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## COMPLICATED TRUTHS IN CONTEMPORARY ART: INVENTIONS, INTERVENTIONS, AND HOAXES

THE GRANGE IS THE OLDEST freestanding residential brick house in Toronto.<sup>1</sup> It was built in 1817 by D'Arcy Bolton for his wife Sarah and their eight children, and was bequeathed to the city in order to found the first Art Museum of Toronto, later renamed the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). In the 1960s and 70s the AGO was renovated and the Grange was restored to its 1835 appearance, including historic furnishings and costumed interpreters. Fast forward to June 2007: as plans for Frank Gehry's architectural renovations to the gallery were underway, the papers of Henry Whyte—butler to the Grange from 1817–1857—were gifted to the AGO, and a detailed map of the grounds caught the attention of archivists.<sup>2</sup>

Whyte had marked sites on the property where Mary O'Shea, a seventeen-year-old maid from Kilkenny Ireland, had hidden handmade objects, described by Whyte as “waxen globules.”<sup>3</sup> One of the first objects recovered by Anthropological Services Ontario was found behind a wall panel below the original staircase in the Grange's main hall. Like the majority of the recovered artefacts it is made of beeswax believed to be stolen from table-candles, and clay taken from the grounds.<sup>4</sup> At the core of each object, materials seemingly obtained on the property have been found: dried flowers, shards of china, flakes of human blood from an unknown

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<sup>1</sup> Historical data on the Grange compiled from Jennifer Rieger, “The Grange,” *Virtual Museum Canada*. [www.virtualmuseum.ca](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca), housed under [www.collectionx.museum/en/exhibition/5463.html](http://www.collectionx.museum/en/exhibition/5463.html) (accessed 10 August 2012); Jennifer Rieger, *House Guests: The Grange 1817 to Today* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario Press, 2001); “The Grange: History and Heritage,” *Art Gallery of Ontario*, <http://www.ago.net/grange-history> (accessed 12 August 2012); and Matthew Teitelbaum, “Epilogue,” *He Named Her Amber* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario Press, 2011), 172–73.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Häussler, “Narrative Tour,” *He Named Her Amber*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> “Narrative Tour,” 7.

<sup>4</sup> “Narrative Tour,” 6–10.

Caucasian female source, cinnamon, sugar, a lock of hair, a child's milk tooth, and animal bones.<sup>5</sup>

The team of archaeologists, headed by Stanford graduate Dr. Chantal Lee, set up data-recovery sites and offices in the Grange library and in the basement kitchens and pantry. At the request of the AGO, Anthropological Services Ontario permitted public access during scheduled guided tours. The Grange, previously relegated to storage and private office space, once again became a busy hub for artists, patrons, tourists, and scholars curious about these waxen and clay shapes. (What to call Mary's globes precisely? Brute art? Irish folk superstition? An obsessive compulsion? Mourning for a miscarriage or for the death of family in Ireland? Visitors have speculated upon all of these possibilities.) Between 14 November 2008 and 26 June 2010 more than sixteen thousand people visited the site at the Grange.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as convincing as the archaeological instrumentation, the excavation, and the historical details of Henry Whyte, Mary O'Shea, and Chantal Lees stories are, the dig is in fact an elaborate fiction—an art installation by Toronto-based visual-artist Iris Häussler.

*He Named Her Amber*, the title given by Häussler to the work, has the markings of what critics have variously defined as “trickery,” “forgery,” “fakery,” “hoax,” and “parafiction,”<sup>7</sup> art and literature where, “with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact.”<sup>8</sup> Scholarly terminologies have been, and continue to be, laden with value: hoaxes are celebrated as “a means of exposing or subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies,”<sup>9</sup> disparaged as “the product of unethical practices,”<sup>10</sup> or considered “a sign of [civilization's] illness and vice.”<sup>11</sup> Despite these variations, a writer or artist's intention to

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<sup>5</sup> Iris Häussler, “Process,” *He Named Her Amber*, 146–51.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Häussler, “Archaeologist,” <http://www.haeussler.ca/amber/archeologist.html> (accessed 8 May 2011).

<sup>7</sup> See the first chapter of K.K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) for an exploration of historical definition-making in the study of fakes and forgeries.

<sup>8</sup> Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 54.

<sup>9</sup> M.M.J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-modern Arts of Memory,” *In Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 224.

