

Archiving Our Anxiety: A Conversation with Dawna Rose and Betsy Rosenwald

“...every day since the Women’s March. I would read about something and I would make a sign about it. It was about Trump, feminism, Indigenous rights. It was about the birds, disappearing nature. So, it was about broad topics and then the pandemic came into it. But it’s all very, very connected.” ~ Dawna Rose

By Laura St. Pierre - September 13, 2023



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For three and a half months, [Dawna Rose](#) and [Betsy Rosenwald](#) inhabited the Connect Gallery at Saskatoon's [Remai Modern](#). During gallery hours the artists-in-residence and gallery visitors collaborated on protest signs, postcards, and a large-scale mural. Their multi-faceted project, *Journal of the Plague Year(s)*, drew its title from Daniel Defoe's 17th-century book. While Defoe chronicled his survival of the bubonic plague in London, Rose and Rosenwald captured the unvarnished reality of living through COVID-19 in 21st-century Saskatchewan.

The artists began the *Journal of the Plague Year(s)* in their shared studio space, long before they were approached by Remai curator Michelle Jacques. Over the last two years, the project had appeared in various forms at [330g](#), [AKA artist-run](#), and [Art Placement galleries](#) in Saskatoon. The duo also worked on the *Journal* during a residency at the [Pouch Cove Foundation](#) in Newfoundland. Between 2020 and 2022, they created hundreds upon hundreds of paintings and signs on post-consumer cardboard, which they refer to as "The Archive." At the Remai, these works were hung salon-style in chronological order, creating a record of the first three years of the pandemic. As we peruse "The Archive," we are brought back in time through quotes, headlines, and images.

It's important to note that the content of Rose and Rosenwald's archive was not limited to the pandemic. Few headlines escaped the artists' watchful gazes while capitalist and democratic institutions slowly collapsed and the climate crisis raged on. It is impossible to summarize the breadth of ideas represented in the exhibition: we find statistics on microplastics, paintings of endangered bird species, Trump quotations, images from the January 6th insurrection in Washington, a PRIDE flag, and references to *The Handmaid's Tale*, George Floyd's murder, bees, supply chain disruptions, and the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to name a few.

BlackFlash

oversized Tampax box which one could enter and purchase postcards by the artists, with proceeds going to Remai Modern's Art for Life program. And opposite the archival wall, tables were installed and set with markers and blank pieces of cardboard. Docents invited visitors to create their own signs in response to the exhibition, world events, or whatever urgent issues were on their mind. These were posted in a section titled "And Another Thing." Guests created over 2000 signs, their content ranging from individuals' signatures and kids' drawings to political statements.

Perhaps the most prominent aspect of the exhibition was a 12' x 40' mural on cardboard, painted by the artists during the first three months of the exhibition. Rose and Rosenwald's continued presence in the gallery gave the public the opportunity to engage with the artists and the context surrounding their practice. Some wanted to share their pandemic experiences, while others were more interested in political discussions. At other times, the artists would work in silence while guests worked on signs for "And Another Thing," creating a collegial studio vibe.

I first spoke with the artists on November 11, 2021, when they were artists-in-residence at AKA artist-run. We met again on February 23, 2023 at the Remai Modern. With their permission, I have combined those interviews and edited them for clarity and brevity.

Laura St. Pierre (LS): So, what inspired the project, and when did it start?

Dawna Rose (DR): For me, it began at the Women's March in January 2017 in New York. It was a life-changing experience for me, being with a million people who were on the streets. It was incredible energy. And the signs were so beautiful! They were works of art, smart, witty, intelligent, and funny.

BlackFlash

hours. It was beautiful. Strollers and dogs and people of all ages. People would come up and ask to take pictures of each other's signs. I actually saw a sign I really liked and made a similar one right on the spot.

DR: Even getting there, with people on the subway, it was like going to a party. You know, they had their outfits on and their signs and little kids with them.

LS: So, what was it specifically that inspired you? Was it the energy? Was it the fact of being surrounded by so many people that were politically like-minded?

BR: Well, for one thing, the fact that Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency. I think it was a mass shock. You know, I'm American-born. I'm a dual citizen.

LS: So you had a different perspective?

BR: I think it was shocking for everyone. It didn't matter if you were American or not. You knew, right off the bat, this was going to be a disaster. Plus, we lost the possibility of the first woman president. So, there was a huge need to be together. And it was a kind of primal scream en masse.

Making the signs wasn't immediate for me. I started making this work during the run-up to the US election, which coincided with the start of the pandemic. So, that would have been in 2020, whereas Dawna has been making this work, the sign work...

