

Lex Brown and Geo Wyeth  
Jan 22 — Apr 16, 2022



# Broadcasts from Here

Western Front is pleased to present an exhibition of work by multidisciplinary artists Lex Brown and Geo Wyeth, who each respectively engage with broadcast mediums in their practices. With so many of us having now taken up the task, “broadcasting” is less a technical question of sending transmissions than a way of being in the world: a broadcaster subjectivity, which is always in one space while performing for another. What forms, poetics, and idioms are available to us that think through such a multiply-emplaced subject?

Geo Wyeth’s *Muck Studies Dept.* is a fictive municipal agency whose protagonist gets in touch with what stinks beneath the surface. The project merges inherited Black Atlantic American funk and folk poetics with techniques of investigative journalism, and connects mud, water, metal, gas, ass, rocks, coins, extractive industry, deep coloniality, and sensual expression of belonging. In Wyeth’s work, local histories, speculative narratives, and black hole stories intertwine in poetic performances and sound works. Speakers or radios bring Wyeth’s voice into the gallery from an elsewhere that is made fully present. For this exhibition, they have created a work out of the gallery space itself, opening up its hidden spaces, to create a site-specific iteration of *Muck Studies Dept.*, including a performance on January 22.

In her thirty-minute video *Communication* (2021), Lex Brown assumes multiple characters as parodic renderings of a telecommunications company, Omnesia; and its next residential target for development, New Greater Framingham. Aspen Van Der Baas (a gen-something girlboss), Jordie (her tech bro analyst), and Sylvie (an impassive and sentient AI) use their extensive technological powers to displace the consumer-citizens of New Greater Framingham. Finding their strategies insufficient, they enlist the help of B. Marbels, a fast-talking, ambivalent film director who is tasked with creating “plot holes,” further confusing the minds of New Greater Framingham. To Omnesia’s chagrin, one such consumer-citizen, Marie, discovers the power of her inner voice to interfere with the algorithmic forces of Omnesia and its plot holes. These characters, the argots that they speak, and the scenarios they play out are reminiscent of the speculative fictions of the present, but Brown’s video also questions the way that speculation (as capital) and fiction (as a constructed narrative) work. *Communication* suggests the many ways that we are drawn, cajoled, and coerced into “the future,” at the expense of what (and who) exists here and now.

# ON AIR, ON THE GROUND

## Becket MWN

Broadcast seems to have become an historical form. What we have now is far more “hot” in Marshall McLuhan’s<sup>1</sup> (and maybe Paris Hilton’s<sup>2</sup>) terms than it once was; it is on demand, streaming, and HD: I don’t mean high-definition images, but rather audiences, which are now more targeted, sorted, and articulated than the Nielsen-ratings-approximated masses of yesteryear. Having maxed out image quality to the point of so-real-it-looks-fake, it is now the viewer who is defined, not so much in their granular particularity, but elastically definable according to the various parameters placed around them, extendable and divisible depending on the set of data they are sorted in or out of.

Such elasticity is critical for the function of contemporary media; it allows for movement, the potential to be drawn in (to this or that self-image, or in deeper, down the rabbit hole) or pushed out (of habits, of the comfort zone, of the neighborhood). Far from the pathetic or (following Baudrillard<sup>3</sup>) strategic passivity of the mass audience, media consumers are now active, and not least of all as broadcasters themselves. Artists have experimented for decades with the form of broadcast, whether radio or television, using strategies such as détournement, subversion, and piracy to work against the unidirectional flow of information. Western Front has engaged with these media since its founding. Projects challenging the form, content, and means of broadcast were initiated at Western Front by artists and media activists such as Hank Bull, Patrick Ready, Bill Bartlett, Bobbi Kozinuk, Tetsuo Kogawa, and Peter Courtemanche, as well as with the Vancouver Co-op radio station CFRO. These experiments resonate today in the waning influence of traditional centralized media networks, when messages to the world can issue forth from the back of any van or bedroom; but now that everyone is doing it, “broadcasting” becomes less a technical question of sending transmissions than a way of being in the world: the worlding capacity of media as it shapes the medium, the message, and the receiver; its forming of a broadcaster subjectivity.

Geo Wyeth and Lex Brown are both engaged with broadcast directly—for example, Wyeth’s series of performances and concerts *ATM-FM (At The*

*Moment Female Male, or At The Moment Fake Money)*, or Brown’s ongoing podcast *1-800-POWERS*; but the significance of broadcast extends to many aspects of their practices, becoming not so much a media format as a framework for thinking about the presence of other temporalities and spaces woven through the stitching of the present. The artists are attuned to these present others, which might emerge from spaces underneath or above where we typically focus our attention, or address us in strange tenses such as the future anterior or the past subjunctive, from speculative history as well as future archaeology.