<sup>10</sup> H.M. Paull, *Literary Ethics: A Study in the Growth of the Literary Conscience* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1928), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 127.

deceive is identified by nearly all critics as the primary element of a hoax. But with intention comes interpretation, and both the intention and interpretation of hoaxes vary greatly depending on the author(s) and reader(s) of the hoax and on the context in which the hoax is perpetrated, published, and revealed. One cannot assume that the means of a hoax, the publication of a hoax's reveal, or the varied sensitivities, judgements, or humours of a hoax's audience-members will be singular or representative.

A hoax's making cannot solely reside with a writer or artist's intentions, a reader or viewer's reception, or a museum's public display. It requires the interplay of all these agents, and a hoax draws attention to the pacts and conventions that meaning-making requires.<sup>12</sup> Along with waxen globules, dried flowers, and children's milk teeth, Iris Häussler's *He Named Her Amber* examines deeply embedded assumptions about the societal role of artists and museums, the common practices for the collection and display of historical artefacts, and the trust that a patron places, often unwittingly, in institutions such as galleries and museums.

Using Iris Häussler's excavation at the Grange as a case study, I examine the pacts and promises inherent to a hoax, including the author's intention to deceive and the role of a reader in *making* a hoax. Second, I document the varying affective reactions museum visitors have expressed in response to *He Named Her Amber* in order to understand that interpretations of hoax vary as diversely as readers and audience members. Finally, I address the institution's role in a hoax's creation and argue that, despite being a highly problematic form of truth-telling through lies, the disorientations and interventions spurred by a hoax have the capacity to instil rejuvenated reflection into the disciplines of art-making and critical discourse.

### THE INTENTION TO DECEIVE

A letter handed out at the end of each Grange tour is the first chance a gallery patron has of receiving a direct explanation from Iris Häussler of her intentions to deceive visitors. The letter for many visitors is the moment that the reveal takes place. Yet the letter does not start off with a clownish "fooled you!" Instead, it opens with scholarly jargon, written in what one

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<sup>12</sup> I am taking the idea that an artistic or literary work exists contractually through a "pact" between the writer, the reader and the publisher from Philippe Lejeune's work on autobiography. See *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 29.

presumes to be the voice of Dr. Lee discussing the historical circumstances of the Irish immigration to Canada following the Great Famine of 1847. Although academic diction may at first appear to be used in order to further convince viewers of the veracity of the archaeological dig and the factual personhood of Dr. Chantal Lee, delving into how a reader accesses history is foundational to Häussler's artistic practice of *haptic conceptual art*, "a practice," the letter tells us, "that deals with deep questions of the human condition, but initiates them through direct experience, rather than theoretical discourse."<sup>13</sup> The phrase "haptic conceptual art" was coined by Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell in his essay "Imagining the Artist." Looking to the future of art, he writes of a new direction wherein "the image economy of the artist collapses, and the artist actually disappears," and the art world in turn is extended beyond the gallery to "every corner of existence."<sup>14</sup> As Kingwell defines the form, haptic conceptual art is "art of ideas that functions by way of immersion, even rapture."<sup>15</sup> This is pertinent here because immersion into a *felt* experience is fundamental to Häussler's project. Mary O'Shea's waxen globes substantiate a *physical* and *sensual* experience oftentimes lacking in historical texts. Häussler's letter and the artwork ask readers to imagine what it would have been like to be an Irish immigrant girl who has left behind her family:

How much does hope weigh when it is burdened upon the shoulders of a child, a daughter, a sister?... Is it a lump in the throat or a cramp around the middle?... How does such a burden feel? I would argue, this is the only question that counts. Yet the question means so little to me when it is posed in an abstract, academic space.<sup>16</sup>

With its references to "a lump in the throat" and "a cramp around the middle," the letter predicts the visceral and affective reactions of exhibition visitors. Indeed, the creation of an affective response to narrative and history is key to Häussler's conceptual work. David Moos, the curator responsible for com-

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<sup>13</sup> Iris Häussler, "Grange Excavation Notes," *He Named Her Amber* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario Press, 2011), 98–101.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Kingwell, "Imagining The Artist: Going to Eleven and The Legacies of Joseph Wagenbach," *Opening Gambits: Essays on Art and Philosophy* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2008), 124.

<sup>15</sup> "Imagining The Artist," 126.

