

BIOGRAPHIES

VSVSVS (pronounced versus versus versus), is a seven-person collective and artist-run centre based out of a warehouse in the Portlands in Toronto. Formed in 2010, the groups activities encompass collective art making including drawings, video works, sculpture, installation and performance, a residency program and exhibition space, as well as individual studio practices. Members include Wallis Cheung, Ryan Clayton, Anthony Cooper, James Gardner, Stephen McLeod, Laura Simon and Miles Stemp. Recent exhibitions include Centre Bang, Chicoutimi; Katzman Contemporary, Toronto; Niagara Artist's Centre, St. Catherine's (all 2015), *Taking a part*, Mercer Union, *More Than Two (Let It Make Itself)*, Power Plant (both Toronto, 2014); and *space mods*, Cambridge Galleries, Preston (2013).

Karen Kraven received her MFA from Concordia University in 2012, and her BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2006. Recent solo exhibitions include the Institute for Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art, Portland (2015), *Razzle Dazzle Sis Boom Bah*, Darling Foundry, Montreal (2014), *A Grinder*, Parisian Laundry (2013) and *As Above, So Below*, Centre Clark, Montreal (2014). She has participated in artist's residencies at The Banff Centre and with Reverse Pedagogy, Venice. From 2013-2016, she will have a Montreal Artist's Creation Studio at the Darling Foundry, Montreal. Kraven currently lives and works in Montreal.

Cait McKinney is the 2015/16 Media@McGill postdoctoral fellow at McGill University, Montreal.

Ashley McLellan is a writer and curator from Vancouver. McLellan completed her BA in Art and Cultural Studies, and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, and was awarded the Canadian Art Editorial Residency in 2012. She is currently completing a Masters in art history with a curatorial diploma at York University, Toronto. Her writing has appeared in *Canadian Art online*, *Artinfo Canada*, and *Drain*. She lives in Toronto.

Kahnawake-born, Montreal/Toronto based artist **Walter Scott** studied at Concordia University in Montreal. Recent exhibitions include *Habitual Present*, 8-11, Toronto, *Pre-Existing Work*, Macaulay and Co. Fine Art, Vancouver (both 2015) and *Joan Dark* at Western Front, Vancouver (2014). In 2014, he was Artist-in-Residence at the Koganecho Bazaar in Yokohama, Japan.



Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

1286 Bloor Street West, Toronto ON M6H 1N9 Canada
(1 block east of Lansdowne Station)
T 416.536.1519 F 416.536.2955

Director of Exhibitions and Publications: Georgina Jackson
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All images courtesy the artists.

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CELEBRATING 40 YEARS



SPACE: Walter Scott

8 April - 25 July 2015

Walter Scott is an interdisciplinary artist working across writing, illustration, performance and sculpture. In 2011 while studying at Concordia in Montreal, he began a comic book series, *Wendy*, exploring the narrative of a fictional young woman living in an urban centre, who aspires to global success and art stardom but whose dreams are perpetually derailed. Romantic woes, professional frustrations, parties and awkward encounters play out in black and white. The position of the outsider and shape shifter is central to this body of work and the influence of feminist icons such as Mary Tyler Moore, Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* or artist, punk poet, experimental novelist and filmmaker Kathy Acker lingers. Wendy is an avatar who shifts between different cultural institutions, reinventing herself with every modality and juggling different fictions of herself.

Scott's *Excerpt from: A Home Underground* (2015) steps inside the inner chambers of the mind and body, exploring the antagonism of transformation of all kinds. The inner self, contained within the bedroom and bathroom, becomes a

space of existential frustration where a change of hair colour, from blonde to black, releases an intangibility of "the different fictions of me." Wendy's crisis on the side of a contemporary art centre perhaps alludes to a consistent necessity to reinvent, to perform and to transform, a subtle hint to the head shaving incident of a fallen pop princess or the continual capacity to reinvent oneself?

Jon Sasaki

1:1 replica of a key to Mercer Union

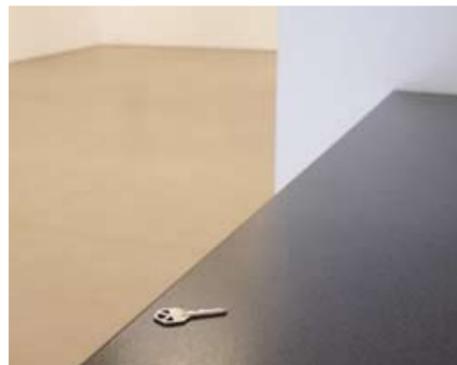
Member card edition launch

Friday 29 May, 6-7PM

Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist Jon Sasaki has designed our 2015-16 member card edition entitled *1:1 replica of a key to Mercer Union*. Please join us for the edition launch, followed by the opening reception for Mercer Union's summer exhibitions. Artist in attendance.

