

When Public Became Private

by Andrew James Paterson

If capitalism is indeed an indisputable reality, then it is there to be strategically occupied, if not necessarily embraced.¹

As the public funding systems that seemed so relatively accessible in the late '70s and through the '80s are being down-sized, more and more artists and organizations are seriously questioning their position in public life and investigating other funding sources to create their work because they really don't have any other choice.

Many art practitioners—middle-aged, young, and old—in practically all disciplines are more than ever before feeling that they must decide whether or not being an artist is in fact their primary “identity.” Who decides (and who indeed has any right to decide) who is and is not a viable artist? How are distinctions made between full- and part-time artists? Does one have to derive an overwhelming majority, if not all, of one's personal income from their art in order to qualify? While it can be argued that individuals who either teach, hold administrative positions or perform MCFunctions for MCMoney are just as much artists as those who sell their work nationally and internationally, there is no doubt that you can devote more time to making and displaying art if you don't have to work at other employment. A very small percentage of practicing artists make their living solely from their artistic practice and artists are forced to decide whether or not they can persevere in an increasingly market-determined climate. Many decide, for varying reasons, that their

chances of survival are somehow unlikely and thus they become individuals who do other things to make a living and then occasionally make art.

DOES THIS MEAN IF YOU DON'T SELL YOUR ART, YOU ARE NOT AN ARTIST?

This may sound like the calling of cold, hard capitalism, but it is indeed a real question that artists must face.

In October 1995, I was an exhibiting artist in Culture Slash Nation, an exhibition that took a critical look at culture in the context of funding cutbacks, held at Gallery TPW, an artist-run centre located in the same building as many varying-profile commercial galleries in Toronto.² One day during the exhibition, I found myself scanning the comments in the guest book. Included among familiar signatures were some wildly polarized reactions to the exhibition and one in particular has remained in my mind. “You have elected yourselves as a cultural elite who speak only to each other. Why is this superior to ‘market value?’”³ I, myself, am a strong believer that artists and their works should be evaluated by criteria beyond financial success or numbers of viewers, and I reject the reductive notion that the market is a level playing field. Yet I was quite pleased to see this bold comment in the guest book. It indicated that the exhibition was certainly not merely playing to the converted and that quite possibly other viewers unfamiliar with these artists and their work did not feel so negatively about both the nature and premise of the exhibition. Ironically, this particular gallery viewer's sentiment is one I have often heard expressed by artists critical of what they perceive as a hegemonic favoritism rampant within granting systems, and by people who wonder what indeed is so bloody special about artists.

This suspicion toward artists and “the art world” is hardly restricted to conservatives and

neo-conservatives. I have known many people for whom art galleries are inhibiting places for a variety of reasons (and not only angry rejected artists). According to many, galleries assume familiarity with art jargon—they are not social or relaxing spaces, and they are not “accessible” (not only physically). Art galleries are seen by many to be closed (or private) systems; irrelevant in relation to more pressing social concerns such as poverty and the housing and health crisis provoked by governments like Ontario’s Harris-led Conservatives. Even among those who spurn philistinism, I frequently hear requests that galleries be open at times suitable to people with nine-to-five jobs, or that artists’ films and video-tapes be available at local video rental outlets, or that visual and time-based art simply be more “public” than it appears to be.

A good deal of hostility (or at least uneasy indifference) toward the complaints of both individual artists and arts organizations is based upon the problematic question of the average taxpayer and what exactly that mythical he or she receives for their taxpaying dollars. But it is not only advocates of taxpayer accountability who would like to see more bang for their bucks, so to speak. Most artists I know would also appreciate greater sales, greater visibility and greater exchange with diverse audiences. Exchange and sales are not necessarily synonyms. I use the word “exchange” here to refer to give-and-take encounters between artist and viewer or performer and audience. I am actually something of an enthusiast for oblique strategies and indirect rather than direct forms of communication. But such enthusiasm is not well served by a lack of willing and intelligent audiences. It takes at least two to tango and, generally, the more the merrier.

So, many artists, curators and institutions have become increasingly concerned with making their art more “public.” Should painters make bigger and more expensive canvases? Should video artists focus on making projections since video projection is *au courant* on the international art circuit? Should artists and galleries make their work more accessible by showing it in trade fairs or other more public spaces beyond the gallery? Well, sometimes yes and sometimes no.

