

JUSTIN LANGLOIS: NEGOTIATING POWER



May 11-June 23, 2018

Opening Reception: June 8, 2018, 6-8 p.m.

Vancouver-based artist Justin Langlois' practice explores language, socially engaged art, and playful forms of public interventions as sites for contestation and participation.

Negotiating Power is a site-responsive participatory gallery installation. Based on a series of posters, videos, small booklets, bunting and temporary tattoos, *Negotiating Power* presents a range of works that offer the viewer a series of entry points into ideas around agonistic civic engagement, the limits of participation and the necessity for expressions of disagreement and solidarity to shape civic engagement into our everyday lives.

Justin Langlois' *Negotiating Power*

Interpretive Essay by Heidi Smith

We choose our stance on an issue based on our knowledge of relevant facts, our emotional response to how these facts are presented, our trust in those providing the facts, and a variety of other factors. However, one commonality is that all the information on which we base our opinions is initially presented to us through language. Contrary to popular belief, language is more than just a vehicle for expressing facts and ideas. Meaning

is derived not only from a string of words that make up a message. It is interpreted based on multiple factors, including non-verbal communication, like body language or mutually understood silence, and the listener's knowledge of a statement's context, among others.

When it comes to politics, diplomacy, or the media, language is often used very purposefully in order to influence the public's opinion. Effective use of word choice and rhetorical devices can sway an audience so subtly that they don't even realize why the speaker is so persuasive. Think, for example, of two politicians discussing gentrification in their city. One politician may use the metaphor of "cleaning up" an area of town, while the opposing figure may describe proposed changes as "destroying" a neighbourhood, even if there is no actual demolition taking place. The speakers are referring to the same set of circumstances, but, according to their views of the situation, one has chosen a metaphor that suggests improvement and cleanliness, while the other leader's metaphor implies loss and even violence.

"Speakers reveal much about their own beliefs through the terms they use, and where these speakers are politicians and policy makers, they do not merely reflect their own views, but often shape the views of others through the use of such connotations."

– Dr. Biljana Scott (From Soft Power to Hard Talk: the languages of diplomacy)

Understanding how we interpret meaning and recognizing the plurality of views we are faced with allows us to become more aware of bias and think more critically about the information we take in. Justin Langlois' exhibit, *Negotiating Power*, explores disagreement, multiplicity, and the role of language and meaning as part of civic engagement.

In his installation, the viewer is presented with a series of statements which are written by Langlois, but which have a familiar ring to them because of their vagueness and use of proverbial sayings. The statements all articulate strong positions, some of which contradict one another and all of which are intentionally unapologetic. Langlois creates an atmosphere of disagreement by filling these definitive statements with absolutes ("always", "never") and provocative language ("...are for suckers", "violent assumptions") and by placing opposing arguments nearby one another.

Negotiating Power is also an opportunity for the viewer to rethink how they attribute meaning and form opinions. Langlois' statements are conspicuously lacking attribution, so the audience cannot judge the arguments' validity based on the speaker's values or credibility. Langlois has created statements that would normally make sense through reference to something said prior, like "We should act now". However, by leaving the context of this action unspecified, the viewer is invited to consider, "In what circumstances would I agree?" In this way, Langlois has created an artificial environment, free from several contextual factors that would normally inform the viewer's opinions, and then asked the viewer to make decisions based on what's left.

Justin Langlois has created an experimental space where the audience is reminded that there are many versions of every story and that the words we hear or read may not be telling us the *whole* story.