

Brenda Goldstein & Dana Samuel

A future history of Toronto's art cultures: A conversation

Artist-run centres have existed in Canada since the mid-sixties – and since the early seventies in Toronto – as organizations where artists could control or have a say in the production, exhibition and distribution of their works. This unique system has bred fruitful and self-reflective discussions among artists, administrators, curators and critics since its inception. Though many important published dialogues have continued throughout this time span and into the nineties, the future of Canada's artist-run culture has yet to be written by the current generation. Media artists and arts administrators Brenda Goldstein and Dana Samuel decided to contribute to this dialogue.

DANA I'm glad we're tackling this subject, Brenda, though it's daunting in some ways, given who has written on this stuff previously. But one of my main interests is how a different generation of writers and artists can begin to add to these dialogues.

BRENDA As an emerging artist, I'm looking at the current challenges of artist-run centres, and looking towards the future. I wonder how these centres can rise to the challenge of providing venues for younger artists like myself, while at the same time staying vibrant, given current funding constraints.

I recently picked up a book entitled *What Do You Expect from an Art Institution in the 21st Century?*, published by the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Renowned curators and artists from Europe, Asia and the U.S. (Canada is absent from this compendium) replied to this question with responses both serious and playful, and sometimes contradictory. A centre should be flexible, fun, diverse, ephemeral, non-hierarchical, anti-institutional

and never boring. Katrina Brown, from the Dundee Contemporary Art Centre in Scotland, replied, 'That it present its public with what it believes to be the best, the most interesting, the most fascinating areas of contemporary practice, whether they originate on its doorstep or on the other side of the world. That it be aware of technological innovations, but not led by them and that it should endeavour to be elastic, but distinct. And that it should serve good coffee.'

I've never been to a smaller gallery in Toronto and been offered coffee.

The texts ran the gamut, too, discussing museums and alternate spaces in the same breath – as though there were no distinction between government-backed collecting institutions and independent, often ephemeral, artist-driven initiatives.

I'm not sure if the public outside the 'art world' even knows the difference – they're all just spaces for art. If someone is walking in and out of galleries in a complex like 401 Richmond, or on Queen West, they might not note the difference between the MOCCA, Paul Petro, Mercer Union or the Drake. One is a public gallery, one a commercial gallery and one an artist-run centre.

And one the subject of much debate, I suppose, the Drake being as much marketing as art.

Let's give an example of the 'textbook' breakdown of the types of art spaces. A commercial gallery is privately owned, and artworks seen in these galleries are for sale. The gallerist often represents a complement of artists and takes a percentage of the sale of their work.

Public galleries and art museums are large institutions supported by both public and private funds. The Canada Council defines them as 'institutions that collect, preserve, present and interpret works of art from the past and present.'

An artist-run centre (ARC) is usually partly government-funded and partly funded by self-generated revenue.

In the late seventies, when the Canada Council wanted to begin funding such alternative spaces, they were going to call them 'parallel galleries,' but those involved in the scene resisted that term, preferring something that could suggest a divergence from the mainstream.

Centres are formed under specific mandates, usually to show work that is underrepresented by the other systems. ARCs can offer production equipment at cost for those who work in film or video (LIFT, Charles Street Video); screenings (Pleasure Dome); experimental music (The Music Gallery); or exhibition space (Mercer Union, Y Y Z). Some straddle both production and exhibition (InterAccess, Trinity Square Video), while others distribute work (Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, V tape). This breadth of production and exhibition helps make Toronto a culturally vibrant city. ARCs have supported the development of some of our most prominent contemporary artists and have led exciting, innovative production on a national scale.

The specifics of the term 'artist-run centre' has its roots in the American sixties Fluxus movement, which was concerned with a do-it-yourself attitude and an 'artist-centred' focus.

But as budgets have grown tighter and accountability has been demanded, the cutting edge has often been replaced with a butter knife.

Artists/writers Clive Robertson, AA Bronson and Andrew J. Paterson and curator/writer Barbara Fischer have published their versions of the history of artist-run centres previously. Robertson suggests that the phrasing for 'centre' comes, in part, from Fluxus artist Robert Filliou's idea of a non-hierarchical 'network' model. In Fischer's essay for Y Y Z's *Decalog*, she charts a history of these alternate spaces in Canada, citing that in the late seventies and early eighties, around ten years after the formation of some of our most historic spaces, the 'institutionalization' began. She discusses the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication, an early artist-run centre that was effectively closed in the late seventies. Arts councils stopped

their funding when the CEAC proclaimed support for the Italian Red Brigades, who advocated violence in the pursuit of class warfare.

It's interesting to consider how our values around security have changed in the last twenty-six years. I can't think of a recent example – despite the current climate of security and paranoia – where a centre's programming has caused so much controversy that it has been forced to shut down.

Art isn't scary enough anymore.

We are no longer threatened with insolvency; instead we die the death of a thousand cuts. This is less a function of the institutionalization of a revolutionary agenda than a symptom of the slipping of the arts from public consciousness. We have the luxury and often the technology to make almost anything we want, but with the knowledge that it will be ignored to death, except by a very small community. The other supporting partner of artist-run culture, a vibrant public cultural space that allows access to a broad market of ideas, has disappeared. Media concentration has eliminated public access television, and the visual arts coverage in the dailies and even the independent weeklies has shrunk.

