

I SEE YOU TOO

An ongoing conversation between artist Erika DeFreitas and curator Tarin Dehod

The dialogue is centred around preparation for their upcoming exhibition at AKA Artist Run Centre in Saskatoon, SK.

We talk. On the phone, over text, on Zoom, via email, and now here in a living document, in the body, through comments, and chat. For two people who have met only once, over tea on Queen Street, we talk a lot. We're working on a project together; we have been since 2019, but it's more than that. Since the world shifted, the logistics of our planning has come to include brief personal moments. Segues that we can't trace. An image to share what our eyes just saw. A text. A passing thought. And then it's back over to work.

The connection happened on its own. It feels natural and real and reliable.

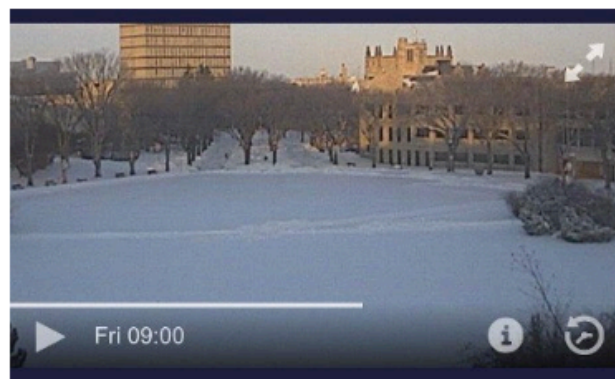
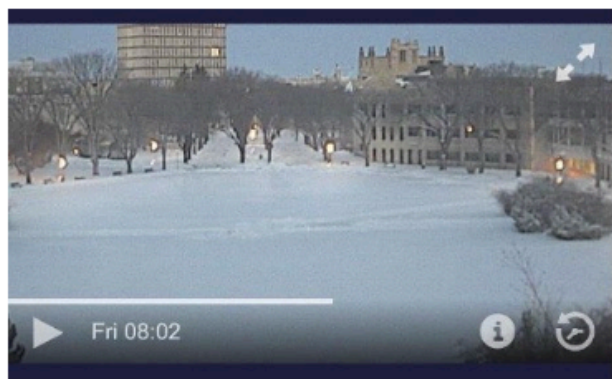
Tarin Dehod, Nov. 13, 2020: I was hoping to catch the sunrise for you, but instead I grabbed it from a webcam. Somewhere around 8:30 a.m. the sun finally came up.

Erika DeFreitas, Jan. 2, 2021: When I had to return to work in September, I was incredibly anxious about leaving my house, taking public transportation, and working in a building with a large number of people during this pandemic. One morning I looked at the sun rising, and I was brought to tears. I took a picture of it and posted it to my Instagram account. A reminder to myself that I was present on that day. Witnessing the sunrise before

going to work every morning became the thing that got me out of bed. I started to post them every weekday morning, because I thought that if it helped me, maybe it might help someone else. I started to tag someone in each post, someone who I would think of as I was standing there with the sun. Photographing the sunrise and sharing it was my way of reaffirming my presence. A nod to On Kawara. The tagging of a friend was my way of saying, hey, I see you too. I think of you. Below is the photograph you were tagged in on December 2, 2020, at 6:52 a.m.

TD, Nov. 26, 2020: Today, I was looking at the calendar and I realized that I have to start setting the dates, mainly because we now have another project following yours and a potential fundraiser. What dates work best with your schedule for a trip here? And, I'm not sure when we'll go back to openings, or if it will be by appointment, or something else. So, at this point perhaps we should just plan for the day the project will be open to the public.

ED, Nov. 28, 2020: It's been a rough two weeks, but the sun always rising continues to emit hopefulness. I have been noticing these moments of "magic" more often, like the way the sun and the top layer of freshly



Pg 4. University of Saskatchewan campus, view from Administration Place, webcam screenshot, November 13, 2020, <https://webcam.usask.ca>.