All new and existing members are invited to enjoy a drink on the house and good company. Existing members are welcome to collect their card at the event or can expect it by mail. Memberships are available for purchase on-site or online at www.mercerunion.org/join-support

Jon Sasaki's work has been exhibited in numerous solo exhibitions in galleries including the Tom Thomson Art Gallery (Owen Sound, ON); the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (Lethbridge, AB); and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Recent group exhibitions include Platform Art Spaces (Melbourne, Australia); Nihonbashi Institute of Contemporary Art (Tokyo, Japan); and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto, ON). His videos have been programmed in screenings at the MCA (Sydney, Australia); the Images Festival (Toronto, ON); and Brick + Mortar Film Festival (Greenfield, MA). In fall of 2014 he completed an outdoor public installation at Sheridan College (Oakville, ON) as part of their Temporary Contemporary commissioning program. He is the recipient of the 2015 Canadian Glenfiddich Artist in Residence Prize (Dufftown, Scotland) and will participate in the Canadian Residency (Detroit, MI) in the fall of 2015. Sasaki holds a BFA from Mount Allison University (Sackville, NB) and is represented by Jessica Bradley Gallery in Toronto.



FORUM: Cait McKinney

How Lesbians Invented the Internet

Wednesday 10 June 2015, 7PM

In her talk, Cait McKinney will address how histories of media and technology are enriched by feminist activist stories. The talk considers a range of projects from the 1970s to the present that provided marginalized lesbian-feminist publics with access to information, whether with index cards, print newsletters, early computing, or online archives. Using these tools, feminists designed complex multimedia practices and built new grassroots networks that are critical for understanding feminism's contributions to histories of commonplace media.

Cait McKinney is the 2015/16 Media@McGill postdoctoral fellow at McGill University, Montreal. She holds a PhD in Communication and Culture from York University, and received her MA from York University, Toronto (2010) and BA from the University of British Columbia (2006). She is currently working on a book manuscript titled *Feminist Information Activism: Newsletters, Index Cards and the 21st-century Archive*. Recent writing appears in the journal *Seachange*, the *Radical History Review's* special issue on queer archives, and *Little Joe* magazine.

FORUM: Kate Zambreno

Switzerland: a work-in-progress

Tuesday 14 July 2015, 7PM

Kate Zambreno will present a reading from her current work in progress entitled *Switzerland*, which meditates on distraction, the day, the possibilities and failures of literature and community, and what it means to try to write a novel in the contemporary. Other ghost texts that haunt the work include Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Robert Walser's *The Walk*, the notebooks of Sontag, Guibert, and Camus, the aphoristic texts of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Cioran, Kafka's *Letters to Felice*, Plato's *Symposium*, and the novels of WG Sebald and Thomas Bernhard.

Kate Zambreno is an author. Her work includes *Green Girl* (Harper Perennial, 2014), *Heroines* (Semiotext(e), MIT Press, 2012), a work of innovative nonfiction, and *O Fallen Angel* (Chiasmus Press, 2009). She lives in New York and teaches in the writing programs of Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College.

FORUM is a monthly series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings and performances. Admission is always free. The series is generously supported by the Hal Jackman Foundation.

 Hal Jackman
Foundation

VSVSVS

Not together, but alongside

Karen Kraven

Flip Flop, Front Punch

30 May - 25 July 2015

Artist Talk Friday 29 May 2015, 7PM

Opening reception to follow



VSVSVS *Not together, but alongside*



VSVSVS, *Drift*, installation view at Centre Bang, 2015.

