

## NOW: In dialogue with the Art Gallery of Ontario

Katherine Dennis

Volume 7, Number 1, 2014

Le dialogue dans les musées d'art contemporain

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1026647ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026647ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Association Québécoise de Promotion des Recherches Étudiantes en  
Muséologie (AQPREM)

### ISSN

1718-5181 (print)

1929-7815 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Dennis, K. (2014). NOW: In dialogue with the Art Gallery of Ontario.  
*Muséologies*, 7(1), 55–79. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026647ar>

Article deux

# **NOW: In dialogue with the Art Gallery of Ontario**

Katherine Dennis

**Katherine Dennis is an independent curator, writer and researcher dedicated to contemporary Canadian art. Katherine works collaboratively with artists and other curators to find innovative ways of connecting broad audiences to meaningful art experiences. In 2012 Katherine won the inaugural Middlebrook Prize for Young Canadian Curators at the Elora Centre for the Arts, where she curated the exhibition as perennial as the grass. In addition to her curatorial practice, Katherine is a research associate at Pivotal Research Inc., leading a research initiative to develop visitor metrics for Canadian museums. Katherine holds a BFA from the University of British Columbia and an MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practices from OCAD University in Toronto.  
hello@katherinedennis.ca  
www.katherinedennis.ca**

*“Contemporary art has the potential to play an integral role in society by opening up spaces in which individuals may reexamine their own lives and their relationship to the world”<sup>1</sup>*

In a first-time collaboration that began only six months before the public opening, Toronto-based artists Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette came together to develop an installation in the Art Gallery of Ontario’s *Toronto Now* series. I was the curator for this show and introduced these two artists, whose practices address the politics of public space through many media: street art, graffiti, painting, design, and photography. The three of us developed a close working relationship with each other, as well as with several members of the museum staff, to create a new body of work specific to the context of the Young Gallery at the AGO<sup>2</sup>. The exhibition, *NOW: A Collaborative Project with Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette*, opened to record attendance on January 20, 2012. Open and free to the public until April 1, 2012, the exhibition highlighted not only new artworks but also a series of programming integral to the development of the project and the audience’s engagement with the exhibition. (fig. 1)

### The Artists

Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette operate both outside and inside the mainstream art world. Their work navigates and negotiates the divide between public and private space. Although visually distinct, the artists’ works share thematic explorations of the politics of public space, mainstream and alternative visual and text-based languages, and intervention practices. Sean Martindale combines his fine art and design background with street art to communicate complicated ideas with visual simplicity. His process involves ongoing interventions that use reclaimed, recyclable, and plant materials. Martindale’s work explores

the visual language of signs through sculptural DIY creations that are often reproducible and open-sourced. (fig. 2)

A recognizable figure in two distinctive art worlds, Pascal Paquette has spent the last decade traversing the contemporary art scene, while learning and expanding his graffiti writing practice under the pseudonym Mon Petit Chou. Paquette’s thematic interests interrogate the transformation of culture that occurs when two or more economic, social, or cultural realities collide. He combines painting with graffiti writing, street art interventions, and photography in projects that are often site-specific or geographically dependent. (fig. 3)

Both artists often work in a collaborative manner, either through intended joint projects with other artists or by allowing their artwork into the public domain and opening up each piece for unexpected authorship from often-unknown sources. The emphasis on collaboration stems from a desire for dialogue that is critically engaged but without strict parameters for participation.

### The Curator

This exhibition was both the subject and outcome of my MFA research in Criticism and Curatorial Practices at OCAD University, Toronto. I completed a BFA in studio practice from the University of British Columbia and subsequently relocated to Toronto for my Master’s degree. I first met the artists during respective studio visits and I was immediately taken with their artistic practice, work ethic and enthusiasm. Meeting Martindale and Paquette independently, the chemistry between us was a natural fit. Most importantly the ideas each were discussing could equally have come straight from my own mouth, although I had never worked with street artists or graffiti writers previously. I had

1 MORIN, France, et al. “Beyond boundaries: Rethinking contemporary art exhibitions”. *Art Journal*. vol. 59, no. 1, 2000, pp. 4-21.

2 As a collecting institution, the AGO is referred to in this article as both Gallery and museum, while the site of the exhibition, the Young Gallery, is referred to as the gallery or by proper name.



