

Parc Offsite: An Interview with Eli Kerr

Aseman Sabet

For the past 7 years, Eli Kerr has been committed to producing exhibitions through emerging alternative models in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal's contemporary art scene. After working for a few years as cofounder with Daphné Boxer of VIE D'ANGE, an art space that closed in the midst of aggressive gentrification, in the Fall of 2020 he opened Parc Offsite, a new space with a new philosophy.

Aseman Sabet: Many people in the local art community felt a big loss when VIE D'ANGE closed in 2019. From this point on, and against all odds if we consider the pandemic context that followed, what brought you to open Parc Offsite?

Eli Kerr: The pandemic has presented a paradigmatic shift in how we constitute or assemble as a public. As it is a social problem, it is very much a curatorial problem, and so this new situation demands that one dive right-in and figure it out.

I've had the idea for a project like Parc Offsite for some time; for an exhibition space to exist dually as a curatorial office that can facilitate activities beyond its walls, initiating and fostering new artistic and curatorial projects, while serving a public through ongoing exhibition programming. I don't live in Mile End anymore, but I know this area well and it feels great to be here every day.

VIE D'ANGE was a very inspiring place to work and to dream with artists, but it presented many challenges as we were caught in a strange loop that didn't allow our activities to be formalized due to legal complications relating to our occupancy, let alone the uncertainty of when we would eventually lose the building. The project was formative in defining an intuitive approach to passionately working in the unknown, though Daphné and I were both surprised it was able to last four years. Had the pandemic happened a year earlier we'd probably still be there, and probably for many more years. The irony is not lost on me that all of the tech offices in Mile-Ex have now been built, but are sitting empty. After all, these technologies lead to disruptive changes such as orientating the home as the new office. We were able to make projects there that couldn't have happened anywhere else. While many people came to our openings, what sticks with me is being there every weekend for in-person visits with whomever wanted to talk about the work, and that commitment continues in the new project.

For the opening of Parc Offsite in Fall 2020, you presented Abbas Akhavan's installation as part of *A Few Many Places*, an international project that brought together five artists from different cities around the world, in conversation with five writers. Developed by the art organization Protocinema, the project implied low material

consumption through site-aware interventions. Was this approach a decisive factor for launching your space with an exhibition in collaboration with Protocinema, and of course with Akhavan, with whom you had previously worked?

E.K.: Mari Spirito at Protocinema was working on *A Few In Many Places* and had commissioned Abbas to create a work for the project in Montreal. Around the same time, I was deliberating about the new project and so it was fortuitous timing. Artists are the people I turn to when I need advice, I love their ingenuity and thoughtfulness. I believe Abbas was one of the first people I showed the storefront to when I was considering it. It was uplifting to work with him a second time. It was the first time either of us had worked on a show since the onset of the virus and so we had to form a bubble, it felt like learning to live in a new condition. While his *VIE D'ANGE* show anticipated the end of the program, I enjoyed the conceptual and material continuity through the motif of chroma key, the social history of plant life and the use of architectural glass, all of which reappeared in this opening chapter on Parc Avenue.

Protocinema does inventive work, I admire the vision, scale and scope of the organization. Mari's thoughtful curatorial premise for the show created a new way of connecting people in different places, I appreciate how the exhibition emphasized 'the local' as a multiplicity of locals. This thinking inspires what I'd like to do in Montreal over the next few years.

The scale of Parc Offsite calls for very intimate encounters with the works. Did you envision this as a defining aspect of your project from the beginning?

E.K.: Certainly. I figured one way to create an intimate environment was to work on a modest scale. This demands both an efficacy of exhibition-making and a heightened focus for the work on view. It's similar to doing more with less, if you

give visitors only one work to look at, will they experience it more intensely? This is an experiment Jean-François Lauda and I are doing with his exhibition *Single Picture*; there is just one painting in the show. In the spirit of a slight refusal due to attention deficits and cultures of instant gratification (which have grossly changed exhibition and mediation practices), we are forgoing publishing images until the exhibition is over.

Limited capacity, a new social condition that has emerged through the constraints of COVID-19, is something that has been on my mind. While of course it is needed as a health and safety measure, I am entertaining the metaphoric implications of a vocabulary that I feel could stage modes of austerity; a limited capacity to hold space is a limited capacity to encounter ideas, to listen to each-other and broaden our understanding. Or perhaps limited capacity is a psychic condition, which we've already been inhabiting for the past decade or so, effecting our ability to focus deeply.