At the Same Time: VSVSVS' Not together, but alongside **Ashley McLellan**

“Not together, but alongside” reads like an amendment to a previously uttered statement. It asserts a seemingly minor distinction between ‘together’ and ‘alongside’: the former implying an active dissolving of boundaries and amalgamation into a perceived whole while the latter maintains a distinction between forms that may coexist and cooperate. It is a clarification of a proposed activity, but one in which the initial context is absent. This slight amendment is put forth by VSVSVS, a collective of seven individuals (Wallis Cheung, Ryan Clayton, Anthony Cooper, James Gardner, Stephen McLeod, Laura Simon, Miles Stemp), who gather their interests and individual methodologies to create large-scale, sometimes inhabitable, artworks in the form of installation, performance, sculpture, photography and video. VSVSVS encourage individuals to participate in the creation and production of meaning. The parameters of building materials and everyday objects become permeable, and you as viewer, or indeed participant, are invited to make use of them in ways unforeseen or even thought possible. With this in mind, the context of the amendment begins to emerge, as an invitation from the artists’ to contribute to a common goal, not necessarily together as a cohesive whole, but side by side. This dialogue and form of engagement is a consistent thread through their collective practice since its formation in 2010. But this invitation, also calls for a form of trust on both the part of the artists and the participant, as well as a certain openness to the experiment.

Their process of experimentation and interrogation begins with the materials they gather, modify, and display. Nothing seems too ordinary or complex, creating the possibility that everything might eventually find a place. They bring their materials up close, and inspect them from all angles, taking note of the properties that may have previously slipped by undetected. The similarities and incongruities are then teased out to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. The installation *Drift* (2015) developed from the snowy context of Centre Bang in Chicoutimi, Quebec, but the drift that they created is one in which obsolescent materials discovered in the recesses of the centre are re-purposed and situated in the gallery. A blue foam block becomes an iceberg supporting a concrete block, inserted at a jagged edge, with a poorly fashioned Styrofoam cup and cigarette butt made of plaster. Nearby, a mountainous structure formed of plaster, chunks of foam, and concrete hovers over the gallery space. And yet, all does not appear as it seems, plaster forms around and partially engulfs the foam and concrete, at first appearing to be key structural components but each angle reveals a new part, and a parallel gallery space.

Front Gallery

VSVSVS place objects one on top of the other, but their boundaries remain perceptible. This is a balancing act, in which the textures, colours, and shapes of materials find a moment of equilibrium. It is a temporary moment of perfection as everything is always shifting and responding to internal and external environmental cues. Inherent in this is a renegotiation of the boundaries of what constitutes art—must something new always be created? Or might objects be re-arranged and destroyed too? Experimentation begins with the materials, and there is hope that the process will spill over into experience and that the objects will encourage new modes of engagement.

In her edited volume *The ‘do-it-yourself’ artwork*, Anna Deuzeze addresses the history of forms of participatory art of the twentieth century to give these practices their due consideration outside of traditional art historical categories. Deuzeze distinguishes ‘the do-it-yourself artwork’ as grammatically speaking performative, expressed as an invitation by the artist(s) to anyone willing to participate; to create a “new triangular relation between the artist, the artwork, and the spectator/participant...”¹ However, ‘do-it-yourself’ is a broad category, in which a wide spectrum of work provides vastly different frameworks for exchange. Some frameworks are overtly political, and others point toward a more subtle engagement and middle ground between the polarities of art and life. Often the exchange is one in which the hierarchical relationship between artist and viewer, insider and outsider, or experimenter and research subject is maintained. This allows participation to be gauged ahead of time, as a participant’s behaviour is relatively predictable, leaving little room for surprise. VSVSVS attempt to eliminate the power dynamic associated with traditional presentations of participatory work, leaving behind expected or preferred methods of audience engagement, and embracing the potentials that might be actualized. They look to find a balance, a back and forth experience of give and take. If you only want to engage a little, they will meet you half way, but if something should strike you and draw you right in, they will respond with enthusiasm in-turn. It is a dialogical approach that allows each individual to take something different away. It is about the small moments as much as it is about the big ones. In fact, it is about distilling the intimate moments, and fostering interactions that may result in a revelatory conversation, an exchange of ideas, or a moment where something that seems out of place provides a new perspective.

A sense of humour permeates their practice. In 2013 for Nuit Blanche they operated a phone line, *1-855-IS IT ART*, responding to public queries and providing advice. VSVSVS transformed their headquarters into an office space complete with desks, phones, and office plants, live streaming to Toronto’s City Hall. While for *Nap Station* (2014), VSVSVS created a place to rest and de-stress at the Art Toronto art fair. Much like a long trip to the museum, an art fair can be exhausting and over-stimulating with a seemingly never-ending stream of contemporary art booths. Tiered bunk beds with blankets acted as a break in the environment provided by a collective of artists whose work doesn’t always fit into the economic system of contemporary art. *Nap Station* is self-reflexive and morphs to the requirements of all who encounter it; it provides space and time for those who are tired as well as those open and ready to receive the witty gesture.