*Figure 1*  
**NOW: A Collaborative Project with Sean Martindale  
and Pascal Paquette, promotional image**  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]

58



*Figure 2*  
**Sean Martindale, NATURE, Public Intervention,  
Toronto, Ontario 2009**  
[© Sean Martindale]



*Figure 3*  
**Pascal Paquette, What I've Learning in the Last Five  
Years (Empire Penguins) 2010**  
[© Pascal Paquette]



undoubtedly found two talented artists who shared my views about audience participation, the potential for museums to play a vital role in the arts community and the city at large, and the importance of questioning historical roles and hierarchies embedded in the art world.

### The Art Gallery of Ontario

Hundreds of people work at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Hundreds more volunteer. All are guided by a clear and powerful mandate – Art Matters. These two words offer infinite meanings that influence a complex web of interactions governing this large-scale institution.

Every year the centrally located, downtown Toronto Gallery hosts major exhibitions of renowned art on loan or from their collection. Famous artists featured in the last few years include Picasso; Cezanne; Matisse; Monet; New York Abstract Expressionists, such as Pollock, Rothko and Newman; as well as internationally recognized contemporary artists like Yael Bartana, Patti Smith, and Michael Snow. They also organize exhibitions from their extensive holdings of 80,000 works of art spanning from 100 C.E. to the present day. The AGO programs events, classes, tours, workshops and lecture series for all ages. Free admission spaces and activities include the Weston Family Learning Center, the Young Gallery, and Free Wednesday nights. Commercial enterprises comprise ShopAGO, the museum's gift shop, FRANK, a fine-dining restaurant, a café on the Gallery's lower and second levels, a members' lounge in the Grange House, as well as rental spaces for private functions. Every year the AGO presents two major contemporary art prizes: the Grange Prize<sup>3</sup> and the Gershon Iskowitz Prize. In 2010/11, the gallery documented attendance of over 600,000 visits. (fig. 4)

3 As of May 2013, The Grange Prize has been rebranded as the AIMIA|AGO Photography Prize.

4 During the editing process of this article, the AGO dissolved the current model of *Toronto Now* series as discussed in this paper. After three years of experimentation, the AGO is restructuring the series. As a result, the Young Gallery will no longer host this program. There is a temporary hiatus in

### The Young Gallery and the Toronto Now series<sup>4</sup>

The Young Gallery was constructed as part of Transformation AGO in 2008 when the Gallery underwent a significant architectural renovation and a re-branding exercise with the help of acclaimed architect Frank Gehry and Bruce Mau Design, which developed a distinctive logo and font specific to the Gallery. The *Toronto Now* series launched in 2010 as part of the AGO's contemporary art programming coordinated by a core team including David Moos and Michelle Jacques as curators and Iain Hoadley as project manager. Jacques, who has since relocated to the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria as Chief Curator, curated most of the series' exhibitions for the first two years. The series is organized by the Modern and Contemporary Art department and has since invited several guest curators to program exhibitions. The Contemporary Circle supports the *Toronto Now* series and the Canada Council of the Arts funds the museum's contemporary programming.

Conceived to demonstrate the AGO's commitment to their local artistic community, several unique challenges have presented themselves since the inception of the series in 2010: while the Young Gallery provides local artists in all stages of their careers a chance to present new work at the AGO, the gallery is frequently criticized both internally by staff and externally by the artistic community for relegating local artists to a peripheral space with little visibility. This criticism highlights the importance of placement within museum architecture as a signifier of value by the institution<sup>5</sup>. The Young Gallery is located on the northeast corner of the AGO, completely separate from the main galleries. Visitors enter the Young Gallery

programming while the museum determines a new trajectory for their spotlight on Toronto artists.

5 MCCLELLAN, Andrew. *The art museum from Boullée to Bilbao*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 2008, p. 111.

through the FRANK restaurant or from the main entrance, by passing through the gift shop and restaurant.

