

No Exaggerations

Justin Langlois

As I write this, the world is in the midst of yet another wave of the pandemic. Over nearly two-years of grappling with COVID-19, each week continues to bring new glimpses of fleeting hope or familiar hesitations. I keep asking my friends and family: do you think we're nearing the end of all of this? But I know it's a silly question. Because somewhere deep down, it seems impossible that we're nearing an end, and that eventually some of what we've experienced will just become normal. I also ask that question because it makes space for me to understand my own feelings about the moment we're living in, the decisions we make every day, and the kinds of futures we're knowingly and unknowingly building.

It's within this context and between the period of summer vaccinations and the onset of the Omicron variant that I made the artwork featured in this exhibition. This was a window of time where it felt like a lot of things started to get closer to normal and I was thinking a lot about the stories we've had to tell ourselves to get through the long days and weeks and months of living in a global pandemic. These were the stories made out of moments where we thought something was changing, but didn't. Or in other cases, something changed when we weren't expecting it. And sometimes, stories about how we changed and didn't even realize it. In some ways, I think of all of the artworks in this exhibition as very short stories, but they are also investigations into the language we know and the language we use and the language we *need* to shape and understand the world and our place in it.

In making these artworks, I was also reminded of just how much language shifts all the time. Depending on who we are, where we live, or what we do in our everyday lives, the ways we interpret and understand words can subtly and not-so-subtly change over time. And that temporal element, the idea of change across time, was really fascinating to me. I knew I wanted to create a series of artworks that use words, phrases, and ideas that have somehow changed in meaning over the course of the global pandemic. But the nuances of that change wasn't something I really understood until the work was completed. Now that I'm writing this essay, after making the work, and before the exhibition opens,¹ it's yet another opportunity to examine how language continues to change.

The multi-part poster-based artwork, *Decisions, Decisions (two years and counting)*, uses the form of a loose story that deploys familiar and personal language to encourage viewers to find points of resonance and dissonance with the individual statements. Viewers can participate by marking their agreement, disagreement, or ambivalence with each of these texts by using a set of small round stickers in the exhibition, and over time, each poster will become a summary of the community's hopes, fears, dreams, and realities.

The video work, *Forever and Ever (How Do You Feel Today?)* contains a series of words that are both related and unrelated to one another circling in an infinite loop, reflecting on the way that language continually and simultaneously becomes a respite and a source of tension. For me, this work also captures the uncanniness of the idea of a loop, where the same thing wraps back around itself, and although it remains the same, the fact that it is experienced over time means that we may understand the words differently each time we see them pass in front of us in a particular way at a particular moment.

The large wall text, *Stay Safe OK?*, takes a phrase that became all too familiar over the pandemic and brings it to a monumental scale. The artwork asks viewers to contend with what staying safe can mean in the midst of a public health crisis, and who indeed can feel safe at all. I still find myself signing off on notes and messages this way, even while I know that safety is not only sometimes a subjective thing but a moving target. In a lot of my work, I use the form of a question because I think it creates an invitation for the viewer, and although this is the only artwork in this exhibition that functions as a question, I think its size and scale allows it to become a looming anchor to all the other work.

Finally, I titled the exhibition *No Exaggerations* because I felt like it was a way to acknowledge that the things we've felt over the last two years are real and difficult and will be something that will probably continue to change us in ways we won't understand for years to come. One loose definition of exaggerating might be something like 'a phrase that makes something seem better or worse than it really is,' and I think about how much our feelings can make something seem better or worse than it objectively appears to be on a day-by-day or even minute-by-minute basis. I think that honouring these changes and how they have impacted us means recognizing all of those phrases, all of that thinking and feeling, as something that isn't exaggerated but experienced in a deeply human way. I hope you'll find some points of resonance and dissonance across the exhibition and some moments of solidarity; we may still have a long road ahead.

Stay safe, ok?

1. As of early January 2022, Ontario has issued closures to many businesses and cultural facilities to try to flatten the curve again, and even with this challenge, the incredible staff at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, especially Sonali Menezes and Florencia Berinstein, continue to be incredible hosts and supports for this exhibition. I am sincerely grateful for their patience and generosity in making this exhibition happen, in whatever form it ultimately takes.