It is this open-ended approach that ultimately guides VSVSVS’ work. It is a process of constant adjusting and reworking to be responsive to those who may choose to engage in any given environment. Projects are not pre-determined and must be materially and physically responsive to each new context. Ultimately, it is this approach that allows the work to simultaneously operate on many levels at once. Both the viewers and the artists are able to find within the process exactly what they need and what they might not have expected to; both are given agency to determine the outcome.

The shape of their installation at Mercer Union reflects this process. Objects might move, and with them you might move too; arrangements may change, and with them you may change a little too. What is clear is that everything is on-going and in a process of becoming. Not together, but alongside is about becoming attuned to a different perspective, or to a myriad of perspectives, which may create a single, harmonious moment before being disrupted to allow space for new configurations. It is an invitation to come in close and move alongside. From the outside looking in, VSVSVS may mix together to form one cohesive accumulated mass, but if you come in closer, you will find all the distinct parts that contribute to the whole; not together, but alongside.

¹ Anna Deuzeze, ed., *The ‘do-it-yourself’ artwork: Participation from Fluxus to new media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 3.

Karen Kraven *Flip Flop, Punch Front*



Karen Kraven, image from the studio, 2015.

Avian Visions in Spandex: Karen Kraven’s Flip Flop, Punch Front **Cait McKinney**

The first time she emails me, Karen Kraven sends a video accompanied by a simple instruction: “check out Shannon Miller’s hands.” It’s a clip from Miller’s memorable balance-beam routine at the 1993 national gymnastics championship in Salt Lake City, Utah. These were the glory-days of the “Magnificent Seven” U.S. women’s gymnastics team, led by Miller and Kerri Strug, a girl-next-door type who competed through a broken ankle at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and was carried to the podium by her broad Romanian coach Béla Károly, crying from pain and triumph. Miller’s hand movements are anything but pained, though I wouldn’t call them graceful either. They are pointed, angular, thoughtless executions made possible by gymnastics’ bread and butter: routine. Heeding Kraven’s request, I follow Miller’s fingers as she bounds along her beam. She’s on her way to becoming the most decorated athlete in women’s gymnastics history, but these medals are not the adornments Kraven cares about.

By her own admission Kraven was never good at sports but liked gymnastics and basketball. Her outsider status offers distance from typical sports spectacles: concern for who wins and “what is the score?” is replaced by fascination with gestures, materials, and costuming. At the Utah nationals, the team wore simple white leotards emblazoned across the chest, arms, and back with a splash of magenta that looks a lot like plumage. Captivated by gymnastics leotard motifs, Kraven imagines uniforms for her own flock. *Flip Flop, Punch Front* explores the common athletic materials of spandex and mesh, but without bodies like Miller’s to enliven them.

A “flip-flop” and a “punch front” are aggressive, full rotations used in beam and floor routines. They require a startling amount of momentum, much like figure skater Tonya Harding’s no-holds-barred triple axel. In *Gymnastics for Girls and Women* (1969), the definitive mid-century guide to the sport, former Canadian Olympian Ernestine Carter describes the balance beam as “a strictly feminine piece of equipment. It develops the skill of a tight-rope walker, the grace of a ballerina, and the agility of an acrobat.”¹ The balance beam is a peculiar “acrobatic” event where stunning, high-impact moves are punctuated by long intervals of “graceful” hand movement, toe-pointing and other embellishments. Scripted pauses allow the athlete to gather herself for what comes next. During these pauses, Miller’s hand-work enters its most bird-like state.

¹Ernestine Russell Carter, *Gymnastics for Girls and Women* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 82.