<sup>16</sup> "Grange Excavation Notes," 99–100.

missioning *He Named Her Amber* for the AGO notes that “[t]he undeniability of the hole in the foundation, perfumed by the damp smell of the excavated still-wet earth piled high in a room, counteracts whatever hesitancy the visitor may feel.”<sup>17</sup> Moos believes that Häussler’s art hinges on her recognition that “the sheer reality of the physical” is “the key to psychic belief” and that “this clash of sensibilities—disbelief in the presence of physical fact—is the fulcrum of Häussler’s approach as an artist.”<sup>18</sup>

“If this were labelled as a project of contemporary art would the label protect the visitor, or would it deny the key experience?” asks Häussler.<sup>19</sup> If viewers entered into the Grange knowing they would be experiencing a work of contemporary art there would not be the same immersion into the stories of Mary O’Shea, Henry Whyte, and Chantal Lee. The story of the excavation would not, perhaps, engage the sympathy of the participant as radically as the work does when he is unaware that what is being seen is art: “The difference between thinking about emotions and actually experiencing them,” Häussler states in the concluding letter, “is huge.”<sup>20</sup> *He Named Her Amber* does not (cannot, in fact, if it is to remain intact) ask the viewer her permission before she enters. The viewer must give of his sympathy, must go on trust, ultimately to have that trust broken.

The relationship between a work’s intention, production, and interpretation does not occur solely within the frame of the artwork or the pages of the text, but also in a work’s paratexts, “those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, and reader.”<sup>21</sup> An example of paratext in the context of an art gallery is the relationship between a work of art and a museum label. Even though it is external to the artwork itself, the label shapes a viewer’s interpretation. Philippe Lejeune goes so far as to argue that “everything depends on the label. In a museum, people almost spend more time reading the labels than they do looking at the paintings.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, the world’s most famous art forgeries, frauds, and hoaxes demonstrate the contingency of the label.

<sup>17</sup> David Moos, “Rehearsal,” *He Named Her Amber*, 108.

<sup>18</sup> “Rehearsal,” 108.

<sup>19</sup> “Grange Excavation Notes,” 100.

<sup>20</sup> “Grange Excavation Notes,” 100.

<sup>21</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> *On Autobiography*, 110.

When a work painted by Han van Meegeren in the mid-twentieth century is labelled and hung in the Boymans museum with a tag that reads Johannes Vermeer, van Meegeren has successfully perpetrated a hoax that has fooled critics and art professionals. Likewise when an Eric Hebborn painting is hung in the National Gallery of Canada with a label that assures viewers the work is a sketch by Stefano della Bella, we have been paratextually duped.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike van Meegeren or Hebborn, Häussler does not seek to convince the viewer that her work is that of a master artist. Her work colludes with rather than deceives the art museum by removing the label that would declare her work at the Grange to be art. Instead, Häussler inserts labels that mimic a museum's showcasing of historical remnants from lived lives. Due to these paratextual disturbances, distinctions between whether we view an object as an artefact or as a piece of art become blurred. As the reveal sets in, the work fluctuates between two readings: history and story; artefact and art. The glass vitrine makes beeswax and clay—simple objects attainable to nearly anyone—appear to have important historical and sociological value. The library books and post-it notes on Dr. Lee's desk become a kind of sculpture, as do the cot and sleeping bag where she apparently takes naps. Henry Whyte's hand-drawn map becomes an artistic sketch. Dayliness and vocation become forms of art. In this way, *He Named Her Amber*, as Kingwell had hoped, works toward “extending the art world to every corner of existence,”<sup>24</sup> even to the dusty crevices of a basement that might otherwise have been forgotten amongst lavish celebrations marking the opening of the renovated AGO; or as a maid might be forgotten to history, while the men that history remembers eat the meals she has prepared, upstairs.

