

21st Century ARCs

by Andrew James Paterson

23.

I can't remember the precise date or year, but I recall reading a *Village Voice* issue in the early nineties focusing on America's National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and its precarious situation. This was, of course, the era of Senator Helms, Anne-Imelda Radice and politically motivated denials of funding to both individual artists and organizations. As is typical, the American crisis was definitely reverberating north of the border.

I recall a young computer hacker being indifferent to the fate of the NEA, since art by this point in history was not on gallery walls and floors but instead on the net, which was considered public space in a way that galleries weren't.

Already, I had become well aware of indifference and hostility among younger artists toward grants and "grant art." I recall a member of Toronto's anarcho-collective The Purple Institute gleefully asserting to Toronto Star art critic Christopher Hume that the Purple gang wished to maintain spontaneity by avoiding grant syndrome. Governmental maintenance

was for those oldsters already privileged (and trapped) within that hegemonic system.

Artist-run centres (ARCs) had long become institutional and were perceived as inaccessible and irrelevant — and not just by young artists. Arguably, the ARCs lost their initial energies and "alternative" status when they became incorporated. Non-profit organizations could no longer exhibit work by their own board members and pay honoraria. However, the artist-run centres had initially been formed as constructive responses to the lack of exhibition possibilities for particular artists and/or disciplines: don't just complain, get off the pot and start your own gallery. And a lot of artists had done exactly that, but now their function was to administer and institute policy, while themselves exhibiting in other — frequently commercial — galleries.

So, if artist-run centres were already an inflexibly inaccessible establishment in the early eighties, then why do they still exist in the twenty-first century and what might be their

roles? Can they perform constructive roles aside from continuing to continue?

It is important to remember that there have long been different models or definitions of “artist-run” and “non-profit” galleries or organizations. It is also important to note that the term artist-run was not always initially synonymous with non-profit and arguably hasn’t been for some time.

The earliest ARCS emerged, in the sixties and early seventies, in tandem with emerging artistic disciplines initially perceived as being counter to established, commercially viable practices. Video, performance, experimental film and installation art were indeed messy and confusing to art dealers. With a utopian fervour, the prototypical ARCS proudly proclaimed themselves oppositional and (often) political. The ARCS were also indebted to the Canada Council and its provincial and municipal cousins, which had been established in the fifties to nurture and maintain a distinctly Canadian cultural realm independent from the laws of the American-dominated market. Times have changed, yet histories persistently resonate.

These once-provocative disciplines or practices have long become entrenched not only within the ARCS but also within public galleries and their commercial cousins. The ARCS main value for many is as a farm system for the major leagues.

And terms such as “outside,” “uncompromising” and even “political” are advertising clichés. The mad artist has long been a staple of liberal individualism, and the arms-length state and other governmental funding systems have always been situated in vulnerable space, only theoretically safe from political pressures as well as those of “the market.” The doppelganger of the market is of course the taxpayer. Autonomy from both market demands and taxpayer anxieties has proven difficult, if not impossible, for most artists and arts organizations. Despite its frequent political posturing, vanguardism has historically been proudly elitist. Aggressive modernism has been making a comeback both locally and beyond. But what seems a regeneration to some might appear as nostalgia to others.

How can non-profit ARCS offer anything in the twenty-first century that doesn’t reek of discredited idealism, serve as a recruiting system for public and private galleries or simply provide services for competing special and other interest groups? I would suggest that ARCS commit themselves to serious and critical programming that would be unlikely — if not impossible — within commercial and public spaces.

This would, I believe, require an abandonment of the ARCS suspicion of “the curator,” while not abandoning calls for submissions that just might reveal at least one fascinatingly talented relatively unknown artist. Volunteer boards do

not have the time or energy to undertake full-time programming responsibilities. Several British Columbia ARCS (Or, Artspeak and others) already employ a model involving a resident curator carefully selected by the artists comprising the gallery’s board of directors.

It is a truism that not all ARCS can afford to employ curators for two- or three-year contracts, and that salaries are more attractive in the public galleries. It is also a truism that curators would likely pass through the ARC system on their way to more lucrative pastures. This might suggest that artist boards should themselves take on greater curatorial initiative, but there is an inherent risk that an ARC’s board would consist of competing individuals reducing the gallery to their own service. However, boards could seek out more curatorial proposals, even while still maintaining open-call procedures.

If the twenty-first century did indeed commence with the events of September 11, 2001, then roles of art in public spaces (and also private ones masquerading as public) would seem to provide a highly provocative subject terrain for imaginative, activist curating that would engage and not merely entertain. The ARCS must avoid both lethargic introversion and bean-counter capitalism disguised as populism. They must present strong and well-articulated programming, visually engaging and seriously worthy of debate.