Pg 5. Photograph courtesy of Erika DeFreitas. December 2, 2020, 6:52 a.m.



fallen snow meet, or when the sun reaches the surface of water—whether it be a large body of water like Lake Ontario, or a small puddle when the snow starts to melt the following morning. I think of this as being similar to the magic of glass, especially coloured glass.

Thank you for looking into these upcoming deadlines and program opportunities. Depending on travel restrictions, I can try to travel in July or August; there are opportunities for weekend travel in September. Perhaps we can plan the day the project will open to the public and have tentative dates for things like travel and public programming.

It is a tricky task to find resources for a publication. I know that one alternative has been to create digital publications, and I appreciate the accessibility that comes with this. At the same time, I am really drawn to the publication as an object, especially how the object carries such a weight in the conceptualization of the works in this exhibition. I believe that we can get creative with this and conceive of something quite interesting and beautiful. Over the holiday I will begin thinking about what the content for the artist book that will accompany the exhibition might be and we can go from there.

For the billboard, I have been thinking about recreating the image of the Italian Spiritualist Eusapia Palladino's hands. I absolutely love it. I first learned of Eusapia when researching the images for my work, *a stammer inclined*

still. (2019). The recreation is just a thought; I feel that at the very least, this image would serve as the impetus for the final visual.

TD, Dec. 1, 2020: Your sunrises have made me think of you whenever I catch one here, especially since we're not seeing it until almost 9 a.m. now. I took this one at Christopher Lake, SK, on Nov. 21.

TD: It works really well for me too, to work backward. We can consider opening on September 9 or 16, 2021; those are both Thursdays. We'll need some adaptability, because it's possible that we won't be able to have a formal opening. Right now it feels like there is such a need to change and be open to change, instead of relying on what was. I'll also reach out to PAVED, who we share our building with, to see if they're planning on opening a project then. It could either be advantageous for us to share the day or not share the day (due to public volume).

ED, Dec. 13, 2020: The formal opening has been on my mind recently because of how galleries are needing to adjust to in-person programming. It makes me consider what the opening means to the exhibition overall. I have always seen them as opportunities for people to gather and celebrate, but now I'm wondering if their weight was much greater than just this. Somehow I am finding a relationship between the opening as an event, the experience of the exhibition, and the archiving of the exhibition; a distinct start, middle, and end, maybe.



Pg 6. Christopher Lake, Saskatchewan, November 21, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Tarin Dehod.

Pg 7. Erika DeFreitas, *She may be moved and they multiplied most in exaggeration.* No. 21, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

Many spaces are finding alternate ways for people to experience exhibitions and art online. To echo a friend of mine, much of it has just become photos of an exhibition on a website, so basically just a website. There are exceptions—I've seen a few spaces push past the VR walk-through of an exhibition, like the Koffler Gallery here in Toronto. I'm sure things have evolved since the beginning of the pandemic, and I should take another look.

A large part of me hopes that this shift in thinking will lend itself to more people writing critically about what is happening out there (physical spaces—both the institutional and not, as well as online), more so than what has been produced over the past few years. I find that I am missing and wanting to indulge more in the conversation about the work: what are others seeing or thinking about, what sort of connections are being drawn, etc. There is something about the relationship between the written critique and the visual and how that serves as a link to the archiving of an exhibition; this is especially important for the many artists whose practices have historically been overlooked, withheld, or omitted from such discourse.

TD, Dec. 15, 2020: The Koffler has been so inspiring for me and how we think about the digital space. Golboo Amani's *My Mother Tongue is Burdened by the Accent of Exile* (2020) is phenomenal. I find exhibition openings to be a bit problematic; it's rare that I meet an artist who wants to spend two to three hours meeting strangers and watching people look at the work. For me it often feels like an exercise, something that we have to do to get to the next phase of the project, where it feels like we're really digging into a connection: one-on-one conversations with viewers, interrelated dialogues, hands-on making, learning, or knowledge-sharing. Points of entry that seek familiarity and relationships that—I don't think—just walking in the space can do for everyone. It's even harder to connect with communities now; many of AKA's relationships are built with those that don't have daily access to computers, endless data or WiFi,

sometimes even regular access to an outlet to charge a battery. How do we continue to welcome them? How can we care for them and talk to them in the digital space? I don't think we can.