Back Gallery

Isolating an athlete’s limbs the way Kraven does with her attention to Miller’s hands and spandexed torso is a recurring practice in her work. A poster picturing Michael Jordan with his arms extended, recognizable from jock dorm rooms everywhere, is altered by Kraven and set alongside a close-up of gymnast Cathy Rigby’s legs posed in splits along a balance beam. Jordan’s face and Rigby’s body are excised from the original images to zero-in on their outstretched limbs, leaving two horizontal planes of sweaty muscle that are all tension and potential; taught and chiseled studies in the sculptural aspects of training for court or beam. Elsewhere, Kraven hangs segments of prosthetic limbs from television mounts, outfitted in blue, red and gold-striped spandex that references the Soviet aesthetics of 1970s, Romanian-dominated gymnastics. These inanimate plaster limbs barely fill out their stretchy casings, leaving puckers and gaps that showcase the materials that are normally besides the point of competition.

The gymnastics leotards in *Flip Flop, Punch Front* are also devoid of bodies, stretched in ways that discourage potential wearers. Shannon Miller and her peacock-like hand gestures are nowhere to be found; instead the garments are willfully still. Sara Ahmed has described the peculiar relationship between gymnastics and the will: more than any other sport perhaps, gymnastics is training through which limbs are finely shaped by an athlete’s ability to control their muscles according to routine.² Gymnastics leotards are containers for all that will; without muscle and movement stretching their contours, they lose some of their essential *leotard-ness*, becoming something else altogether. Like Jordan’s wingspan and Rigby’s splits, a leotard is the potential to be stretched, constructed in proportions much smaller than the bodies they cover. Anyone who has squeezed into a leotard will be familiar with the compression-anxiety of confronting an impossibly tiny garment on its hanger: “That thing is going to fit over me?” Kraven’s uniforms are displayed in various states of stretch and repose, but these accommodations have not been made for a body.

Gymnastics developed in the mid-19th century as “the movement cure” for bourgeois bodies damaged from corseting.³ Back bends and side lunges made possible by the leotard’s stretch recontoured formerly constrained modern subjects. Sports costumes remain judgment mechanisms for women athletes as television commentators remark on colourways and sequins. The classed 1994 feud between Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan played out through the skaters’ outfits: “all-American” Kerrigan dressed in simple, white leotards embellished with modest lace while her “white-trash” foil preferred colour, pattern, and glaringly sequined décolletage.⁴ During the 1980s, track and field’s Florence Griffith Joyner was famous for her self-styled, one-legged racing suits. Made with unconventional materials such as lamé and fishnet, they complimented her four-inch fingernails, always painted to match. These nails become references for Kraven’s attention to the adornment-politics that haunt female athletes, in this case ensuring that Flo-Jo’s speed could never be articulated without reference to her black feminine embodiment.⁵

Whether for skating, running, or vaulting, leotards stretch over bodies that challenge feminine comportment through their musculature and racialized and classed connotations. Imagining garments with markings and identifications that reflect an ornithologist’s attention to pattern, Kraven holds the nationalistic tactics of international competition in tension with this gendered material history. Bodies like Miller’s, adorned as they are, become moving materials for nation-building.

Working on *Flip Flop, Punch Front*, Kraven became a spandex collector, browsing in specialist shops in Montreal’s textile district and sharing aisles in Manhattan’s Spandex World with eager Dance Moms as she selected a coveted Fruit Loop print. Kraven’s reverence for spandex exists alongside her ongoing attention to mesh, another synthetic material indispensable to sports uniforms, including the Bulls jersey Jordan wears as he extends his “wings” toward Rigby’s taught quads. While Kraven’s spandex is stretched at odd angles or arranged in inanimate gestures, her mesh lies flat in layers. Photographed in pairs that are difficult to tell apart at first glance, the movement in these still images comes from the moiré patterns they generate, and from the modest gap created by the near-identical diptychs’ titles, such as *Home Game & Away Game* (2014). These two-dimensional C-Prints frustrate our desires for mesh: that it hang-loose, offer just a glimpse of skin, and breathe as we sweat. If leotards need to stretch and mesh wants to drape, Kraven’s tactics for working with both materials ask what else they do, drawing our attention away from the main event, much like Miller’s sleights of hand.

² Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 83.

³ Ann Chisom, “Nineteenth-Century Gymnastics for U.S. Women and Incorporations of Buoyancy: Contouring Femininity, Shaping Sex, and Regulating Middle-Class Consumption,” *Journal of Women’s History* 20 (3) (2008): 84–112.

⁴ Sarah Marshall, “Tonya Harding, Nancy Kerrigan, and the Spectacles of Female Power and Pain,” *The Believer* (2014).

⁵ Lindsay Pieper, “Star-Spangled Fingernails,” *Sport in American History* (2015).