Other artists featured in the series include Dean Baldwin, John Sasaki, Libby Hague, Paul Butler, Lisa Myers, Autumn Chacon, and Nicole Collins. Two projects that stand out in their attempt to address the specific site of the Young Gallery and its connection to the FRANK restaurant are Dean Baldwin's *The Dork Porch* (2010), which transformed the gallery into a backyard porch, and Lisa Myers and Autumn Chacon's *Noise Cooking* (2012), which captured the sounds and movements produced during the creation of a receipt. Other artists, such as Libby Hague with her paper works and Nicole Collins' use of sound, tackled one of the challenges facing this wall-flower space by using the outdoor window as an extension of the gallery to draw viewers' attention from the street.

The concern of minimal visibility is initially surprising, as the gallery has a street-front location with large floor-to-ceiling windows, and enjoys free public access during restaurant hours: Tuesday to Sunday from 11:30 am to 10:00 pm. These hours are significantly longer and more accessible to a working public than the main Gallery's hours, which are Tuesday and Thursday to Sunday from 10:30 am to 5:30 pm and Wednesday from 10:30 am to 8:30 pm. Yet visitors cannot see through the UV protected glass and passersby often miss the gallery altogether. Signage for the space is minimal, almost invisible next to the advertising campaigns for the Gallery's paid programming and commercial marketing. (fig. 5)

Additionally, the simple act of entering the gallery through the restaurant produces unintended tension among the restaurant staff, diners, artists, and audiences that share this space. This disunity among users creates an unconscious sense of class, marking these

adjoining spaces as sites of cultural and economic difference<sup>6</sup>. The tension arises from complex and imbedded habitus of inherent differences in character, behaviors and upbringings<sup>7</sup>. The strain apparent between the gallery and restaurant demonstrate how the physical location of a space reveals the much more complex identity of a functional site<sup>8</sup>.

Positioned by the AGO as an alternative space on the edge of the mainstream museum model, the Young Gallery has the unique potential to operate in unconventional ways compared to galleries reserved for more traditional exhibitions, despite the barriers faced by the public and artists when interacting with the site. The artists in the *Toronto Now* series are able to push against other boundaries inherent in the rest of the museum, such as coded behaviour, museum language, and acceptable practices.

Martindale and Paquette excel at illuminating often-overlooked sites—such as back alleyways, temporary hoardings, and parking lots—transforming these liminal spaces into forums for artistic exploration. Working with the museum, these artists were able to open up the Young Gallery as a place where socially relevant and contentious ideas—such as city planning, transit, education, and topical news headlines—could be addressed head on through art by artists and audience members alike. The site-specific character of Martindale and Paquette's work and the collaborative and inclusive nature of their practices best suited them for this project. The artists were not selected based on their graffiti and street art media per se, rather these forms of expression were well suited to address the politics of public and institutional space and question how so-called public spaces within the cityscape are navigated. The Young Gallery, with its distinct identity, provided the artists abundant fodder to appropriate and respond to. Knowing that the location is a permanent fixture of the gallery, site-specificity is one method used to

6 BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Translated by Richard NICE. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 78.

7 *Id.*, p. 78.

8 MEYER, James. "The functional site; or, the transformation of site specificity". In. SUDERBURG, Erika (Ed.). *Space, site, intervention: Situating installation art*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 25.



incorporate these previously restrictive elements into the artwork by investigating the physical, functional, and institutional character of this location<sup>9</sup>. Here the museum functioned as site and subject for the artists.

### The Exhibition

The importance of context in the production of their work provided commonality for the artists between the street and the gallery. Similar to the work created on the street, the process for addressing the Young Gallery space was familiar. The parking lot between Grange Park and Butterfield Park in Toronto (the site of Martindale's FREE installation) and the now demolished brownstone wall at 360 Richmond Street West (a past site of one of Paquette's pieces) both parallel the distinct identity of the gallery to which the artists responded. The art ultimately took on a different form than the expected cardboard sculptures, plant interventions from Martindale, or the large-scale paintings and graffiti pieces by Paquette. Imposing these expectations would have unnecessarily categorized and limited the artists' response to the site. (fig. 6)