### **COMPLICATED COMPLICITY: THE NECESSITY OF THE VIEWER**

A hoax's existence is incumbent upon the reader. Häussler's art comes into existence as art once the museum-goer understands that what she has experienced as fact is fiction, that the artefacts and archaeology of

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the forgeries of van Meegeren and Hebborn, see John Godley, *The Master Forger. The Story of Han van Meegeren* (New York: W. Funk, 1951); P.B. Coremans, *Van Meegeren's Faked Vermeers and De Hooghs* (London: Cassell, 1949); Lawrence Jeppson, *Fabulous Frauds: A Study of Great Art Forgeries* (London: Arlington, 1971); Ian Haywood, *Faking It: Art and the Politics of Forgery* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1987); Eric Hebborn, *The Art Forger's Handbook* (London: Cassell, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> “Imagining the Artist,” 124.

the dig at the Grange are art. Thus disclosure is part of the work of art: as Häussler argues, “[r]evealing the fictitious nature of Amber’s story after a time of reflection is as much a part of my artwork as constructing the story in the first place.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Moos writes, “As visitors digest their experience of *He Named Her Amber*, they become aware that they have in fact participated in a performance and have actively aided in the making of the work.”<sup>26</sup> If the viewer is so much a part of the work’s creation, what exactly is the art? Where does *He Named Her Amber* begin and where does it end? Is the art happening on planes, in cafés, in people’s homes and hotel rooms? Or, as one respondent has reported, are people reading Dr. Lee’s letter in their bathtubs? Of what does the work consist? Kingwell speculates that “the work begins anew with each visitor, each tour, each moment of the reveal.”<sup>27</sup> *He Named Her Amber* is the production *and* the viewer’s participation and interpretation.

The disorientation, reaction, and redirection of a reader are as much a requirement of a hoax as is the tall tale told. Thus, some critics have argued that the reciprocity that exists between reader and text, viewer and artwork, is highlighted in the experience of a hoax. In *Learning from Lying*, Julia Abramson’s optimistic view of what a revealed hoax can accomplish is compelling. She claims that “mystification brings reader together with writer to talk about texts,”<sup>28</sup> and that a hoax rouses a reader “out of intellectual slumber.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the process of retroactive reinterpretation, or revision (re-seeing what we may have cursorily walked by before) can be one of the most deeply empowering and transformative experiences of art and literature: it can awaken us to the complex layers and details of history, and can remind us of the part we take in constructing the narratives of our own lives. Put differently, hoaxes ask readers to be active participants, to be creators of meaning, to pay attention. As readers of a hoax we undergo a *gestalt* shift, wherein, upon reflection, we are able to see ourselves in multiple modes of understanding: as readers in earnest, as investigators, as mistaken, as spectacularly awed, as duped, as discomfited, or as transfixed with wonder. Whatever the reaction, a student of hoax cannot remain passive.

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<sup>25</sup> “Grange Excavation Notes,” 100.

<sup>26</sup> “Rehearsal,” 113.

<sup>27</sup> “Imagining the Artist,” 128–30.

<sup>28</sup> Julia Abramson, *Learning from Lying: Paradoxes of Literary Mystification* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Learning from Lying*, 14.

However, just as ravishment connotes both pain and delight, a hoax has a double edge that can cause aversion: while there is affirmation and surprise, even wonder, in realizing one's participation in a newly-defined contractual exchange, having one's consent taken away is, to say the least, not a trifling matter. It is the protection of trust about which critics of hoaxes speak most vehemently, while it is the bending of rules and expectations that may, in turn, revitalize our sense of astonishment, pleasure, and social engagement. How visitors respond to their unsolicited participation in *He Named Her Amber*'s conception is understandably mixed. The array of responses is a vital indication of the form's affective scope.

### **MISTAKENNESS AND DISORIENTATION: RESPONSES TO IRIS HÄUSSLER'S HOAX**

During the Grange exhibition, Kathryn Blaze Carlson reported in the *National Post* Arts column that "Häussler's *He Named Her Amber* has polarized gallery patrons, AGO staff, and the art world at large, pitting those who cherish the revelation as part of the art experience against those who feel outright duped by the unusual exhibit."<sup>30</sup> Yet the dichotomy often presented in theories of hoax that viewers and readers are either victims or accomplices does not describe the complexity of the lived experience of being hoaxed. A response upon the reveal of a hoax is not always immediate, nor is it necessarily permanent. As time passes a viewer's reaction may begin with delight and end in anger or may begin in anger and end in delight. Even in a single reader a complex network of reactions is possible over a short span of time. The range and complexity of responses to Häussler's work demonstrates the aesthetic and ethical complexity of *He Named Her Amber*, and of hoaxes generally.