TD, Dec. 1, 2020: Did you see "What We Mean When We Rant About Digital Art" (Leticia Cosbert Miller and Emily Fitzpatrick for *Canadian Art*, Oct 7, 2020)? I missed it, and just to read that the project is on Miller's radar was really flattering, and the conversation is so right on about the digital space.

ED, Dec. 13, 2020: I can sense Leticia and Emily's frustration in what the digital space has failed to become in the art world, and I too am yearning for what possibilities still lie in the future for this! After you, Derek Sandbeck and I talked about the layout of my project on www.tofeelclose.com, I had a moment of entertaining the thought of creating work that was strictly for the digital realm. I was seduced by the challenge. I think I lack the fundamental skills or knowledge to know where to begin. I feel like I can conjure the ideas, but how that translates digitally is where I fall short. Maybe what I am wanting and expecting from institutional spaces is unrealistic, but they have access to the resources needed to make this sort of thing happen and for it to be sustainable.

TD, Dec. 15, 2020: An email came out from the Canada Council last week that suggested there will be new money specifically allocated for supporting cultural contract workers and artists through the pandemic and it had me thinking about how we approached *tofeelclose*. It was nothing too special in terms of experimental digital design, we didn't have a budget for that or the staff know how. But I think we did something that put work first, and was centered around the artists, stripping back any of the average website content: About, Contact, etc. We also tried to embrace the frame of the screen, and the tools that the website opened up, and all of that is a credit to the artists. I would love to go a bit deeper and if you're interested we could apply for assistance to hire a professional to help realize a digital component.



ED, Dec. 28, 2020: This sounds like a great project for both of us!

ED, Jan. 2, 2021: I wonder if this is a program where we can work with someone who can help make the exhibition more accessible to those with varying needs, i.e. are there tools we can develop so that those with vision impairments can experience the work?

TD, Dec. 30, 2020: Alright, well let's see what kind of funds are offered and go from there. As we keep talking perhaps something will reveal itself.

TD, Dec. 15, 2020: I completely agree with you about the publication as object. In some ways I feel like we could approach the whole project with this mind to accessibility. Like we have online components and object-based components. I've worked with someone here on smaller run prints. Michael Peterson runs Void, a printmaking cooperative and workshop space, and he has a risograph machine that produces some really beautiful pieces. If something like that could be of interest to you, we could talk with him. It could also be an opportunity to collaborate with your friend in Winnipeg. We actually worked with Michael on a print shop collaborative show and residency last summer.

ED, Dec. 13, 2020: I have been looking for an opportunity to produce something on a risograph. I need to understand the printing process a bit more so I'm not overcomplicating things when working through the idea for the publication, but it would be great to see if Michael would be interested in working together. I feel like the risograph might lend itself to intuitive ways of making.

At first when I read "In some ways I feel like we could approach the whole project..." I thought you were going to say, "as an object" and I immediately thought, "tell me more!" The exhibition as object. Is this what an exhibition becomes when it is no longer experienced in person, if in-person was how it was intended to be

experienced? Maybe it already is an object because we experience objects, we develop relationships with them, but that brings into question one's relationship to space as a thing. That was a bit of a tangent, but perhaps this speaks to my interest in consciously considering how the online and object based components are experienced in ways that deeply resonate with the intent of the exhibition we are designing. How do we approach accessibility in its many meanings?

TD, Dec. 15, 2020: Exhibition as object. YES. On a whim I googled "exhibition as object" and I was reading through the various definitions of exhibitions. I like this snippet "objects meet an audience" because it made me think objects meet objects.

ED, Dec. 29, 2020: To return to the artist book, early last year I came across a book of writing in my research, a compilation of automatic writing produced in the early 1900s. There is a chapter in the book that is called "Cautions" and I was so interested in this idea of a book written by those who have passed. I've been wanting to work with the cautionary notes. I'm thinking that this might serve as a good place to start for the artist book. I just purchased the book and I am so excited to read it in full. The inside has an inscription. It was a gift to someone named Kay in 1919.