The first time I encountered Geo Wyeth’s project *Muck Studies Dept.* was in the back of a van, where a video was back projected onto a screen hung across the open rear doors. In the video (*Muck Signal from Muck Studies Dept.*, 2018), Wyeth is wearing a long white shirt with “Muck Studies Dept.” inscribed in thick, wet letters on the back, raking (literally, with a rake) down into an algae-covered body of water. This brings to mind the “muckrakers” of the early twentieth century—journalists who wrote exposés of political corruption in the popular press. However, here the muck that rises up could be folk histories, suppressed narratives, or colonial geological layers; everything gets caught in the rising water. The agent of the *Muck Studies Dept.* is a scientist or civil servant, one who sorts, scrutinizes, and records as well as one who stirs up what stinks, who brings it to the surface, to sensorial undeniability (and, in the end, is it not the denial itself that makes the stink?).

In Wyeth’s show *In Need of a Memory Bank* (2021) at Shimmer in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, a small fog machine intermittently spurted clouds into the room from within a plastic shopping bag printed with Dutch tulips, as if it were ostentatiously passing gas. In a nearby corner, a wall panel had been removed, exposing the wall’s interior and a deep gap that extended well below the floor. A soundscape that played in the room went just as deep, including the clangs and clinks of chains and loose change and the gurgling of underwater feedback-missives from the boiler room. When composing the sounds, installations, and performances that comprise *Muck Studies*, Wyeth attends to these local histories and perspectives, but always in their own idiom and poetic form, and tuned specifically to each exhibition space. Within this mode of research, there is also a speculation about alternative histories or futures. These potential temporalities include complex configurations—for example, a future-opened-to-the-present-by-the-presence-of-the-past, or perhaps

another-present-buried-by-the-past-that-becomes-a-future. These possibilities are ultimately a part of what is there, in the locality as well as within the gallery; they are contained within it. Like the voices that often beam into Wyeth's work via hand-held radios distributed throughout the space, there is another place that is part of this place, that is broadcasting in from (where else?) exactly where we are.

Lex Brown's video *Communication* (2021) also presents us with spaces nested within each other. It begins with a prologue in a planetarium, where a scientist named Wanda introduces the video as if it were a future presentation about human societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Once Wanda's presentation begins, the setting switches to the stage of a theatre, its scenic backdrop made of silhouettes of stylized windows and houses. Aspects of this society remain familiar to us, but are extrapolated one step further: a massive telecommunications company called Omnesia, "plot holes" in the collective memory (particularly around historical trauma), and mass evictions to build an entirely empty version of the city of New Greater Framingham. This empty city becomes a figure with multiple meanings. Most immediately it reminds me of the luxury apartment towers that stand uninhabited in city centres, having been built not so much to house people but rather to accumulate capital in the form of real estate investment; but it also becomes a symbol for the violence of the virtual on the real. As Sylvie, Omnesia's sentient AI program, points out, New Greater Framingham will be "ultimately, new photographs," "a shining beacon in the distance: speculation."

*Communication* suggests the many ways that we are drawn, cajoled, and coerced into "the future" at the expense of what (and who) exists here and now, particularly those deemed "futureless." From the perspective of Omnesia, the present exists purely as a form of investment that may yield future profit. Even emotional labour is a market that must be "subsidized by potential futures," as a character named Marie puts it. Marie is having a difficult conversation over the phone, negotiating complicated feelings through Omnesia's algorithmic language "aggrevision", or "talking about not talking." These and other words and phrases of Brown's script wash over the viewer in the same way that loaded signifiers circulate in contemporary media, articulating a meaning dependent on the receiver's ability to decode, interpret, and contextualize a certain lexicon, becoming nodes themselves in the

circulation of affect. In this sense, all of Brown's characters are broadcasting—even the everyday citizens negotiating their interpersonal conflicts, whose emotional lives are very much the target of information capital (as Aspen, one of Omnesia's executives, reminds us).

Brown doesn't leave us in this linguistic state, however. We see one of the characters, Marie, turn within herself to listen to Lucida, or "the little voice," whom Omnesia's aggrevision is meant to suppress. The little voice speaks in an intimate way, inappropriable by algorithmic functions, drawing us inward rather than pushing us forward. After this moment of listening, Marie begins to explore the backstage of *Communication*'s theatrical setting to discover its constructedness—not only the flimsiness of the scenic flats and the lights and cables that prop up the illusion, but also the firmness of the stage under the soles of her shoes. In both Brown and Wyeth's practices, ways of writing and speaking resist broadcast's smooth exchanges; sense-making is slowed or questioned to allow other meanings to emerge, to search for what cannot quite be said. These messages, too, go out over the wire, perhaps as a long, rambling voicemail, or an enduring silence.

- 1: In McLuhan's terms, "hot" media focus on a single form of information in high definition; for example, the radio. "Cool" media, in contrast, are more environmental, engaging multiple senses (for example, sound and image in the case of television), typically in lower quality. The receiver projects their attention into cool media, rendering them more passive or absorbed; hot media is more activating. For McLuhan, these qualities have direct political and social consequences, particularly "hot" media: from the printing press came the Protestant Reformation; from radio, the mass mobilizations of the Second World War. (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994], 22-23.)
- 2: Hilton was famous for her catchphrase "that's hot" from the reality TV show *The Simple Life*. A highly flexible phrase, it applied to so many situations that it became simply a stand-in for Hilton herself, a circular signifier for a celebrity who is often described as "famous for being famous." Hilton has registered the phrase with the Patent Office as a trademark.
- 3: For Baudrillard, the alienation of "the masses" (a term which seems to already presume alienation) is something conferred onto them by a philosopher or theorist who may then demystify them. Instead, Baudrillard suggests that the masses' passivity is a strategy for remaining unknowable by the various technologies producing and measuring them: "the object, the individual, is not only condemned to disappearance, but *disappearance is also its strategy*; it is its way of response to this device for capture, for networking, and for forced identification. To this *cathodic* surface of recording, the individual or the mass reply by a *parodic* behavior of disappearance." (Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media," *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 [1985]: 583.)