DR: ...every day since the Women's March. I would read about something and I would make a sign about it. It was about Trump, feminism, Indigenous rights. It was about the birds, disappearing nature. So, it was about broad topics and then the pandemic came into it. But it's all very, very connected.

BlackFlash

know, both in listening to the first interview and in looking at the work, I'm struck by the degree to which the project is tied to current events. As I was walking through the archive of signs here at the Remai, I was reminded of aspects of the early pandemic that I had forgotten. So, obviously, the content of your project evolves with world events. But, I wonder, how else has the project evolved for you, as you've taken the project to different spaces? Tell me about that.

DR: Well, okay, I'll start. Remai Modern has definitely been a very different experience, because it is more public. More people. We happened to open just as the donation from Ellen Remai went through, so people would get in for little or no money. And I think that made a huge difference to the number of people that came in. And it was the first time that "The Archive" was put together chronologically. That had never happened before. It was also the first time we included a sculptural element. This was made possible because the museum has preps to build things like Tampax boxes. And then the mural was, I guess, an expanded version of what happened at Art Placement.

LS: Right. So even though the project has appeared several times in different forms, the scale of this exhibition allowed it to have several components that work together. First, there are the signs that you made, all the smaller signs that make up "The Archive." And then there's the mural, a 40' by 12' mural. And you've included a participatory element where people can make their own signs. And then there's the Tampax box, which is basically a big box that people can enter and purchase postcards that you've made, and the proceeds go to charity. Was there a particular reason that you created a Tampax box and not a Ritz cracker box or something else?

DR: Supply chain for women's products during the pandemic, primarily...

BlackFlash

factories, and there aren't huge mega-corporations that are doing it all over the world. So, when there was a disruption, and one or two factories shut down, no more products. The other thing was that it didn't pick up right away. Supply issues like, say toilet paper, they fixed right away, but with women's products they didn't. It was a way of bringing attention to all that, but also, seeing a giant Tampax box was embarrassing to some people. So, it was also a way of examining the idea of shame and femaleness.

LS: Of course, that makes sense. And tell me more about the choice to have a participatory element to the exhibition, where people can make their own signs.

BR: In our meetings, there was anxiety about how the staff would handle visitor response. So, our idea, instead of having to burden staff with talking to people who were upset for whatever reason, was that visitors could do what we did: let it out on cardboard.

DR: And we made it very clear that no matter what it was, whatever point of view, whatever political agenda, whatever emotion, whatever, anything that went up on the wall, there was no censorship.

LS: And how has it worked out?

BR: Actually, better than we had expected, because we have over 2000 signs. There are boxes of them. We then made the decision to keep it rotating and not have everything up, because we ran out of space. So, we took a lot of the scribbles down and just went for content; it didn't matter what it was. But if somebody had something to say, it would stay.

DR: I was also intrigued by a lot of the kids' stuff because some of it was quite emotional. It was quite moving. I found out about elements of the pandemic

BlackFlash

LS: And when people talked to you, what was that like?

DR: We both have amazing stories. One 12-year-old kid was into all the Timothy Snyder snippets that are sprinkled all throughout “The Archive.” They’re like puzzle pieces throughout the show, quotations from his book *On Tyranny*. It’s like she had zeroed in on it, and she came up to me and asked, “Did I get them all? And could you explain it to me?”

BR: There are a million stories. This other kid, she was 10. She made a picture of herself, surrounded by many different flags denoting sexual identification, and question marks. A lesbian flag, a trans flag, pansexual flag. And as she was working, she explained them to us, and that she was trying to find her identity. I was just gobsmacked. I did not have that kind of freedom to think about myself in that way when I was that age. Later, her father sent us a message asking how to get Posca markers (like the ones we had at the gallery), wanting to encourage her to continue to express herself. That was really moving to me.

DR: Another interesting one was this guy who worked in construction. He was one of several people who visited many, many times. I think he was an anti-vaxxer.

BR: He hadn’t been vaccinated. And he was just in town to work on a project, and somebody had told him to come to the museum. And it was almost like he hadn’t seen the flip side of his world. We were friendly, we weren’t devils, and he came back several times, to take it in and ask us questions.

DR: He talked with the program guides a lot, he wanted to talk.

BR: It seemed like he came from a very restrictive environment and something about the show let him out.

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So, with the project, you created a space where people could enter and feel comfortable and talk. That's amazing.

BR: We had a lot of people that came in who told us that they'd forgotten the early part of the pandemic. And the archive seemed to touch people in ways that made them want to tell us their stories. And at one point, we really wanted some way of recording these stories, because they were amazing.

DR: We thought we should provide a way for people to record their stories in the Tampax box. But what I discovered through time is that people actually wanted to tell their story to another person. They didn't want to talk to a recording device, they actually wanted to have an exchange.

