# IN CONVERSATION: KANARINKA WITH NATALIE LOVELESS

In this email conversation kanarinka, a.k.a. Catherine D'Ignazio talks to Natalie Loveless about her many diverse and multi-sited projects from *Funerals for a Moment* (2004) to her most recent project → *The Border Crossed Us* (2011).

**‹ natalie loveless ›** To start, can you speak a little bit about the role of the Internet in your work? Do you consider it a medium, a site, or both, and why? How do you conceive of the relation between the online and «offline» aspects of your pieces (including both performance and exhibition aspects)?

**‹ kanarinka ›** The Internet has figured in many of my projects from the early 2000's up till now. I guess I would say that I consider the Internet both a *medium* and a *site*, though I'm more inclined towards it being a site for staging various kinds of encounters. More and more these days our experiences of physical places are overlaid with our networkedness – i.e. the way that we are connected via email, text and phone wherever we are. So I'm buying groceries but I'm also chatting with a friend in another state. I'm at a concert but I'm uploading the video to my YouTube channel or streaming a live podcast to an online audience. These spaces can't be neatly separated into categories like «real» and «virtual» or «physical» and «cyber». There's also a way in which constant networkedness dissolves the distinctions between original and copy, act and document, material and immaterial. What I mean by this is that the Internet can serve a much different purpose than simply documenting something that happens in «real life» for the Internet is already a site for the unfolding of real life.

**‹ natalie ›** I wonder about your use of the word «dissolve.» Do you really mean dissolve – that is, a loss of distinction between elements – or do you mean that these distinctions and spaces, if taken seriously, start to fold into each other in multiple ways that cannot *a priori* be scripted or predicted?

**‹ kanarinka ›** Yes – I mean the latter. It's because of this kind of multiplicity that many of my projects are conceived with multiple sites (and audiences) in mind for the work. For example, in the project *Funerals for a Moment* (2004) I

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See: www.kanarinka.com

**NATALIE LOVELESS** is an artist, academic and curator. Her doctoral dissertation («Acts of Pedagogy: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Art and Ethics,» 2010) and artistic practice share a central commitment to feminist embodiment and material entanglement in the everyday. Issues addressed in previous work include the politics of narrative, the representation of mourning and melancholia, and participatory dissent as a reframing of political discourse. Natalie currently resides in Kitchener, Ontario.

See: www.loveless.ca

→ See The Border Crossed Us – http://www.ikatun.org/kanarinka/the-border-crossed-us/

Border Crossed Us (fence)
The Border Crossed Us, 2011. Fence, sound installation, website & public programs by *The Institute for Infinitely Small Things*. Photo by John Sobol.

invited people on the Internet mailing lists to submit their lost or inconsequential moments to the project's website. They were asked to detail where and when the moment happened in New York City. Then, as part of the Conflux festival, I led a small parade of mourners around to the sites of these passed moments and performed funerals for the moments. Finally, I compiled all of the moments into a book. Those who experienced the project may have submitted a moment online, may have participated in a funeral, may have seen the procession go by, may have read the book or may have simply looked at the project website after the fact.

‹ **natalie** › Would you say that, in this context, what emerges is a kind of responsiveness between these multiple sites? I'd love to hear you say a little more about how the different aspects of a piece like this fold into each other, and how that multiplicity is central to the work.

‹ **kanarinka** › Absolutely. A more recent project, → *The Border Crossed Us* (2011), was a sculptural intervention that erected a photo mural replica of the US-Mexico fence on the UMass Amherst campus across a busy pedestrian walkway. The project recreated the part of the international boundary fence in southern Arizona that was erected in 2008 across the ancestral homelands of the Tohono O'odham indigenous people. The situation along that border is outrageous – many O'odham are regularly detained and arrested just going about their daily lives. For the project, I wanted to create a parallel situation of community division that could be experienced by students on the North-South boundary of their territory. So the project was the fence but it was also bringing a delegation of Tohono O'odham to campus to speak about their experiences, and it was also partnering with the Native Studies program on producing a powwow, and it was also working with faculty to design writing assignments for students in their classes, and it was also re-purposing a map kiosk to ask the students a different «border question» each day to which they could respond by texting their answers to a website, and it was also the website which served as a site of conversation and documentation of the multiple ways the idea wove its way through the UMass community. In this case, the website was a kind of archive of the multiple performances of the project which took place in different locations and at different times.

‹ **natalie** › I am really interested in the way your multiple sites almost *chiastically* fold into each other, articulating a complex and rich form of «artistic research.»
You started off by saying that «the Internet is already a site for the unfolding of real life.» In this respect, we can think of the Internet as a kind of *polis* – a public space. But, as you point to, it is never simply a «public» space distinct from the intimacy of private space – if that distinction ever really held given the dense materiality of everyday life. Do you see a distinction between work that happens in and with public space and *public art*? Do you consider *Funerals for*

The Border Crossed Us, 2011.
Fence, sound installation, website & public programs
by *The Institute for Infinitely Small Things*.
Photo by John Sobol.