In-line with this thinking, it is very important for me to keep regular open hours as opposed to shifting to by appointment. Being a street-level community member on Avenue du Parc, it is essential to allow opportunities for spontaneous discovery.

I am still learning through this context. For both myself and the viewer, it calls for a more rigorous and curious practice. There is no architectural grandeur that envelopes the encounter, presentations need to find their own way to concision and perhaps, for now, this is a modest way to open new worlds.

Your project also implies developing residencies for artists and curators, along with an editorial branch that will take the form of an annual journal. Can you tell us more about the articulation of these various components?

E.K.: I am still in the early phases of figuring this out. But the city needs new vehicles and approaches to create adaptive contexts and ways to support art here, especially after the past year. Our artists need support, and in this regard, I would like to see a curatorial culture grow and expand in Montreal. To formalize these aspects of the project and to enrich what they can be, it will be essential to work with other people.

For now, publishing the journal will be an annual and thematic project. While I'd like each issue to be retrospective of the of previous year's programming, the first issue will be dedicated to Avenue du Parc, with bilingual interviews and profiles of the places and people who make up this street. It will likely be a few broadsheets of newsprint and should be out in September.

The residencies should also be launched around this time if not later in the year.

They can take place in many forms. I am currently timesharing the space two days a week, renting it to an arts administrator, which provides them with an office and helps me keep things financially manageable. This has shown to me that the timeshare model could be a sustainable way to support a resident's research practice over the long term, as opposed to a short intensive period. I also should note that a small library and reading space is being added to the gallery, which could be useful for residents and for visitors.

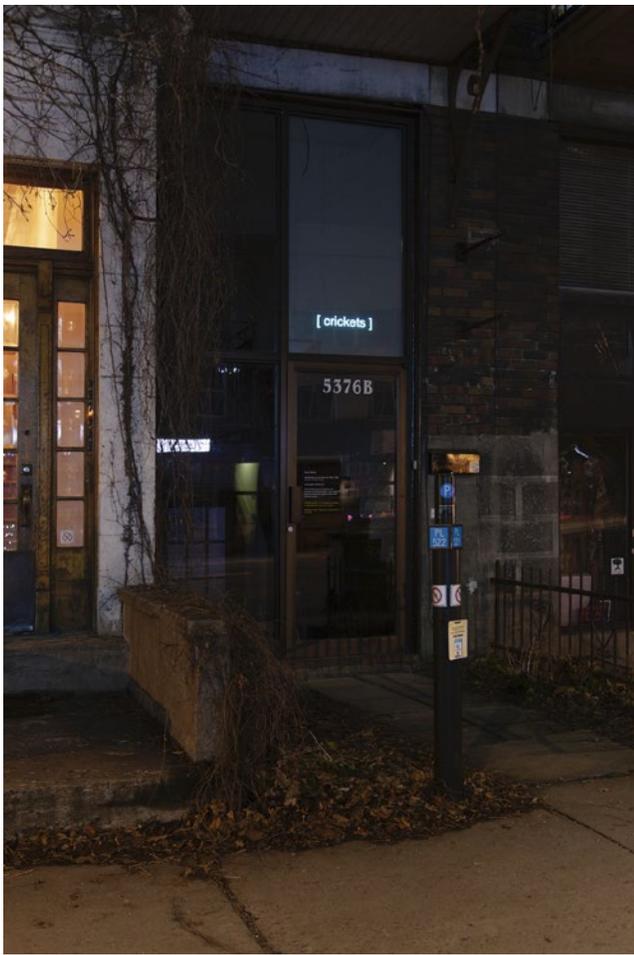
I have also recently signed the lease on the adjacent storefront, which has the same architecture and window profile as the gallery location. In the summer a large maple tree nearly almost entirely hides it from the street. At the moment, an artist and a writer are renting the space and using it as a shared studio for the rest of the year. They are great neighbours and this gives me time to figure things out. The location would be the ideal space for a full residency program and I am currently looking for institutional

partnerships, as well as public and private support to make this happen. I enjoy creating spaces for artists and being a resource for them and I'm excited to explore new ways of continuing to do this.