BR: That was an unexpected and very moving part of it.

DR: Because there was scaffolding, and we'd often be eating our lunch or having coffee or other things you're not allowed to do in a museum, people would often stop at the door and ask permission to enter. They felt like they were entering a private studio.

BR: I think that's what made visitors feel more comfortable.

LS: There were art supplies, it was a bit messy, it wasn't the regular gallery experience.

BR: Yes. There were those cues. The gallery is not for making art. The studio is for making.

DR: Also, because the admission fee was waived for the first time, a lot of people who hadn't been to the gallery came. It was a safe space to come with your

BlackFlash

both painting, and they were over there drawing. It was just this peaceful place, and we were all just working.

LS: It sounds like that collective experience of an artist's workshop or something like that, and everybody's just in the zone, like doing their thing together. That sounds beautiful.

DR: It was.

LS: Tell me about the mural. You worked on it for three months and it's done now! What am I looking at?

BR: It started out with an environmental theme. It was late August, there were floods in Pakistan, with more than a third of the country underwater. Extreme weather was happening in the US; it was happening in Europe, South Sudan, all over the world, these disasters. So, we wanted to address that but also bring it home to Saskatchewan. So, we started with a Saskatchewan landscape as our base. We were also looking at Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Triumph of Death* with its fantastical, allegorical imagery about good and evil, and we felt it had a kind of parallel to our time.

DR: The poles with the wheel shapes are medieval torture devices—picked up from Breugel. And this boat started out as Noah's Ark. We were going to paint animals being rescued from the floods, but we realized there's no way out. The people who are causing the floods and the climate crisis would be rescued, not the animals. So instead, we put the villains in a warship: Trump, Putin, Bashar al-Assad, Xi, Kim Jong-Un... with the Wagner group (mercenaries fighting for the Russians) manning the helm. Then there's Elon Musk, who's heading out in his SpaceX.

BlackFlash

of frogs, snakes, birds and mammals. There are forest fires from drought, an oil refinery, the atomic doomsday clock that says we have 90 seconds to ignition. Blindfolded people walk, one after the other, off a cliff—the blind leading the blind, another reference from Breugel. For us, that represented climate crisis denial. The quote running along the banner at the bottom is from André Gide: “Everything has been said already, but since nobody was listening, we have to tell it again.”

LS: And there’s more to the mural that you’re not describing. It all ties together, much like Bruegel; but in terms of content and ideas, it’s very much like the signs. Do you think that sign making and that sort of practice will continue? Or do you think that’s something that you’ll leave behind? Because I know, in our first interview, Dawna, you talked about it being very cathartic. You said you had all of these bottled-up emotions and ideas at the beginning of the pandemic, and then making the signs was therapeutic. It wasn’t the only thing that you were doing in the studio, but it was something that you had to do every day to just let it out. Do you think that it will be something that you do from now on?

DR: I think it is. I was at the studio on Thursday, and there were signs I wanted to make. And I think partially it’s because I like painting on cardboard, and it’s probably not going to end. I think it’s just a habit now. It’s like, I’ll just start the day with this.

LS: Yeah, like a ritual.

DR: Yeah. A warm-up. I don’t know, I’ve got to get this done. This is all on my mind. I’ll get this out, and then I can move on to this other thing.

BR: Right? It’s not like the world’s getting any easier. And, you know, I went through a period while we worked where I just avoided the news, which I

BlackFlash

debacle. The news photos with the stories look like paintings, historic paintings from Jacques-Louis David or Delacroix. And I would think, how would I paint this? So, I don't think it will end for me either; I already have ideas as to how to proceed. But I haven't gotten there yet.

DR: It's a hard habit to stop. You're going through the media and you're like, really? I'm going to take a screenshot. So you have the material. You just can't stop on a dime. Can't let that one go.

BR: Yeah. Click! It's a form of notetaking. And, yeah, there was this great photograph of the guys who intercepted the Chinese balloon that was shot down, and they were in this boat, and the light was really...

DR: That was a great photograph! Do you know what it reminded me of?

BR: *The Raft of the Medusa!* (both laugh)

DR: Exactly! (more laughter) There it was, the reference. It is a habit. Yeah.

BR: I mean, it's almost an obsession, you know, it's a way of seeing the world and interpreting it that you've developed. Yeah.

Journal of the Plague Year(s): 2020-2023 will travel to the [Mann Art Gallery](#) in Prince Albert in the summer of 2023. A book about the project, *Journal of the Plague Year(s): 2020-2023 | A project by Dawna Rose and Betsy Rosenwald* was launched in February 2023 and is available at the Remail Modern.

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