*a Moment* or *The Border Crossed Us* – pieces that unfold in public space and with participation from the public – as pieces of public art? Or, would you consider the pieces to be «social practice» pieces instead of «public art» pieces? If so, what is the distinction for you and why does the distinction matter?

**‹ kanarinka ›** In regards to → *The Border Crossed Us*, it was very important to me that the piece not just be, to use the public arty term, «plop art.» Homeland Security already did plop art in the Arizona desert. I didn't want to just abstract the fence out of its original geographic context in southern Arizona and plunk it down in a new location. It felt important to not only build a fence but to build a context, community and relationships around that structure so that the project would have a chance of having greater affective impact. There was also an aspect of storytelling to the project – how to bring a geography and people that are far away into the context of everyday life for college students in New England. And the story is not my story – it's the story of the people who live with and experience the fence everyday – the Tohono O'odham – so it was essential that we craft a way for them to come and speak on behalf of the fence. And, being in a college environment, it also felt important to work with faculty to design opportunities for student reflection. I guess for me it is not only about the design of an object but also about engineering the circuits of reception and reflection that make that object really mean something for others. In this sense, I believe you could call the work «social practice» of a sort although it's different from some of the typical examples like artist-as-meal-provider or artist-as-foot-massager. (Just kidding, I don't know foot massaging art projects but I'm interested in finding some.) Social practice occasionally feels to me like Duchamp for the experience economy – i.e. found experiences instead of found objects which are then made into «art» because of being put into an art context. But those experiences happen all the time in more meaningful, committed and sustainable ways outside the art context so I sort of don't see what the big deal is. I've been calling work like *The Border Crossed Us* «temporary public art» because it happens outside, relates aesthetically to other works of public art (Christo, Serra) and it is for a particular community. Also, in this case, it had to pass through the campus' public art committee, which was a real learning experience for me. But in regards to the terminology, I guess I would say I'm wary of both of those terms and use them when politically expedient depending on the audience.

**‹ natalie ›** I love the way you put the following: «it is not only about the design of an object but also about *engineering the circuits of reception and reflection that make that object really mean something for others*.» That is so beautifully put. What really strikes me is the political thrust, not only of this statement, but linked to this, of the kind of multiplicity – multidiciplinarity and multilocality and multimodality – that you invoke in something like *The Border Crossed Us*. While you insist on the multidisciplinarity and multimodality of *The Border Crossed Us* as a central aspect of the piece, is it also central to its politics? (I am thinking here about the extraordinary work feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe has done with the notion of the political – both for radical democracy and in relation to contemporary art.) Can you say more about the role of politics in your work and how you understand and work with the political? I also am curious about how important collaboration is to your practice, and whether your understanding of politics informs how you think about and work in collaborations?

**‹ kanarinka ›** Regarding the political, multimodal and multivocal – we have inherited a tradition of individual authorship in regards to works of art which I feel is very connected to our conception of the individual, rational actor in representative democracy. I feel (and by feel I mean in my body not my head) this idea of individual authorship to be deeply and intrinsically untrue. I even find the idea that we are individuals to be extremely suspect as I do not feel myself so separated from the things around and inside me. So I author things collaboratively as *The Institute for Infinitely Small Things* and try to remain as open as possible to the different manifestations, tanglings and directions a project can take in its unfolding. I have this idea of doing a project that would try to imagine how we would be and relate to each other if we took joinedness as our first operating principle instead of individuality. If anyone is reading this and wants to think about that together, please get in touch.

**‹ natalie ›** I think this is an extremely important way to think about things, and it is one that, in my work, I approach through the artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger's notion of a «matrixial ethics.» A matrixial ethics *starts* with relation – a kind of responsive enmeshment – and only works with anything approaching individuation from that starting point. This primary relation is something that feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway regularly invokes when she says (drawing on the work of Karen Barad) that *relation is the smallest unit*. But I digress!
Or maybe I don't … I want to take you back to one of your earliest curatorial projects: *info@blah* at the Mills Gallery in Boston, MA. I remember the central role of «net art» in the exhibition. You weren't, at the time, talking overtly about relationality. Instead, the buzz-word was «interactivity.» Can you speak to the role of technology and interactivity, two central concerns for «net art,» in your work over the years? How are these concerns related to your use of participation and the performing relational body? In other words, can you say more about your move from «interaction» to «relation» as different modes, or understandings, of participation?