Iris Häussler and the Art Gallery of Ontario received over 250 emails, hand-written letters, gifts, notes and telephone calls from visitors who took part in *He Named Her Amber*.<sup>31</sup> In their correspondence, tour-goers identified the physical sensations, felt emotions, and theoretical reflections provoked by the exhibit. Viewers' affective responses to their own mistakenness, the disruptions of their expectations, and their experiences of disorientation provide insight into ideas of trust and ease, experiences of error and un-

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<sup>30</sup> Kathryn Blaze Carlson, "Art or Artifice?: Toronto Artist's 'Historical' exhibition Offends Some Artistic Sensibilities," *National Post* 27 Nov. 2009: A8.

<sup>31</sup> Iris Häussler, "Visitors' Emails," *He Named Her Amber*, 56.



truthfulness, as well as the exploration of a more muddied middle ground of near-truth or “truthiness.”<sup>32</sup> While each response to *He Named Her Amber* can be read as a personal aesthetic reply to a singular piece of art, the implications and experiences of the respondents also have ethical reverberations that move beyond the walls of galleries, or the pages of books, to comment on authorities, narratives, and habits within which society commonly, and often unquestioningly, places its trust.

In “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change,” philosopher Ami Harbin writes that “the bodily ease of felt orientation is like this: we can be most likely to notice that we were at ease only when we become partially or seriously disrupted, when we are no longer able to recognize or interact with objects, people, or occasions in ways that were once habitual.”<sup>33</sup> The unease felt by museum visitors—experienced as “dizzying”<sup>34</sup> and as a form of “discomfort”<sup>35</sup>—is a sign of disruption to our habitual gallery experiences. This discomfort is articulated by commentators through resentment, a diminishment of faith, anger and disappointment. One commentator writes: “The AGO has behaved and continues to behave disgracefully in continuing to present a fictional narrative as an actual discovery. In the face of upset patrons, the AGO is an arrogant schoolyard bully.”<sup>36</sup> Another respondent asks: “Am I stupid for not assuming that someone might be lying to me because the story was so eccentric? Is this an exercise in proving how gullible people are?”<sup>37</sup> Another writes, “We lost our time, our faith in human interaction, our attention to worthier aspects of the AGO.”<sup>38</sup> Realizing that our loss of comfort is deliberately being performed against us can also be humiliating.

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<sup>32</sup> I first came across the term “truthiness” in Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” in which she writes: “*Time* magazine ran the headline ‘Untruths and Consequences’ on its cover in July 2003, over an image of President Bush; two years later a much-needed term was added to the philosophical lexicon, when satirist Stephen Colbert identified Bush’s characteristic mode of “truthiness”—truth measured by conviction rather than accuracy” (57); however, since the publication of Lambert-Beatty’s article, the term has been adapted and used by artists, notably in the exhibition *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, presented by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and SITE Santa Fe, curated by Elizabeth Armstrong, Curator of Contemporary Art, Center for Alternative Museum Practice (CAMP), Minneapolis Institute of Arts, in which Häussler’s *Ellen’s Gift* was included. The exhibition premiered in Santa Fe from 8 July 2012–6 January 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Ami Harbin, “Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change,” *Hypatia* 27.2 (Spring 2012): 265.

<sup>34</sup> “Visitors’ Emails,” 80.

<sup>35</sup> “Visitors’ Emails,” 64–66.

<sup>36</sup> Iris Häussler, personal interview, 19 November 2009.

<sup>37</sup> “Visitors’ Emails,” 80.

<sup>38</sup> “Visitors’ Emails,” 64–66.

As Carrie Lambert-Beatty notes, “Being taken in by a parafiction, after all, is not just epistemologically destabilizing. It is humiliating .... Parafiction is an antidote to vanity. It changes you, leaves you both curious and chastened.”<sup>39</sup>

Yet disorientation does not always result in inarguably negative experiences. Some emails to Iris Häussler indicate a complex range of responses that defy binary categories of accomplice and victim. Paul Roorda writes that he felt “duped captivated by a fiction, a trust betrayed,” yet he also acknowledges the ability to “step above all of that to admire your creative work as art, and the process of my belief, the challenge of reinterpreting my strong response.”<sup>40</sup> Krys Goldstein writes of the experience of the reveal she and her daughter felt upon reading Chantal’s letter: “things became unclear, hard to comprehend ... then woah ... we felt betrayed ... sad that [Mary O’Shea] did not exist—pissed off ... then so enthralled with the genius and elaborateness that we wanted to do it again.”<sup>41</sup> These respondents express dismay or discomfort at the experience of being hoaxed alongside feelings of challenge and/or enthrallment.