*NOW: A Collaborative Project with Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette* transformed gallery into forum, using art as the catalyst for conversation. Pushing the idea of *Toronto Now* to its edge, the artists appropriated the AGO logo and the "Now" name to construct the *NOW Service Bureau*, a hub for artistic creativity that encouraged thoughtful action on local issues. Martindale and Paquette's installation included a workspace for the artists and a lounge and work area for visitors (with free Wi-Fi access provided by the AGO). Next to their service counter, a comment wall posing questions such as, "What would you do first if you were mayor?" or "What's on your mind right now?" provided space for visitors to reflect on and display their own ideas. Posting personal responses to current local or global

issues, visitors contribute their own creative energies to the installation. Artworks within the installation included *Infinite NOW* (2012), a large-scale mirrored sculpture; *NOW up* (2012) and *Whitewash* (2012), two videos of graffiti writing taking place outside the gallery; and a vinyl graffiti piece *NOW* (2012) styled as a fire extinguisher tag installed on the outside window of the gallery. (fig. 7)

This DIY agency reflected the artists' interest in tensions between the rush and impatience of everyday life and the benefit of slowing down, being mindful and aware of environmental, political, and cultural topics. This friction is supported by the DIY mentality that privileges the experience of the here and now in order to provoke change through self-consciousness, self-transformation, and social interactions or exchanges<sup>10</sup>. The *NOW Service Bureau* offered visitors the opportunity to use the gallery as a setting for thinking about and discussing pressing issues in Toronto. Visitors addressed public and private concerns about transit; the current city mayor; free education; access to healthy, clean water; and issues of mental health, among many other topics.

By constructing a DIY agency, the artists flipped the expectation of a functional service bureau and instead asked visitors to participate directly through attentive awareness, conversation, or action. To encourage participation, the artists held "office hours" every Wednesday evening and made frequent visits to the gallery, offering tours and conversation to any interested visitors. When the artists were not present, the gallery was littered with questions to encourage thought and response. Instructional panels were positioned at seating areas to guide visitors through the installation. While each artwork functioned independently, the overall installation contained elements of social practice that aimed to foster relationships and promote discussion.

<sup>9</sup> ROSENTHAL, Mark. *Understanding installation art: From Duchamp to Holzer*. New York: Prestel, 2003, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> DEZEUZE, Anna (Ed.). *The 'do-it-yourself' artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010.



*Figure 4*  
AGO façade, shopAGO window installation, 2012.  
Art Gallery of Ontario  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



*Figure 5*  
Young Gallery window – installation view, 2012.  
Art Gallery of Ontario  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



**Figure 6**  
**NOW Service Bureau – installation view, 2012.**  
**Art Gallery of Ontario**  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



**Figure 7**  
**Post NOW comment wall – detail, 2012. Art Gallery of Ontario**  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]

Appropriation of the AGO's logo appeared throughout the installation, on business cards, in the font and coloring of text, and foremost through a large-scale mirrored sculpture, *Infinite NOW*. The artists produced a reflective plexi-glass and vinyl three-dimensional logo. Visitors could walk between the two mirrored NOW sculptures, which reflected their image ad infinitum into the installation. This dominating sculpture was the focal point in the gallery, and the AGO's distinctive branding became an encompassing, over-the-top art object. The three dimensional element of the work reinforced the inescapable presence of logos and the power of branding that pervades contemporary city life in both public and private spaces. (fig. 8)

Two time-lapsed videos of graffiti writing taking place outside the gallery brought elements of graffiti history and current practice into the installation. In *Whitewash*, active participants in the local Toronto graffiti community joined Martindale and Paquette. This work in progress recorded a growing collection of graffiti pieces continuously removed and buffed back to white on a legally-obtained brick wall at 6 Nassau Street in Kensington Market, drawing attention to the ephemeral nature of this type of work. The video captured a slice of life in Toronto's current graffiti scene and was updated with new contributions throughout the exhibition. Martindale and Paquette gave no guidance to the contributing artists regarding what content each piece should explore. This video became the most overtly political work in the exhibition, referencing city policy and attitudes toward graffiti through the act of whitewashing, as well as in the content of the individual graffiti pieces.