**‹ kanarinka ›** It's funny because my first forays into art production were marked by an intense desire to create «interactive» work where I imagined an oppressed viewer being unshackled from their looking-at-art chains and able to finally engage in a real, authentic way with an artwork. Looking back, I cringe a little bit at these fantasies of oppression and liberation that, to some

extent, still dog digital-tech-interactive art and prevent it from (in my opinion) being able to fully engage with subjects other than the technology itself. That said, I think that «net art» has come a long way from the early days of trying to position itself as some kind of anti-gallery avant-garde movement. But I am still very skeptical and wary about liberation fantasies in relation to technological developments. Facebook probably won't save the world and the «Twitter Revolution» is a clever branding scheme. We are living in the age of participation in which media companies no longer need to create content to generate revenue – no need for actors, journalists or writers – the end-users can create the content for free, everyone is a producer, everyone is liberated, we therefore have more democracy. Or so goes a particular narrative of participation. By that reasoning, Jersey Shore (the reality TV show) must be our most profound democratic action to date. And though I do actually enjoy watching Jersey Shore, I don't see many parallels between it and democracy. Maybe on MTV's website where you get to vote on Snooki's outfit? But now *I'm* digressing. I think technological developments have played a major role in shifting the way we work, play, and relate to each other in our everyday lives. In the early days of the Internet, the body was in «meat-space.» But over the past ten years I think we've come to terms with the fact that our materiality, our bodies, are still (even more so) the central players in these networked-physical spaces that we inhabit.

‹ **natalie** › Yes! This is what N. Katherine Hayles insists on in *How We Became Posthuman*, but it, sadly, still needs to be reasserted all too often. In any case, your invocation of «meat-space/virtual-posthuman-disembodied-space» leads into some other questions I have for you: could you say a bit about the role of «site» in your work? Do you consider your work to be site-specific, context-specific, situation-specific or some other such designation? And what is the role of the studio in your work – do you have a studio? Or is the traditional studio displaced or made obsolete by the needs of your practice? I am thinking, for example, of the → *Corporate Commands* piece or the piece that you did in your back alleyway …

‹ **kanarinka** › You ask a lot of questions! I do have a studio but it's a small room in our home which also serves the purpose of family office, exercise room, and guest bedroom. So mostly I have a desk and a wall to hang things on but I realized that I can't hang anything too nice because my son recently colored on one of my sketches for a collaborative drawing project called *Erase the Border*. Lately I've been considering my runs as my studio. I have two small children and the only time I have to think expansively is when I'm running and not in front of a computer or networked device of some sort. So I think my studio is time-based and situation-specific. Recently when my kid fell asleep on a plane I think I had a studio, too. I was physically immobilized because of the giant baby in my lap but I was able to stare at the ceiling and imagine some really interesting solutions to creative challenges I was facing for particular projects.


It takes 154,000 breaths to evacuate Boston, 2007 – 8. Running performances, website, gallery installation by kanarinka. Photo by David Raymond.

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Corporate Commands, 2004 – Present. Performances in

Exit Strategy, 2008. 2:12 looping video installation at the ICA Boston by kanarinka.

It was during the alley project that you speak of, *Public Alley 818*, that I realized I could not be a traditional studio artist. I had just started an MFA program and they kept talking about being «in the studio» and I tried very hard for the first couple months but ended up feeling the need to insinuate myself into a larger context. So I put out a call on the Internet for actions I could do in Public Alley 818 which ran right behind my apartment. People submitted instructions online and I carried them out – everything from planting flowers to reading aloud to impossible Fluxus-like ideas.
In regards to the terminology, I think my projects are more context- and situation-specific than site-specific as they try to take into account not only the particular properties of a place but also the actions, relationships (emotional and spatial), and other more performative aspects of a site.

**‹ natalie ›** OK, here is my last (multi-pronged) question! This framework, your mode of approach, seems fundamentally feminist to me. Can you speak specifically to the role of aesthetics in your work? Are you informed by a feminist conceptual aesthetic? More generally, how do you make formal/aesthetic choices and what informs them? Do you see your work within a specific lineage and thereby draw on certain aesthetic histories?

**‹ kanarinka ›** Speaking of aesthetics, my inspiration comes from things that are, in a way, everyday and minor – in this respect I *am* indebted to a history of feminist thought. And so I think the aesthetic choices often flow from those things as well and are either designed to blend into the everyday flow of life or to disrupt it in a calculated way. And, particularly with the *Institute*, I try to treat most endeavors as a kind of collaborative experiment so I try not to overly aestheticize or control them. So that is not to say that aesthetics are not important because they are extremely important, only that projects outside the gallery often unfold in unpredictable ways and it is important to be open to that and not fixate on scripting some kind of perfectly aestheticized social intervention whose meaning and value you have determined in advance.
And speaking of lineage – Fluxus for humor and white lab coats. Dada for irreverent intervention along the outsides of things. And feminist performance art for prioritizing the specific body in specific space (there still is not enough bodily fluid in contemporary art). The Situationists and De Certeau for the very powerful idea that by moving one's everyday body in everyday space you might change the world. A kind of poetics of revolution but micro-revolution, resistance in the affective register. I still find solace in this idea and it's where the name *The Institute for Infinitely Small Things* came from.

public space by *The Institute for Infinitely Small Things*.
Photo by James Manning.

Videographer Mike Hall.