For some respondents the experience of mistakenness and unease even resulted in various reported pleasures: “I have not had such a wonderful thing happen to me in a long time. I keep revisiting the experience. Just thinking about it fills me with a grand feeling of awe again .... It is emotional splendour.”<sup>42</sup> For others, the experience of mistakenness evoked wonder or astonishment. Canadian poet Anne Carson observes in the poem “Essay On What I Think About Most,” that “Lots of people including Aristotle think error / an interesting and valuable event.”<sup>43</sup> Carson’s poem examines the emotions that come when we make a mistake:

On the brink of error is a condition of fear.  
In the midst of error is a state of folly and defeat.  
Realizing you’ve made an error brings shame and remorse.  
Or does it?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Make-Believe,” 82.

<sup>40</sup> “Visitors’ Emails,” 72.

<sup>41</sup> “Visitors’ Emails,” 82.

<sup>42</sup> Lynne Kenneith Brodgen to Cecilia Aldarondo, quoted in Gillian MacKay, “Brilliant Disguise: Iris Häussler’s Fact-Meets-Fiction Odysseys,” *Canadian Art* (Winter 2009): 83.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Carson, “Essay on What I Think About Most,” *Men in the Off Hours* (Toronto: Vintage, 2001), 30.

<sup>44</sup> “Essay,” 30.

Carson's poem argues that attending to our experiences of assumption, error, and mistakenness has tremendous potential to be, as Aristotle himself noted, a "valuable mental event." If, as Carson suggests, we "look into this,"<sup>45</sup> we may find that our experiences of disorientation and mistakenness help us to discover more deeply what enlivens and troubles our daily inhabited epistemologies. Carson, referring to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, suggests that when "the mind experience[s] itself / in the act of making a mistake" a "surface breaks or complicates" and "Unexpectedness emerges."<sup>46</sup> While at first the unexpected experience "looks odd, contradictory or wrong," through our shock we come to realize that "things are other than they seem" and that "such mistakenness is valuable."<sup>47</sup> However paradoxically, moments of mistakenness or disorientation often permit new aesthetic insight, and alert us to habituated thoughts and concretized beliefs. As Ami Harbin claims, "we are often most able to recognize our orientations when we become disoriented."<sup>48</sup> To be disoriented permits us to see as new what has become routine and to thus understand our held beliefs, actions and orientations more clearly.

#### **(PISSING?) ON THE MUSEUM'S AUTHORITY**

*He Named Her Amber* relies upon the inherent trust that gallery-goers bestow to the authority of the museum for the foundation of its trick. The tools used to protect ideas of authenticity in an institutional context are turned into the props of an elaborate stage set. Glass display cases and museum labels deliberately misinform us of the origins and significance of the artefacts inside. The dress and technology of science—lab coats, white gloves, microscopes, scalpels and official looking nametags—are convincing markers of authority. The comfort and solidity of numeric accuracy, such as birthdates and death-dates, act like nails, hammering down facts to create a seemingly solid piece of history. Even the building's historic and cultural designations are exploited for the ruse: built on decades of criticism and taste, the institutions of the art museum and national historic site determine, by what they house, what art and history *are*. However, a niggling hypocrisy remains in hoaxes performed by museums and artists: because Iris Häussler has worked in collaboration with the AGO, it is ultimately from the museum's authority that the questioning of authority comes.

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<sup>45</sup> "Essay," 30.

<sup>46</sup> "Essay," 30.

<sup>47</sup> "Essay," 30–31.

<sup>48</sup> "Bodily Disorientation and Moral Change," 265.

Toronto gallerist and former AGO curator Jessica Bradley notes of *He Named Her Amber* that “playing games of trust and challenging the authority of the museum is *de rigeur* in the art world ... but it takes courage and commitment on the part of the AGO to acknowledge that they are not sacred or untouchable.”<sup>49</sup> While I agree with Bradley that a gallery taking a risk to get patrons questioning the status of a museum is brave, the museum and artist are still complicit as curators to the visitors’ reading of the artwork: the power and authority of the museum and the artist have not entirely disappeared, as Kingwell had hoped. Those who delight in a hoax’s subversive nature are often thrilled at the ability of a hoax to “disturb the societies in which they are produced ... in ways resented by the guardians of cultural institutions,”<sup>50</sup> yet the “guardians of cultural institutions”—the AGO, David Moos and the docents—are, in the case of *He Named Her Amber*, collaborators in the visitors’ deception.

