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Art Gallery of Ontario: Re-Opening Celebrations

Claire Christie

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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

TORONTO

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO : NOW AND THEN, THEN AND NOW

Re-Opening Celebrations, January 18-24, 1993

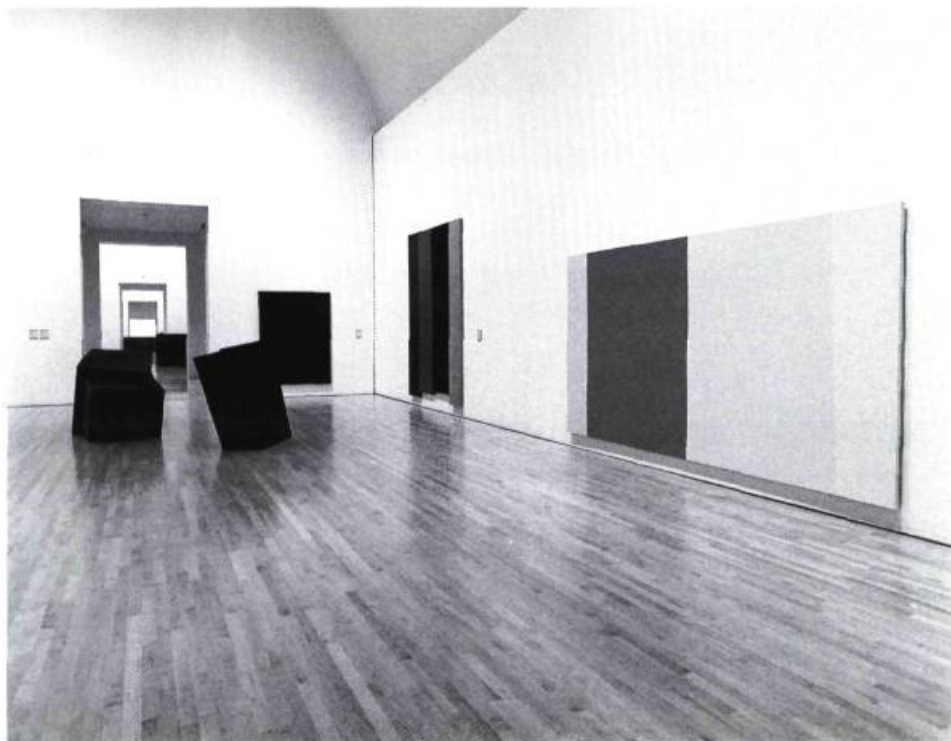


The new Art Gallery of Ontario. Inside View.

The grand re-opening of the Art Gallery of Ontario on January 24, 1993 was characterized as a rebirth. Picking up the thread of this promotion, we might suggest that the week leading up to this day was an intense labour, or perhaps more accurately, the determined rising of the Phoenix. Among the many events of that week was a preview for supporting members on Thursday, January 21, which drew most of the local artists, dealers, collectors, curators, critics and sundry 'cultural workers'. The attendance that night almost matched that of a year's patronage in 1913, when the Gallery, then known as the Art Museum of Toronto, opened at the Grange. (The opening for the public on January 24, 1993, attracted 50 000

visitors, the largest single-day attendance in the Gallery's history.)

As close to eight thousand people filtered through the 50 galleries and various reception areas, it seemed quite clear that the revamped Art Gallery of Ontario had the unequivocal support of the community. The largely stellar crowd (including such noted dealers as René Blouin, Olga Korper, Jared Sable, Sandra Simpson, Mira Godard, and Fela Grunwald, there with her new partner, Linda Généreux; and notable artists, Ian Carr-Harris, Yves Gaucher, Barbara Steinman, Judith Schwarz, John Massey, Angela Grauerholz and AA Bronson of General Idea) marvelled at the new vaulted galleries, colour coded salons and spacious sculp-



Michael and Sonja Koerner Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario.

ture atrium. The changes are nothing less than impressive, with thirty new and twenty renovated galleries to showcase active programming and selections from the more than 16 000 works in the permanent collection.

The completion of this third phase of expansion marks the final stage of a project initiated in 1966. The first two phases, undertaken by architect John Parkin, saw the addition of the Henry Moore Sculpture Gallery, the Samuel & Ayala Zacks wing, the Activity Centre and the galleries for the Canadian historical and contemporary collections. This final aspect returns to the central core of the gallery, and ultimately relegates Parkin's hurried modernism to the outer edges. It is nonetheless a complementary environment for the viewing of works of art, and no small task for an architect to embark upon, recognizing from the outset that there are limited opportunities for design flourishes. The team of Barton Myers Associates and Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg have adhered admirably to the original architectural conditions, allowing only one small indulgence (no apologies necessary) with the creation of a magnificent spiral staircase.

The opening installations include a solo exhibition of works by Toronto artist Robin Collyer, who will go on to represent Canada in the Venice Biennale later this year. Curated by Philip Monk, this exhibition features sculptural work from 1987 to the present. An adjacent gallery complements the exhibition with earlier sculptural and photographic work drawn from the gallery's collection. Among the other mini exhibitions mounted for the re-opening are a suite of twelve large prints — *The Columbus Suite* — by artist Carl Beam, recently acquired for the permanent collection; a comprehensive drawing exhibition selected from the historical and contemporary collection; and small spaces dedicated to Joseph Beuys and others. The remaining installations reflect an emphasis on context: works thoughtfully selected and arranged to represent a movement, conceptual commonality, historical period or perhaps simply curatorial whimsy. Moving from gallery to gallery, one can determine and appreciate these associations, but occasionally they falter — installing

Royden Rabinowitch's *Medium Grease Cone* (1969) directly next to one of Ron Martin's black paintings from 1975 (*The Heart's Rebellion #18*) is a juxtaposition that appeared too literal and contrived; a Jack Chambers high realist painting across from a Molinari of the same vintage simply does not provide an insight into either; and an area corraling admirable works by Joyce Wieland, Liz Magor and Betty Goodwin — gender representation perhaps — is dismissive of their respective concerns. At the same time, there are truly poignant presentations: a small gallery with Denis Oppenheim's *Condensed 220 Yard Dash* (1969), a Richard Artschwager from 1972, Hans Haacke's *Ice Stick* (1966), and a Robert Smithson from 1975; and a small room containing two modest works — On Kawara's *Wednesday, Aug. 5, 1981* and a 1965 work by Roman Opalka — invoking memories of past exhibitions. These installations reflect an effort to provide some level of comparison (educational value) as well as to illuminate the collecting tendencies and concerns of the Gallery's curatorial staff of the past eighty years (historical value). This approach, although not as innovative as the Gallery has claimed, provides patrons with a pluralistic and developing insight into the permanent collection, and the visionaries at the Art Gallery of Ontario are optimistic that hybridizing this scholarly approach will compensate for the demise of the blockbuster exhibitions of the past.

On a recent visit to Toronto, artists Bernd and Hilla Becher were given a tour of the new Art Gallery of Ontario, and Hilla Becher commented afterward, "It is very rich". This provoked some ironic laughter from those within earshot, since the prevailing image of the gallery in recent months has been that of a financially constrained institution. Recognizing that there was a covert context, Becher went on to qualify the comment, by saying that she was referring to the quality of works in the gallery's permanent collection. As the political and financial turmoil of realizing this institution subsides, we catch a glimpse of that which has awaited our gaze — a truly remarkable collection.

CLAIRE CHRISTIE