TD, Dec. 1, 2020: About the billboard, I love those hands. As soon as I saw them I thought about when I first learned about Stieglitz and his photographs of Georgia O'Keefe's hands. There's something in the nails that made me think of these images.

ED, Dec. 13, 2020: The clean ovals. The absence of uneven cuticles. The whites so white. So neatly set in the tender. Your last sentence made me feel something in my gut.

TD, Dec. 1, 2020: I've been thinking a lot about the work for this project and I wondered if we could talk about which pieces you would like to show? I know we've already

planned on the work, and this could be completely off base: is there a space intellectually and visually for some of the recent pieces you've been making for *tofeelclose*?

ED, Dec. 13, 2020: For some time now I have been thinking about the potential, despite unintentionally merging these things, for there to be a discussion or an observing of the tension that arises when there is so much of a correlation between the religious, the paranormal, and let's throw the history of hysteria and the female body into the mix. The sublime comes to mind. Did you have any particular works in mind or ideas you would like to share?

TD, Dec. 15, 2020: Can we have an indepth look at the work together? I think it was well before my leave the last time we did that.

ED, Dec. 28, 2020: I remember when we first met we discussed such a range of topics and there was a shared curiosity for similar questions, especially those around, maybe I can call them, hauntings? The ways in which we can echo those who have come before us, like our mothers and grandmothers, or the ways that certain objects have held an importance to us. I remember telling you then about my experiences with Gertrude Stein and there was a moment of quiet understanding that I believe opened up a generous space for us to approach this work for our show.

TD, Dec. 30, 2020: Yes! I left our tea feeling very much myself, which is unusual for me. After meeting someone that is new to me I often spend the next few minutes going over everything I said and leave feeling like I gave away too much. Just reading what you wrote about our mothers and grandmothers brought up this visual for me. Like a flash card. My great grandmother's Star of David pendant.

ED, Dec. 28, 2020: Prior to creating *She may be moved and they multiplied most in exaggeration*. (2019), I worked with a medium, I engaged in automatic writing, and the act of psychometry was something I felt closely aligned to. This suite of photographs document my attempt to read the objects that I am interacting with. Each object was specifically chosen because they were animated objects; they made me feel something by just sharing space with them. Sometimes it was an anxious feeling, or in the case of the Picasso book with the portrait of Stein, a sense of comfort. As we work on this, we can consider including only a selection of these images; there are thirty-five photos in total.

TD, Dec. 30, 2020: I've been rereading "Glowing Objects and the Psychometric Interstice," the interview between you and Jennifer Fisher and I was brought back to the text where you describe the feeling that you weren't supposed to be in the building. That in turn gave you the confidence in the work you were making, why your body and your presence were vital in that space.

ED, Dec. 28, 2020: *Everything repeats itself but all this has never ever happened before*. (2019) is an interpretation of a photograph I came across in the 1907 book *Mysterious Psychic Forces: An Account of the Author's Investigations in Psychical Research, Together with Those of Other European Savants*, by Camille Flammarion. The original photograph is a staged demonstration of a

woman sitting at the head of a table impersonating the placement of Eusapia's hands. Sitting on either side of the woman is a person, each with one hand interacting with her hands. The photograph is captioned: "Method used by Eusapia to surreptitiously free her hand." In my photographs I am joined by my mother and two plaster casts of my left hand. When creating this work I am thinking about reenactments as a way of gaining knowledge, the female body as a conduit to the past, present, and future. The cast of my hand is a reminder of the past or that which can never be replicated...past selves clashing in the present moment.

I have been enamoured with aura photography. With all the research I have done to understand my relationship to objects, I wanted to figure out a way to photograph the aura of an object. *may they or may they seize* (2019) is a series of photograms that conceptually capture the aura of objects as I activate them through movement while they are being exposed to light. Large panels of coloured glass are placed next to the photograms when this work is installed. From a young age I had an affinity for coloured glass, and as I've gotten older, I see this is because there is something quite enchanting about coloured glass as a material, the ways it interacts with light, how it occupies space, and what that evokes when in relationship to the body.