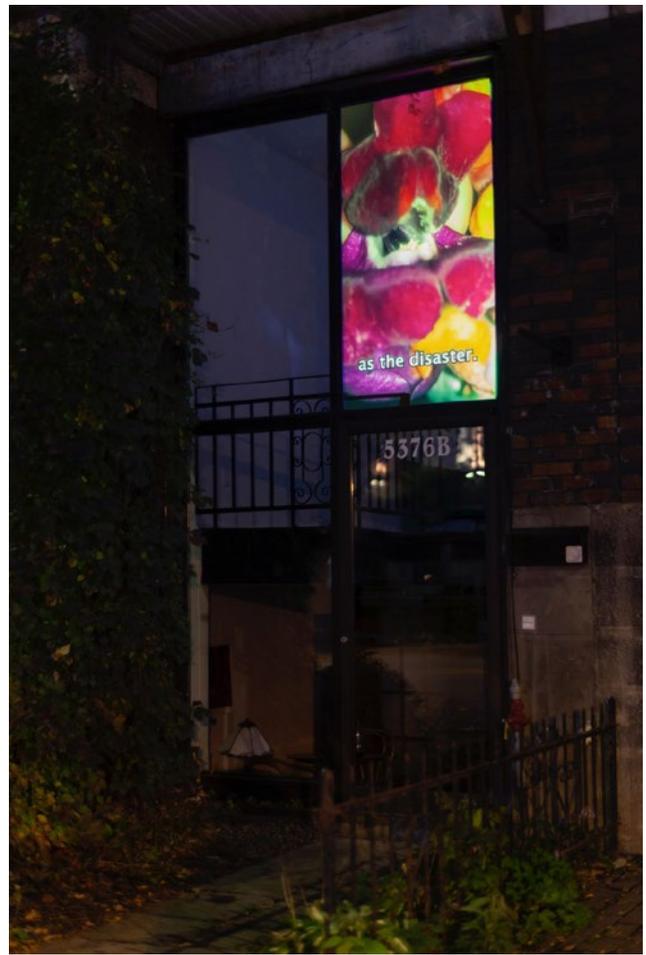
Eli Kerr is based in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. Through exhibition-making, text and advocacy for artists, his efforts commit to the various modes in which artistic practices both recall and produce the memory of site, and the social histories of place. In 2015 he co-founded VIE D'ANGE with Daphné Boxer before founding Parc Offsite, a curatorial office and exhibition space, in 2020. Kerr has completed curatorial residencies at International Studio and Curatorial Program (New York, 2017) and Rupert (Vilnius, Lithuania, 2018). He is the recipient of the 2019 Hnatyshyn Foundation-Fogo Island Arts Residency Award for Canadian curators under 30.

Aseman Sabet is an art historian and a lecturer at Université du Québec à Montréal. She also works as an independent curator and an associate editor for *ESPACE*. Her research explores sensorial studies as well as the confluence of contemporary art and science. Her most recent exhibition projects include *Through the Forest* (2018), the first in a series of three carte blanche invitations from MAC LAU, focusing on intersecting epistemologies and representations of nature and history, and *The New States of Being* (2019), presented at CEUM and developed in collaboration with Harvard's Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology and Bioethics.

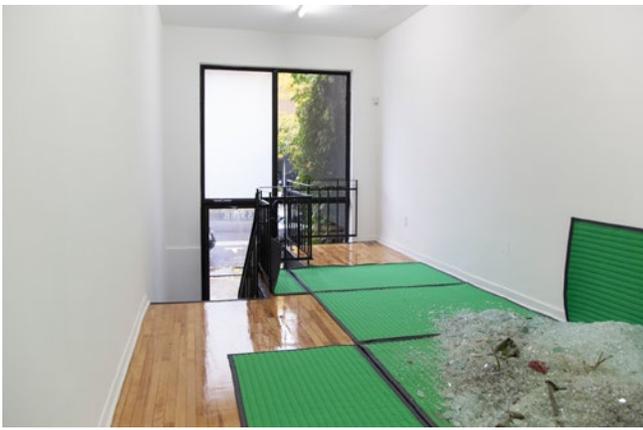
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Abbas Akhavan, *Spill*. 2020. HD Video. 4 Min 13 s. Photo: Simon Belleau.



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Abbas Akhavan, *A Few in Many Places*, 2020. September 28th – November 28th. Installation view. Organized by Protocinema. Photo: Simon Belleau.



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Abbas Akhavan, *Untitled*. 2020. Heavy-duty vinyl-reinforced polyester, quilt batting, tropical plants, glass. Photo: Simon Belleau.



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