It's true – and when, for instance, *Eye Weekly* needs to cut space in the back of the issue, what do they do? They chop out the art listings. But as a result of events like the CEAC controversy, many older centres became less 'alternative' and more 'institutional' – with organizational and administrative aspects taking on as much importance as artistic concerns. As an artist, an administrator and other titles I could tack onto myself, I don't see this institutionalization as such a bad thing. Nevertheless, where does that leave the 'alternative'?

It's amazing how the 'alternative' always seems to shift. In the past few years, a number of art-making collectives have sprung up – they're performance-based and so not only are they not institutionalized, they're also not easily commodified.

I don't think it's our goal to write another history, when we weren't even there. But possibly what we're creating here is a history of the future of artist-run culture. Artist-run culture, like it or not, has its roots in the history of non-profit management (not very revolutionary, is it?). As contemporary management guru Peter Drucker notes, 'management was a dirty word for those involved in non-profit organizations. It meant business,

and non-profits prided themselves on being free of the taint of commercialism and above such sordid considerations as the bottom line.' In fact, ARCS fall prey to the 'Peter Principle' (named for Dr. Laurence Peter in the sixties) – that employees rise to their highest level of competence and then are promoted to a management level, at which they are incompetent.

I'm sorry, I'm not touching that one, I want to keep making art in this town...

So, does 'artist-run' necessarily mean 'poorly run'? I should hope not, but this is why, I suppose, throughout the eighties and nineties, our ARCS were asked to be more accountable in every way, by funders and other stakeholders, following the tide of many non-profits across North America, and as a result of 'Reaganomics' and subsequent economic trends in Canada. Funding became more competitive, and centres more bureaucratic – so that they could be more stable, and run less on crisis and chaos.

We are at a point where ARCS, and culture generally, must justify their existence. Chronic underfunding has led to a different kind of crisis and chaos: a crisis of continual undervaluing of the labour of cultural workers. And chaos in the wake of short-term project grants that don't allow institutions to build continuity. There is also the cult of utility that must be appeased at the bureaucratic level: centres have to show a measurable effect, produce something other than just 'art.' We're constantly being urged to attract a newer, more diverse audience and educate the public, educate at-risk youth, do outreach into schools in underfunded districts. And while these are important issues, there is another agenda here – to use the arts as a social worker, to justify the funding by making the arts do what the provincial government stopped doing under Mike Harris. This is a huge burden for small, understaffed, underfunded organizations. You quoted Katrina Brown from Scotland earlier – how can we strive for such utopian standards when we're constantly under threat of having our funding pulled?

Everyone involved has a different idea of what our centres should pursue, and even what constitutes 'artist-run.' In the past, ARCS existed to exhibit works that might not find a place in more mainstream avenues, so there was no call for education or outreach. It was enough that the artwork be there for a smaller audience. But it's naive to think that artist-run culture

shouldn't shift. The focus on the audience as well as the artwork is an important one. These shifts keep things interesting. AA Bronson describes Toronto, in *From Sea to Shining Sea*, as 'the only Canadian city in which the art scene is continually fracturing, and thrives on that fracturing.'

It seems that once one niche is filled, there is another void left where work is being made that is not finding a place to be shown.

Beginning in the late nineties, a lot of newer galleries that sprang up were private spaces, but existed somewhere between a commercial gallery and an artist-run centre. Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects and her BUSgalleries are excellent examples (as are le.gallery, Luft and a host of tiny storefronts in the city's west end). Mulherin may sometimes support video, performance and installation – works that are unlikely to sell and make her any profit – but the bulk of her programming is painting and photography, which typically will sell to her affluent Queen West audience. One can only imagine it's for the sole purpose of paying rent on Queen West; for the emerging independent gallery owner, it's impossible to escape the market, because few funding opportunities exist. Will the next generation of artists and curators be forced into this lifestyle as a way of making the rent?

Recently, one such centre trying to become an officially funded 'artist-run centre' is the Toronto Free Gallery. It has a mandate to curate challenging works about the social and cultural dimensions of urban issues in all mediums – from wall art to video to sculpture to a one-week performance-art teach-in. Started by Heather Haynes, the gallery has survived for two years without funding, relying on project grants that materialize as often as not.

I think Haynes and those like her should be commended for starting new centres – she's both brave and economically wise to forge out in the underpopulated art-world territory of Queen East.

The Blocks Recording Club is another interesting development, because it's an artist-owned workers' co-operative based in Toronto that shares production and distribution of music. Because there's so much money attached to the mainstream music scene, it's not often thought of as a venue for artist-run production. But with the explosion of the independent music

scene in Toronto and Montreal, and the concentration of the music industry, artists came together to share resources and produce innovative music with creative freedom. Members include such local favourites as Owen Pallett (Final Fantasy), Bob Wiseman, Lenin i Shumov and the Phonemes.