The pact made between gallery, artist, and viewer in the formation of a piece of art becomes exclusive and potentially hurtful when two parties work together to misinform the third. However, with any kind of pact, there is no guarantee that the interpreter will *get* or *make* the meaning of a hoax in the same way that an artist or institution intends. Viewers can thwart as much as realize an artist’s intention, making meanings artists and institutions did not plan upon or predict. The third party of the pact—the viewer or reader—still has power in how an artwork is read, perceived, and publicly discussed. Certainly a viewer’s reaction can involve hostility toward the affront of the hoax, as evidenced when patrons who were upset with their experience of *He Named Her Amber* revoked their AGO memberships and thereby their financial support to the institution.<sup>51</sup> However, there is also a kind of thwarting that Häussler and the AGO’s collusion might inspire in viewers that remains closer in kind to the thwarting of authority *He Named Her Amber* attempts to perform. For instance, upon completing a tour of *He Named Her Amber* with a colleague and insisting that we read the letter together, my friend’s response was not to be offended, or even especially delighted, but to immediately think of ways she could hoax Häussler back: writing a letter to Häussler from Chantal Lee; finding a Korean actress to sneak into Dr. Lee’s basement office, hide in the sleeping bag, and surprise

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in MacKay, “Brilliant Disguise,” 86.

<sup>50</sup> Ruthven, *Faking Literature*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Häussler, personal interview, 19 November 2009.

the tour guide and audience by yawning and getting out of the cot, upset at the group's intrusion.

To intervene into an artwork is not a new idea. Artistic interventions involve interactions with previously existing artworks or artistic venues, as well as sites and situations outside of the art world, in an attempt to change the existing aesthetic, political, and/or economic conditions of a given institution, group, or person. Artistic interventions have implications of subversion, although they are often performed with the endorsement of those in positions of authority, as is the case with *He Named Her Amber*. Unendorsed interventions are still common, however, and often blur distinctions between art and vandalism or trickery. One of the most famous artistic interventions of the twentieth century has itself been the recipient of further artistic interventions.

In 1917 Marcel Duchamp anonymously submitted *Fountain*, one of his early ready-made sculptures, to the Society of Independent Artists in New York for an exhibition. The Society had proclaimed that it would exhibit all submitted work. However, despite the Society's promise, *Fountain*—a urinal signed "R. Mutt"—was hidden from view during the show (and then subsequently lost). The New York Dadaists protested *Fountain*'s exclusion in their publication *The Blind Man*: "Whether Mr. Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object."<sup>52</sup> *Fountain* intervened into prevailing notions of what a work of art was, shifting the focus of art from the physical craft of an artwork to its conceptual interpretation and context. Perhaps, then, it is fitting that in spring 2000, performance artists Yuan Chai and Hian Jun Xi honoured the spirit of Duchamp's work and critiqued the current state of Modern British art with an intervention of their own. Xi claims that, "Modern British art is getting worse and worse. They haven't taken any risks. The mainstream are caught in a circle, and we are outside that circle—pissing in."<sup>53</sup> Yes. Chai and Xi went to the newly opened Tate Modern and urinated on the artist-approved copy of the *Fountain*. Chai and Xi were in fact prevented from soiling the sculpture directly by a Perspex case

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<sup>52</sup> *The Blind Man* 2 (May 1917). Housed under "Dada Documents," *International Dada Archive*, University of Iowa Libraries, <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/blindman/2/05.htm> (accessed 8 August 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Nick Patton Walsh, "It's a New Cultural Revolution," *The Observer* 11 June 2000, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2000/jun/11/features.review37> (accessed 11 August 2012).

that surrounds the work, erected due to other artists' and visitors' previous attempts to pee in the *Fountain*.

