

For Immediate Release

Sonja Ahlers' *Classification Crisis* showcases three decades of deeply personal work at the RAG

This major survey exhibition provides an important glimpse into this under-recognized artist's expansive output and ability to capture the cultural moment

AUGUST 2, 2023 (VANCOUVER, B.C.) — From **September 9 to November 5, 2023**, **Richmond Art Gallery** presents **Sonja Ahlers' *Classification Crisis***. Over the last 30 years, Ahlers has been an influential voice for generations of feminists through her D.I.Y. approach to collage art, poetry, zines, mail art, and other publications. This exhibition presents an important and long overdue overview of Ahlers rich, eclectic practice. Highlights on view at the RAG will include Ahlers' zines, poetry, installations, excerpts from her personal archive, and a decade-plus worth of works not previously shown until now.

"*Classification Crisis* follows Sonja's career from Victoria to Vancouver to Whitehorse and back to Victoria, geographic moves that correspond with major shifts in her artistic practice," says curator Godfre Leung. "In a way, *Classification Crisis* tells a story of art in Vancouver in the 2000s. This period of rapid urban growth and international recognition for both a handful of artists and the city itself brought about a hyper-competitive art scene that left a lot of very good artists behind. This exhibition highlights the importance of building communities and art infrastructures alike that are more humane and accessible, while bringing to the foreground a staggering body of work by a very important artist that has not received the recognition it deserves."

Ahlers began her career in her hometown of Victoria in the '90s as a collage artist—a medium she describes as "gathering and collecting and organizing and archiving." Her work became influential within the feminist *Riot Grrrl* and zine subcultures. Her move to Vancouver in the early 2000s saw her shift to installation works and the creation of more idiosyncratic books. Her time in Vancouver was notably difficult, as she juggled an increasingly impenetrable art scene, personal difficulties, and the notoriously high cost of living.

In 2008, Ahlers moved to Whitehorse for a change of scenery, and found space to renew and refocus her artistic practice. She returned to Victoria in 2014 to care for her ailing mother. This process of caring for her mother and her affairs led Ahlers to take stock of her own life's work as an artist. Through her years in Whitehorse and Victoria,

she continued to collect ephemera and produce art, which she archived in dozens of binders. Most of this remained private until the publication of her 2021 book *Swan Song*, described by Ahlers as “a goodbye to [her] former selves.”

Classification Crisis is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated publication of the same title, edited by curator Leung. Bound to become a collectors’ item, the book includes contributions from such well-known feminist thinkers, writers, and friends as *Rookie Mag* founder Tavi Gevinson, musician Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill and Le Tigre fame, and author Doretta Lau. Ahlers’ corpus is considered not only through the lens of biography and archiving, but also the disturbing lessons taught by the #MeToo movement and vocabulary that has recently become common vernacular: grooming, negging, and gatekeeping. The publication also features a brand new artist book, *Rabbit-Hole*—which Ahlers vividly describes as a “feminist memoir/scrapbook/confessional commentary on the art world and my place within it.”

More details can be found at <https://www.richmondartgallery.org/classification-crisis>.

About the artist

Sonja Ahlers is a visual artist and poet based in Victoria, on the unceded territories of the lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) speaking peoples, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations. Since the early '90s, Ahlers has worked primarily in book and book-adjacent formats, in a medium that she calls visual poetry. She is the author of *Temper, Temper* and *Fatal Distraction* (Insomniac Press, 1998 and 2004), and *The Selves* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2010), and was a key contributor to *Rookie Mag* from 2011 to 2015. *Swan Song* (Conundrum Press, 2021) is Ahlers’ most recent artist book.

Public Programs

Richmond Art Gallery is organizing a wide array of programs in tandem with Sonja Ahlers’ survey exhibition. Visit the Gallery’s website and social media for the most up to date information. Programs include, among others:

Tour & Opening Reception with Sonja Ahlers and Godfre Leung

Saturday, September 9

Artist and Curator Talk & Tour: 2–3pm

Opening Reception: 3–5pm

Don’t miss this opportunity to meet the artist and curator, and learn about Ahlers’ fascinating practice during an informal tour of her exhibition.

International Mail Art Exhibition and Fundraiser: Collecting and Reassembling

September 9—November 5

Artists from all over the world have contributed postcard-sized artworks to this exhibition featured in the Gallery's Art Lounge. Organized in tandem with the exhibition *Sonja Ahlers: Classification Crisis*, Richmond Art Gallery invited artists to mail in one original piece of artwork in response to the theme of "collecting and reassembling." Once the exhibition closes, these artworks will be auctioned off to raise funds in support of our public programs.

Let's Make Mail Art!

As part of Culture Days

Saturday, September 23, 1–4pm

Free drop-in for all ages to collage and draw on postcard-sized artworks. Learn more about the history of mail art and how you can share artworks through the postal system. All materials provided.

Chinese Language Tour of *Classification Crisis*

Saturday, October 14, 2–3pm

Meet the Gallery's Curatorial Assistant Rebecca Wang 王晨鈺 for a tour of Sonja Ahlers' exhibition in Mandarin. Learn more about the themes of the exhibitions through a guided visit and informal discussion over a cup of tea.

Book Launch & Collage Party

Saturday, October 28, 1–4pm

Join artist Sonja Ahlers and curator Godfre Leung, for the launch of the *Classification Crisis* publication, followed by a fun hands-on art making inspired by Ahlers' practice. Registration required.

About Richmond Art Gallery

Richmond Art Gallery (RAG) is a non-profit municipal art gallery established in 1980. The Gallery produces an array of exhibitions and programs that connect, empower, and provoke conversation with our diverse Richmond, B.C. communities. RAG actively contributes to Richmond's cultural communities through our commitment to supporting artists via its exhibitions, educational programs, publications, and permanent collection.

Address

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Richmond Cultural Centre
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Hours

Monday–Friday from 10am–6pm, Saturday–Sunday from 12–5pm

Press kit and photos

bit.ly/ClassificationCrisis

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