Many activist artists and curators have been focusing on art exhibition possibilities within wider public realms. In the winter 1998 edition of *Lola*, Kelly McCray wonders why Toronto doesn’t have an

international art fair such as the one in Basil or Spain’s ARCO. “It doesn’t benefit artists in this city, which holds about half of Canada’s working artists, to stay within the local market. An art fair would help. It would bring in curators and dealers from around the world.”⁴ In theory, why shouldn’t Canada have an international art fair? But, would the need to make financial returns wind up dictating the art selected for such a fair? Would such a fair allow space for intelligent and portable work that may in fact problematize or democratize the notion of the art commodity? Small conceptually flavoured works may or may not completely get lost or bypassed among “big” art but, hopefully not. Intelligent art in the form of multiples can both parody and reinvigorate varying modes of exchange.

In Toronto over the last couple of years I have witnessed an increase in site-specific installations and performances. Initiatives such as Mercer Union’s “Off/Site” (curated by Kym Pruesse, fall 1998) and the “7a-11d Performance Festival” (presented in 1997 and 1998, in a variety of public places) are two such projects. While I tend to be one who is “in the know” (aware of events with a calendar of locations and times), I find artistic interventions in public space most effective when I am *not* looking for the art, but rather when I stumble across it—when I don’t see obvious spectators amid the obligatory camcorder. Publicly situated art can indeed be an effective means of engaging, confronting and challenging viewpoints from anonymous audiences.

A considerable amount of art in public places either bypasses official channels and funding agencies entirely or is developed from grassroots organizing before applying for grants. As council funding becomes more and more difficult to count on, DIY (Do It Yourself) strategies become highly appealing. It is not only younger organizations and one-shot *ad hoc* collectives who have long been frustrated by the temporal delays and general over-bureaucratization of artist-run galleries and of arts funding agencies. Many aging artists and arts activists also prefer funkier exchanges than those possible within the non-profit systems.

In the parallel and public galleries, art is exhibited and the artist is paid the regulation fee, but then what? Are non-profit galleries merely a stepping stone to the private gallery system? Does the necessary entrepreneurial component of DIY production (and consumption) play too neatly into a false binarism between privately initiated and



market-friendly versus state-protected, DIY-subversive versus bureaucratically conservative, or populist-capitalism versus elitist-socialism. There are so many creative reasons for individuals and organizations to play these stereotypes off one another while hopefully problematizing conventions. If you can function without the need to access funding agencies then by all means do so and leave the options open for those who might need that possible support. Serious, partially credible, arguments against arts council funding—that it is hegemonic; that it is out of touch with younger and emerging artists; that it hinders artist and consumer exchange possibilities—have themselves been cynically appropriated by cost-cutting conservative governments. The traditional leftist disdain for art and artists on the basis of class pretensions has long been deployed by the populist right in order to provoke anger at “special interest groups.” Appealing to protectionist or survivalist instincts within all those labeled special interest groups is elemental to Harris’ and Klein’s divide-and-conquer strategies. Artists and their advocates certainly need to examine the shortcomings of the granting systems, as well as the limitations of superficially-unregulated free market economies. But they should avoid playing into divide-and-conquer strategies. As the twentieth century speeds to its conclusion, individual artists, their exhibiting and service

organizations, and the grant dispensing agencies themselves all need to seriously negotiate all the existing available options, as well as do their damndest to invent fresh options and strategies.

Notes

1. Idea expressed in *Test Tube*, a videotape by General Idea, 1979, 28 min.
2. “Culture Slash Nation” was curated by Lorraine Johnson and Cheryl Sourkes at Gallery TPW, Toronto, 20 October–25 November 1995 (also shown at Definitely Superior artist-run centre, Thunder Bay, Ontario, 5–30 January 1999).
3. Mitzi Hamilton, Gallery TPW comment book, November 1995.
4. “Sophie Hackett Talks With Kelly McCray,” *Lola*, no. 3, winter 1998, pp. 26-27.
5. Sally McKay, “Money Trouble,” *Lola*, no. 2, summer 1998, p. 15.

Andy Paterson is currently editing a book with Sally McKay, Money, Value, Art: State Funding, Free Market, Big Pictures, to be published by YYZ Books.