TD, Dec. 30, 2020: I've seen all of this work, but not shared space with it, so it helps to talk through the presentation methods. When you think about this work and the new works that you showed on *tofeelclose*, it strikes me that the production of the two is very different. The work we're talking about seems like it is mounted and framed, whereas the new videos and polaroids are more immediate. That's not the right word. I'm searching for something, but I can't place it. How does the work feel to you when put together in a physical space?

ED: The works we have been talking about are definitely more polished in regards to presentation. I wonder if we can think about ways for the works that were created for *tofeelclose* to be presented in ways that can feel similar. For example, a simple strategy, but I'm not sure how cost effective it would be, to have the polaroids behind a plexi or in a large vitrine-type structure on the wall or in a case to add a more sculptural element?

TD: Right, there surely will be a kind of in between way to bring the presentations together. A plexi case would likely be expensive, but we could source it to get an idea. I'm trying to find the words to describe my approach as of late. Since coming to AKA, I've gradually adapted my installation approach. I've veered away from the hidden wires, crafted cases, the slickness that I personally find so appealing. I've done this for a few reasons, the main one being that I want the distance from the work to be shorter, to be more transparent. And, the other big factor is money; it's hard to ship to Saskatoon. We've approached this in many ways with artists, I think without compromising what they want to see and experience. But in saying that I'm aware that it can create a tension with how the artist wants to present their work. A few years back this happened with an artist that I greatly respect, and when they arrived we realized that our styles were so different. This reminded me of how easy it is for my assumptive thinking to creep in.



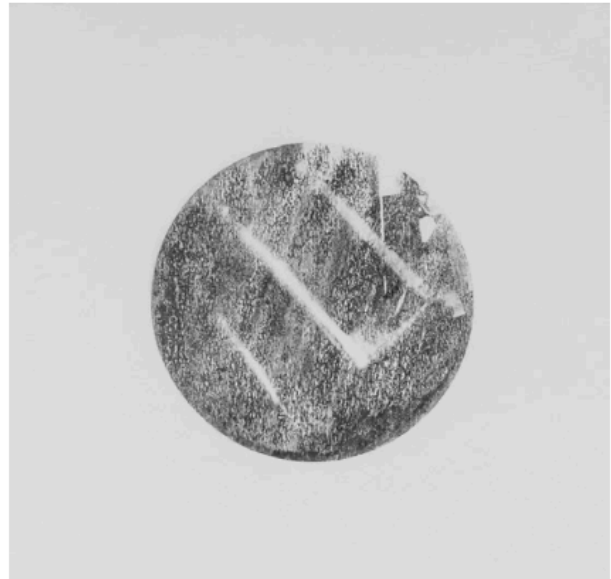
Erika DeFreitas, *Everything repeats itself but all this has never ever happened before.*, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

ED: I see some of that also bringing things to a place where one lets the work be the work. I think about ways to present work so that they are shown as intended, but also in a more sustainable way both financially and environmentally. The glossy presentation of the photographs and photograms mentioned earlier was intentional.

ED, Dec. 15, 2020: I've been thinking about your question and I can actually see the intellectual relationships between these different works in addition to the ones I mentioned earlier. I think of the act of ritual, of liminal/marginal spaces....I believe that there are also some lovely aesthetic nuances present if one considers the circle, and repetition, as a practice and as a visual tool.

TD, Dec. 7, 2020: I'm watching the progress of your show on Instagram and that colour is amazing.

ED, Dec. 13, 2020: The colour of the walls in the MacLaren exhibition is called *Indigo Night*. I have never been a person who would say that blue was a "favourite" colour, but I noticed that since working with the *Virgin Mary*, I see varying depths of blue everywhere. When thinking about the aura of this show, I was envisioning a deep blue or deep purple, and the curator of the exhibition, Emily McKibbin, found the perfect combination of the two. It is amazing how the colour transforms depending on the time of day, very much like how the sky transforms within minutes.