In the case of *He Named Her Amber* there have been creative responses to the artwork that did not require the disruptive vandalism of pissing on works of art. To give one example: along with the emails expressing anger, disappointment, and wonder, Häussler also received a message from "Neil Hollands," who claims to have been "born in 1961 onboard the marine research vessel HMS *Jack Russell* while stationed ten miles off the Larsen G shelf in Antarctica."<sup>54</sup> Hollands asserts that his mother, "Dr. Grace Wilson, an endocrustaceanist, was recovering from a diving accident inside a hyperbaric chamber when she gave birth to me." He explains that the accident "grossly enlarged posterior canals within my inner ears" and "somehow allowed me to discern complex harmonic overtones inaudible to others."<sup>55</sup> Further, Hollands' email tells Häussler, "I feel I can trust you," and, because of this trust, Hollands goes on to warn her of "robotized drummers" whose "frequencies are siphoned off and fed into innocuous looking "domestic glass jars" in the Grange basement: "YOUR EARS MAY BE IN SERIOUS PERIL!" insists Hollands.<sup>56</sup> He concludes by inviting Häussler to participate in a scientific experiment "disguised as a house-party."<sup>57</sup> Hollands' response to the fiction of *He Named Her Amber* with fiction, light-heartedly questions the authority of Häussler and her artwork, just as her artwork questioned the museum's authority. Hollands' fiction plays with elements of Häussler's art, but subverts them into his own imaginative narrative response, a literary equivalent, perhaps, to pissing on (or taking the piss out of) Häussler's narrative. Hollands ironically brings up the trust of a viewer that Häussler engages with: "I feel I can trust you," he says to the woman who has just fooled him with her art. A key element of *He Named Her Amber*—scientific work being a mask for playful artistic invention—is mimicked in Hollands's email, wherein a scientific experiment becomes a house party and reference is made to "marine research vessel" preposterously named after a breed of dog rather than a lauded scientist. The fabrication of an elaborate story based on a simple object found in domestic areas of the Grange home is also subtly and hilariously mocked in Hollands' response: the dangerous noises are coming from "domestic glass jars." Just as Duchamp intervened in the

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<sup>54</sup> "Visitors' Emails," 70.

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1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists with the submission of a urinal, and just as Chai and Xi's pissing into that urinal added to the history of Duchamp's *Fountain*, Hollands' response to Häussler's response to the history of the Grange adds to the body and story of what has happened in the historical Toronto home.

To respond with thoughtful critique or with creative flourish to *He Named Her Amber* means that the authority of the gallery and the artist are mitigated by the truly collaborative and contingent agency of the reader or viewer. There is an authority that an artist and a gallery cannot ever be given, and that is the authority over the unique felt responses of patrons to works of art. Honesty and notions of truth must persist in our society for the sustainability of trust in our communities. It is not my intention to argue that the art gallery ought not to have authority or trust bestowed upon them by society to care for and house important works of art and cultural artefacts. My claim, in bringing the antics of artists and/or vandals like Chai and Xi into the conversation is to note that gallery, artist, and viewer are all bestowed with authority, and what Häussler's art asks, and what interventions and responses to works of art also have the ability to ask, is just how that authority is chosen, distributed, and conducted.

The epistemology that *He Named Her Amber* can inspire in viewers and the Art Gallery of Ontario is transformative, and curatorially connected to Frank Gehry's architectural renovations to the institution, named "Transformation AGO." *He Named Her Amber* transforms the theoretical space of the AGO by reimagining the foundations and practices of the gallery, the context of its history, and by asking basic questions about what *is* and what *makes* a work of art. This architectural and theoretical transformation allows for a deeper contemplation to *all* works of art and *all* gallery experiences encountered thereafter.

In *The Art Forger's Handbook*, Eric Hebborn instructs readers how to copy the work of the Masters, not necessarily to become art forgers, which he warns against, but rather to appreciate the incredible work of history's greatest painters. He notes that the materials and methods of a forger's art, "with the exception of those involved in ageing techniques, are, of course, precisely the same as those used by the Old Masters themselves" and argues that "it is only by understanding the painter as a craftsman that we can truly appreciate him as an artist."<sup>58</sup> Hebborn recommends his handbook most "to

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<sup>58</sup> *The Art Forger's Handbook* (London: Cassell, 1997), xvi.

the student of art history” in order to encourage the reader to paint so that, even if it affords no pleasure, one garners a better understanding of all art, both ancient and modern.<sup>59</sup> The deception that Iris Häussler performs with *He Named Her*—to be artfully fooled into serious insights, to be tricked into mindfully contemplating what is typically taken for granted, to create artifice that brings about truth—has been the paradoxical work of the artist in society for centuries.

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<sup>59</sup> *The Art Forger's Handbook*, xvii.