. Higgins

Professor of Art History, University  
of Illinois, Chicago

*Aether/Or: The Place of Things and  
Beings in the Eternal Network*

*Underground in the Aether* evokes a simultaneously schematic and poetic framework. The non-commercial art world (the underground) has been characterized by a process of the dematerialization of art (an ether) since the 1960s. This underground has thrived for a half century through a highly adaptive, non-hierarchical, informal system of artists. In 1968, French poet Robert Filliou called this informal system the Eternal Network. Other artists at the time called it Intermedia, Fluxus, Happenings, the New York Correspondence School, and Mail Art. In the intervening decades, however, the language of international global networks of information culture has been appropriated and monetized by corporate capital. In both contexts (the art world and industry), the common language about networks (their flatness, their universality, their adaptability in space and time), obscures specificities of location, historical processes, and personhood. This homogenizing process creates distortions with regard to center and periphery, even as the language of networks seems to promote inclusion. By exploring the 'the place of things and beings in the Eternal Network' of the art counterculture in the 1960s, this talk performs an archaeology of terms and praxis that rehabilitates the language for continued use.

## BIOGRAPHIES

## Organizers

**Joni Low** is a writer and curator from Vancouver, presently curator-in-residence at Or Gallery. Recent exhibitions include Chloë Lum & Yannick Desranleau: *5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)* (Or Gallery, 2016), *Hank Bull: Connexion* (national tour through Confederation Centre Art Gallery, 2015–2017), and Laiwan's public artwork *Fountain: the source or origin of anything* (CBC Wall, 2014). Her critical essays appear in exhibition catalogues and publications including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Fillip*, *Momus*, *The Capilano Review* and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.

**Robin Simpson** is an art historian, curator and student based in Montreal where he works as the public programs and education coordinator at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University. A PhD candidate in art history at the University of British Columbia, his dissertation investigates video art of the 1970s through to the early 80s, re-examining the socio-political stakes in the critical and clinical framing of video's narcissism.

## Speakers

**Vincent Bonin** lives and works in Montreal. Notable among his curatorial credits is *Documentary Protocols (1967–1975)* (Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2007 and 2008) an exhibition and publication project exploring the development of artists' collectives in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s. With curator Catherine J. Morris he co-organized *Materializing 'Six Years': Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art* (Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, 2012–2013). In 2013–2014, he conceived the two-part exhibition *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant/ Actors, Networks, Theories* with a publication forthcoming from Black Dog (Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery and Dazibao, 2017). And recently, *Réponse*, which investigated the persistence of the subject in post-humanism through the work of the French philosopher Catherine Malabou (Musée d'art contemporain des Laurentides, 2016).

**Allison Collins** is a Vancouver-based curator, writer and researcher. Her curatorial projects have appeared at DIM Cinema, Or Gallery, Satellite Gallery, Western Front and VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver; Vtape, Toronto; and PLATFORM, Winnipeg. Her writing has been published across Canada with Stride Gallery, PLATFORM, Or Gallery, VIVO Media Arts Centre, Republic Gallery, *C Magazine*, *Fuse*, *ARTSlant* and Publication Studio. From 2011–2012 she was Event Manager for Institutions by Artists, a three-day congress that examined the promise and practice of artist-run culture. She holds a BFA in Visual Art from the University of Ottawa and an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia. She is presently Media Arts Curator at the Western Front and a producing member of the Doryphore Independent Curators Society.

**Hannah B. Higgins** is a Professor in the Department of Art History at UIC. She is solo author of dozens of articles on the history of the avant-garde, multi-modal artistic experiences, Fluxus, performance art and art and technology. This work appears in scholarly journals as well as *Fluxus Experience* (University of California Press, 2002) and *The Grid Book* (MIT Press, 2009). Higgins is co-editor with Douglas Kahn of *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of Digital Art* (University of California Press, 2012). She is also co-executor of the Estate of Dick Higgins and the Something Else Press. For more information and samples of her scholarship, visit: [hannahbhiggins.com](http://hannahbhiggins.com)

**Luis Jacob** is an artist, curator and writer, with exhibitions of his work at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York (2015); Witte de With, Rotterdam, and Taipei Biennial (2012); Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art, Toronto, and Generali Foundation, Vienna (2011); Kunsthalle Bern, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach (2009); Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, and Hamburger Kunstverein (2008); Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, and Documenta12, Kassel (2007). In 2016, he curated the exhibition *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto* at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, and was featured in *Le Grand Balcon*, la Biennale de Montréal (2016).

**Jee-Hae Kim** is a PhD Candidate at the University of Cologne, Germany. Her doctoral thesis focuses on telecommunications projects in Victoria, Pender Island and between Vienna and Vancouver from the late-1970s to the mid-1980s. She was research assistant for the project *Radio art: On the Development of a Medium Between Aesthetics and Socio-cultural Reception* (2011–2015, publication forthcoming) and for the Department of Art History at the University of Cologne (2016–2017). She holds a BA from the Seoul National University, South Korea and an MA at the University of Cologne, with a thesis on Bruce Conner's found footage films.

**Felicity Tayler** is presently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Art, University of Toronto. Her PhD research focused on counter-national narratives in conceptual bookworks and artists' magazines from the early 1970s. She has worked as an art librarian and as an artist. Recent writing includes a review of *Hank Bull: Connexion* (*C Magazine*, 2016), an article on Roy K. Kiyooka's Transcanada Letters (*Journal of Canadian Art History*, 2016), and *The Grey Guide to Artist-Run Publishing and Circulation* (ARCA, 2017). [atthetime.ca](http://atthetime.ca)