# Biographies

Lex Brown is a Philadelphia-based artist who uses poetry and science fiction to create an index for our psychological and emotional experiences as organic beings in a rapidly technologized world. She has performed and exhibited work internationally, and teaches as a Media Fellow in Art, Film, & Visual Studies and Theater, Dance, & Media at Harvard University. She is also the host of the podcast *1-800-POWERS*. Brown is a 2021 recipient of the USA Fellowship. She is represented by Deli Gallery (New York).

Geo Wyeth is a Swampy Pessimist Yearning (S.P.Y.) artist and educator based in Rotterdam and working in music, performance, narrative sculpture, and video. Wyeth has shown work internationally and they are co-founder of the queer social space Tender Center in Rotterdam. They also compose original soundtracks for film, including by the artist Tourmaline. In 2021, Wyeth was awarded the Dolf Henkes Art Prijs and the Hartwig Foundation Grant.

Becket MWN is an Amsterdam-based writer and artist, originally from the United States. MWN's recent projects have focused on the relation between language and the production of the self, the circulation of affect and popular culture, and media and current forms of subjectivity. His work often takes the form of text-based audio, and comments on and is structured by its architectural context. He also has a writing practice under the name Becket Flannery, in which he responds to the work of other artists in the "paratextual" spaces of art exhibitions.

# List of Works

# Floorplan

1. Geo Wyeth  
*No Stars Found Waving Signs at Muck Studies Dept.* (2021-22)  
4-channel audio. 24:00 mins.  
Courtesy of the artist.

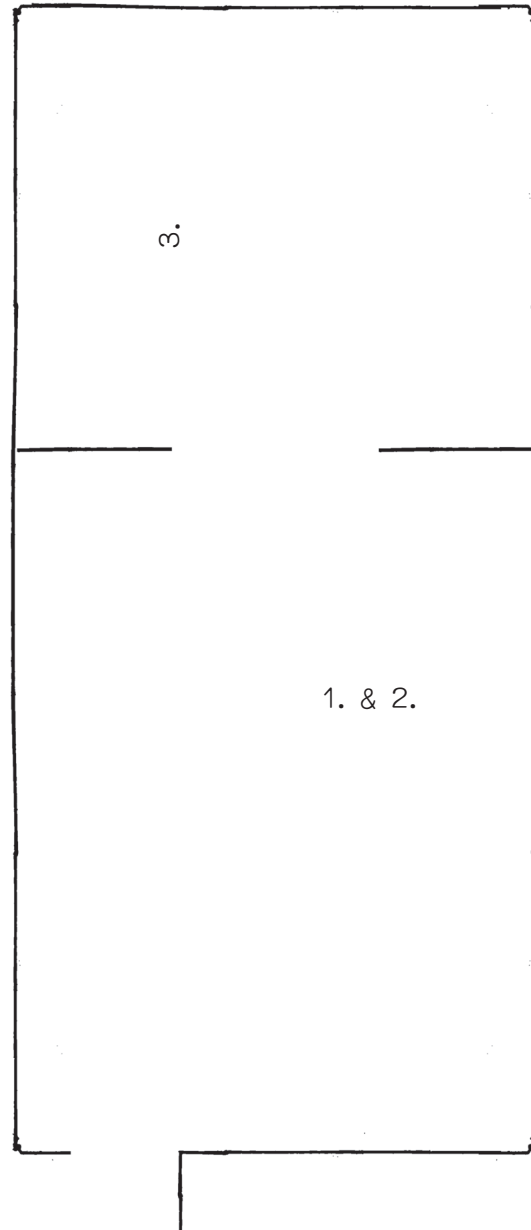
Broadcast times: 1:30 & 3:30 p.m.

2. Geo Wyeth  
*Not a Dime at Muck Studies Dept. w/ Wilma Subra* (2021)  
4-channel audio. 20:16 mins.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Broadcast times: 2:30 & 4:30 p.m.

3. Lex Brown  
*Communication* (2021)  
4K digital film. 30 mins.  
Courtesy of the artist and Deli Gallery.

Screening times: 1, 2, 3 & 4 p.m.



# Project Team

Curators: Becket MWN and Susan Gibb  
Copy Editor: Kate Woolf  
Design: Line-Gry Hørup  
Technicians: Hannah Rickards and Ben Wilson

Western Front gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada, the BC Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia, and the City of Vancouver.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des arts  
du Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA  
ARTS COUNCIL



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA



Supported by the Province of British Columbia