TD, Dec. 15, 2020: That's something that I feel like I'm newly learning about colour—leave the paint shop and it completely transforms. I can never really decide what works until I see the light and the work. I've been slowly painting my house, and choosing the colours has been so agonizing. In the end I decided to take all of the colour from the very first painting that I recall physically seeing.

ED, Dec. 29, 2020: That is a really beautiful strategy. What painting was this?

TD, Dec. 30, 2020: A bit of an unfortunate first I'm afraid. Caillebotte's *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877). I have the print I originally bought when I was thirteen, dogeared and torn.

TD, Dec. 31, 2020: This is really obvious, but I'm also really aware of the vulnerability it takes to include the personal body, and someone who you know intimately. The repetition of the hands. Just thinking about this line in your interview with Jennifer Fisher, distinguishing between the compositional objects without your body and the arrangements where you are "activating each thing."

ED: The mention of vulnerability has been made before. I remember I was taken aback at first because it didn't feel vulnerable to create work about what I know. Many times it's about communicating those things that go unsaid.

Thinking again about connections, there is the female presence: mine, my mother, Gertrude, Eusapia, the owner of the objects, and the Virgin Mary.

TD, Dec. 31, 2020: Oh, and also the moment in time, your hand captured, catching the sun, the season, the sky. The kind of grim Roland Barthes idea of the death of that specific time, or alternatively the memorial to it.

ED: Yes! This is what I see most evident in the use of my body, the plaster cast, the use of repetition, and

serial images. There has been an archive building in my practice over the past twenty years. It is also so tied to his thoughts around memory and the photograph. This makes me think about all that is outside the frame of a photograph. The moments prior to the image being taken and those after.

TD: And really what you said there frames everything, ties all of the connections together. I remember when I read *Camera Lucida* (when everything was new and wondrous feeling in university), and yes, those frames or moments before and after. The best way to look at a photograph is to close your eyes, etc.

ED: It would be great if we can draw some inspiration from Black or female critical thinkers when talking about theory around photography. I tend to lean heavily on Derrida, a huge influence on my practice, same as Barthes.

TD: I was thinking about Tacita Dean, but she is very connected to Barthes.

ED: I think that is totally okay—I'm sure it is hard to find artists who work with photography in these ways to not be connected to Barthes. I have a great book on Felix Gonzalez Torres and there is a chapter on "Traces" in his work. There was some theory in there that I feel we can spend time with.

TD: FGT feels very fitting. I was just doing some reading about Steve McQueen's video that was shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale, *Ashes* (2016). That piece has stayed with me as catching something fleeting and gorgeous. Ultimately it is about young death, and black death. But there's some contrast in the work around the grandness of his image, and the banality of daily life overlaid in the voice. Anyway, just a thought and impression.

ED: The fleeting moment, mortality, the Black body.

TD: The pattern that is emerging. The colour, sunlight, form.

Pg 10. Erika DeFreitas, *a stammer inclined still. No. 6*, 2019. Erika DeFreitas, *a stammer inclined still. No. 2*, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

Pg 11. Erika DeFreitas, *we are reservoirs (August 14, 2020)*, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist.



Erika DeFreitas is a Scarborough-based artist whose practice includes the use of performance, photography, video, installation, textiles, works on paper, and writing. Placing an emphasis on process, gesture, the body, documentation, and paranormal phenomena, she works through attempts to understand concepts of loss, post-memory, inheritance, and objecthood. DeFreitas' work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. She was the recipient of the TFVA 2016 Finalist Artist Prize, the 2016 John Hartman Award, and longlisted for the 2017 Sobey Art Award. DeFreitas holds a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto.

Tarin Dehod was born on unceded Mi'kmaq land originally known as Epekwitk. She is a curator, living and working on Treaty Six Land that encompasses the traditional homeland of numerous First Nations, including Cree, Dene, Plains Cree, Nakota, Saulteaux, and Ojibwe, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. Since 2014, Tarin has served as the Executive Director of AKA, working to understand the role of the artist-run centre in joint ownership with communities, as a space that is created and given meaning through the actions of its users.