Well, it's interesting that you mention this project, since perhaps not everyone would see it as relevant to a discussion of artist-run culture. However, consider the connections of the artist-run to other DIY movements – small press, punk and so on. I wonder if the next generation of artist-run culture will be without physical spaces? This question could be relevant over the next decade, considering the cost of rent combined with funding cuts. The organizations that are most elastic could prove the most stable.

But how stable are these 'private' collectives, when compared with their 'public' brother and sister organizations?

Toronto has a history of such collectives, which crop up, then fizzle out. In a 1992 essay, artist Andy Fabo lists several collectives in Toronto: 'the Red Head, Workscene, Place and Show, the Blanket Group, the Spontaneous Combustion alliance and the Round-up crew.' The only one still standing is the Red Head, which had garnered a permanent physical space for itself. Other centres like A Space and Public (Public Access) began without a space, but as they defined themselves, found permanent physical homes. Groups like the performance collective FADO don't need a traditional gallery space since the performances and interventions often take place throughout the city or at existing galleries. Will groups like FADO be the most flexible, as real estate costs escalate, and Parkdale and Ossington become fully gentrified?

Andrew Paterson writes, in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Fuse Magazine* that 'roles of art in public spaces would seem to provide a highly provocative subject terrain for imaginative activist curating that would engage and not merely entertain.' Though it is interesting that when public art is at its most effective – when it reaches a broad audience and causes critical thought and public debate about important or uncomfortable topics – it becomes a threat again.

Recently, *Pigeon Condo*, by Luis Jacob and Amos Latteier, was radically reconfigured after its proximity to a politically sensitive area under the Gardiner Expressway drew attention to

the city government's policy of evicting the homeless from the area. The piece, a sculpture for *The Networked City*, a Canada Council-funded project presented by InterAccess and the City of Toronto, was intended to be a full-size condo for pigeons – highlighting the need for city dwellers to learn to live with less desirable neighbours. It was stymied through bureaucratic foot-dragging by a department that wasn't involved in the commissioning process. The city loves the idea of art as a marketing tool, but not as a forum for critical thought.

Well, you had your own battles with public art recently.

Yes, my piece was one of several art videos pulled from the public screening in Dundas Square, *Transmedia* :29:59. The series, curated by Michael Alstad for Year Zero One, a new-media collective he also founded, runs on the video screen at the corner of Yonge and Dundas. Clear Channel owns the screen, which usually displays advertising, and authorized this two-minute art intervention on the twenty-ninth minute and the fifty-ninth minute every hour. My video featured a dancer incidentally performing in front of the Bank of Montreal's video screen at Bay and King. Clear Channel didn't want to risk being sued for having a competitor's logo and screen in the video. I had to resubmit. Also, the City Beautification Ensemble's video criticizing the design of Dundas Square was not welcomed back, and Myfanwy Ashmore couldn't use a sampled Super Mario Bros. image, so she resubmitted a video featuring the 'GAME OVER' screen from the same game.

I read in *NOW* magazine that Alstad didn't seem too concerned by Clear Channel's opposition. I think Year Zero One is very innovative in that they partner with corporate and commercial public spaces to show art. It harkens back to the way artists like Bill Viola in the early days of video wanted to use the medium to create works for broadcast on television. Year Zero One shifts locations and parameters for their exhibitions to work within the corporate contexts. This could be a viable route for future artist-run spaces.

This is where I think artist-run culture has a role – in those in-between spaces. We can provide a safe space where artists can explore touchy ideas, experiment with media that doesn't fit within TV or movie conventions, or skate around the vague contours of copyright. We are an island in a sea of market-driven content. Even the more comfortable capital-A arts – the ballet

and opera – are market-driven, and they get the lion's share of council grants while they generate revenue because they have a legitimacy that allows for benefactors and corporate supporters. The capital A of the artist-run system can be Accessibility – artists have access to production equipment, or at least a small audience.

We shouldn't get too romantic about the power of art, either. Sometimes those in-between spaces can merely shift a passerby's perception. They may see an artist's video and interrupt their daily routine – but even that's enough, I think, to consider the intervention effective.

The concept of shifting spaces for art is interesting. Art needs like-minded – or at least open-minded – spaces to thrive, as the Clear Channel example shows; existing spaces often have their own concerns that are mundane and administrative, like liability or insurance, which often extinguish creativity. In the future, as spaces shift and funding shrinks, we're going to have to think about how we can take up more cultural bandwidth.

The discourse and urgency around these issues of the artist-run seems to have dried up throughout the second half of the nineties. Meanwhile, Canada is unique in supporting this system of 'institutionalized anti-institutionalism,' and ARCS could be the key to understanding Canadian art post-1970. There are ARCS elsewhere, but here they're specifically tied into the system of presentation and education alongside public galleries and museums, and they're very much parallel galleries, whether they want to be called that or not.

In this way, ARCS provide a space for younger artists to work in relative freedom, with institutional support, whereas in the past, or in other countries, young artists who aren't seeking a more commercial route really need to be self-sufficient. The only people who seem to discuss and write about these matters anymore are the Andy Patersons and the Clive Robertsons. It's time the next generation of artists and curators begin to think about – and write about – what they want from artist-run cultures in this century.

Maybe it's already happening on myspace....