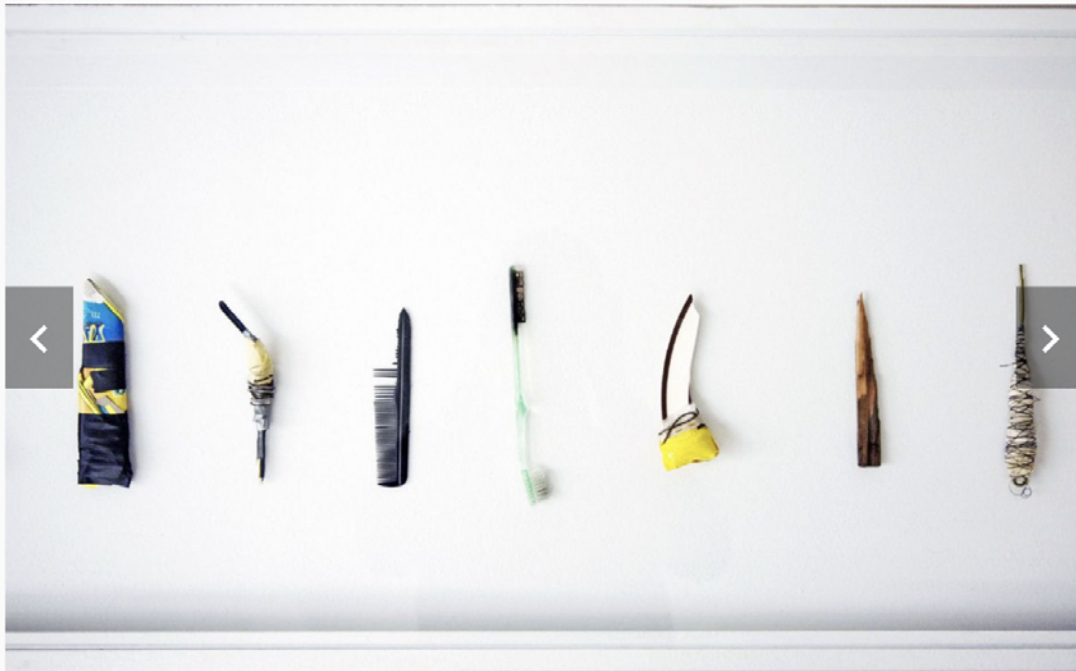


Tools For Conviviality at the Power Plant: Review

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual Arts Critic
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So this is goodbye. That was the inevitable, creeping sense wandering “Tools for Conviviality,” the Power Plant’s summer show and, it turns out, its last to be assembled by curator Melanie O’Brian, who resigned just as it opened a couple of weeks ago.

The gallery didn’t broadcast it, and no surprise there. Recent staff history at the institution has been nothing to crow about.



A detail shot of Abbas Akhavan's "Makeshift Objects," a collection of handmade weapons, commonly known as shivs, made and used by inmates in prisons for attack and defence. "Makeshift Objects" is part of "Tools for Conviviality," the summer show at the Power Plant.

O’Brian started 18 months ago; the person who hired her, longtime director Gregory Burke, quit shortly thereafter in February 2011. After more than a year, the Power Plant named Gaetane Verna its new director in March and O’Brian’s departure so shortly after hardly seems a coincidence. But nobody’s saying anything about that, at least publicly.

O’Brian would have had other shows in the works and their future is yet to be determined — the helpful arrival from the National Gallery in September of *The Clock*, Christian Marclay’s 24-hour extravaganza, buys the gallery some breathing room — so for all practical purposes, *Tools* serves as a swan song.

It fits. O’Brian’s few shows were intellectually sharp, but dense and often dry, and *Tools* is no exception. It takes its name from a 1973 text by philosopher Ivan Illich, who wrestled with an essential dilemma of a burgeoning technological world: Do we rule technology or does it rule us?

I hesitate to call *Tools*, the book, obscure; that said, a well-known philosopher is akin, on the visibility scale, to a superstar theoretical physicist, which is to say not very. The show does itself no favours with a title drawn from so far beyond the margins as to be unrecognizable by most and whose language is a quizzical puzzle to be unravelled.

So a welcome mat it's not, and that's been an on-again, off-again problem with the Power Plant throughout its 25-year history. The show's content does little to rectify its nominal obscurity. Illich wrote about convivial tools as being neutral, or "non-coercive," by which he meant they were simple, useful, affordable and accessible. Think of a shovel or a rake. On the other end of the spectrum were "manipulatory" tools, which brought into play socio-economic privilege. His main totem here, in the burgeoning sprawl of suburbia, was the car: A brilliantly useful tool so long as you could afford it.

What these ideas have to do with the work presented here, I have no idea. Maybe it doesn't matter. "Tools for Conviviality" is notably half-hearted. Individual works, like Kyla Mallet's *Being Yourself*, have a charming, sad irreverence: Mallet presents an irregular grid of quasi-instructional diagrams culled from a self-help manual of the same name. What they're instructing, in their weirdly practical-seeming way is anyone's guess. But their warming futility in trying to practically map the mysteries of human motivation is their one good trick.

Nearby, an enormous pinwheel of coloured thread fills an entire wall. Next to it, a tall, angled pole of black clay stands erect, the impressions of hundreds of fingertips embossed, Giacometti-like, into its soft hide. These are the works of Vancouver superstar Geoffrey Farmer, about whom I long ago gave up trying to glean specific meaning; instead, I reconciled a simple savouring of his esoteric, forever-unfinished oeuvre.

Farmer is famous for his constantly transforming installations, reflecting a kind of ruling impermanence of contemporary experience, and the work here enthralls in its intentional confusions and transformations. It also embraces the handmade. Absent of tools, Farmer invites a conviviality through shared experience.

Simply put, it works. Unfortunately, it's virtually alone here in this regard. Nearby, the Franz West installation, a cube wallpapered with recent Toronto Star pages. Outside, useless tools — those iron rods with the plaster lumps — lean against a wall. What now? Well, follow the handy instructional video: Grab a tool, go inside and giggle at the ridiculousness of your reflection in the mirror, ideally along with others who've done the same. Useless tools? Ah, but for the conviviality! Get it? The gallery makes it impossible to miss, and that's the problem.

At this point, I realized there was no stretch I could make to hang this all together, so I took the works individually, which was the only reasonable way to consider them. Even here, we fail: Transplanting fragments of Swintak and Don Miller's "Don Blanche" event out in the Ontario countryside — it's a kind of annual earthy refuge/response to the annual urban assault of Nuit Blanche — just neutered it in a natural history museum-diorama kind of way. Claire Fontaine (a collective, it should be noted) and its slogans embroidered on black flags hung from garden tools is both too obvious and just as silly.

A final saving grace is the work of Abbas Akhaven, arrayed in vitrines in the gallery's corridor. Akhaven presents dozens of shivs — homemade daggers, skewers and other crude maiming implements — in a polite, almost anthropological fashion: Murder under glass.

Not convivial by any stretch, Akhaven's "Makeshift" series are menacing absurdities intensified by the fact that they could very well be and in various correctional facilities likely are very real. Tools for conviviality? More like tools for hostility. I wonder what Illich had to say about that.

"Tools for Conviviality" continues at the Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, to Aug. 26. A guided tour of the exhibition takes place Sunday, July 15 at 2 pm.