Moving back in time, the life-size video projection *NOW Up* showed the changing face of a wall repeatedly covered with graffiti. Each new layer obscured the last. Rather than employing conventional graffiti language the artists insistently re-inscribed the word NOW. Using different graffiti styles in the approximate sequence with which they appeared, the artists painted the history of graffiti into the gallery. Beginning with the early form of modern

graffiti, hobo tagging, the artists worked their way through the 70s, 80s and 90s, illustrating styles such as tagging, piecing, Pixacao, Wildstyle, and throw ups, ending with 90s roller hits. While graffiti artists most frequently inscribe their own handle when writing, Martindale and Paquette employed NOW to reinforce the ephemeral nature of graffiti as an art movement and the concept of now—as a present moment—over as soon as it has begun. (fig. 9)

There are distinct opportunities and challenges of bringing graffiti and street art practices from outside the gallery inside. Although graffiti is recognized by many people around the world as a legitimate art form, whether found in back alleys or exhibited in major art galleries, others view graffiti writing as vandalism without artistic merit. Despite graffiti's popularity, positioning this practice as art in the mainstream museum system remains contentious for many audiences, patrons, and gallery workers. The relationship between graffiti and the museum is complex. Presenting this ongoing conversation directly into the gallery highlighted the importance of constantly questioning and rethinking standard definitions of art practices and whether legality or subjective definitions of beauty are required to qualify an object, image or action as art. Rather than co-opting street art and graffiti, the gallery acted as a forum where these issues and dialogues can be continually interrogated.

With no direct one-to-one translation, what is made on the street cannot necessarily be shown in the gallery; nor was that the intent of this project. Tagging the front of a business with a fire extinguisher tag, a crass and damaging form of graffiti, is an action that might seem rebellious, even crude, on the street, but has a different and significant power in the gallery. As a vinyl artwork, the fire-extinguisher tag becomes a fine art object that draws attention to an overlooked space, the Young Gallery, by employing a distinct eye-catching aesthetic. This transformation invites questions about who determines what practices are named as art and how value is attributed to these actions. The institutional setting unquestionably



impacts the way these ideas would otherwise be interpreted if encountered outside the gallery. With the presence of their art, Martindale and Paquette restructured the space. Yet at the same time, the space restructured their practice. This reciprocal negotiation involved compromise to encourage change. The work of Martindale and Paquette did not lose meaning or impact in a gallery but the context unquestionably informs how the art is interpreted.

To complement the exhibition, the accompanying curatorial essay took the form of a newspaper. This four-page essay, available in the exhibition, was carefully constructed to reach a broad readership while the newspaper format maintained cohesion with the installation concept. The essay was divided into eleven segments and written to function as a whole, while each section also worked independently as a complete idea. The format was intended to provide a choice of reading that would benefit the experience of the exhibition. The visitor could read the entirety of the newspaper all at once or individual sections that supplemented the project. Segments included information on the *NOW Service Bureau* and the artists' biographies; ideas of positive complicity, mindfulness and community addressed by the exhibition and curatorial process; as well as two interview segments from conversations with each artist that introduced their voices into the curatorial writing. (fig. 10)

In addition to the curatorial essay, a double-sided hand-held panel provided information and context to the exhibition. Available to read in the gallery, this text introduced the voices of both artists and the curator. Frustrated and unsatisfied by third-person writing of exhibition text that implies an all-knowing and removed author imposing one specific interpretation onto the art, this panel provided brief, personal perspectives on the project. Each author took ownership of their ideas by

signing their name thereby acknowledging that these statements are just a few of many possible interpretations.

### Programming

Developed from an exploration and recognition of the Young Gallery's position within the larger institution, the artists extended their project into other areas of the museum and beyond the gallery walls. The curator and artists hosted several outreach programs aimed at stimulating conversation. These programs were developed concurrently with Martindale and Paquette's artworks instead of being produced after the installation was complete. The programs were not separate or supplementary to the installation but integral parts of the total experience.

These activities aspired to bring together different groups to talk about what matters to them in their city and how art can play a vital, action-led role in daily life. The exhibition was not a static and passive experience to be viewed from a distance. Instead, visitors were encouraged to take on an active role making not only the gallery space but also the larger museum and surrounding neighbourhood their own.

In *Tagging Along*, the artists led two outdoor walks exploring commissioned and unsanctioned artworks within the AGO's neighbourhood and surrounding community. Looking at the ways individuals and communities act within their society, cultural theorist de Certeau put forth the practice of walking as a method of activating agency in the urban environment<sup>11</sup>. The author proposed walking as an alternative to the voyeur who views the city from a disinterested distance. The act of walking in the city produces "pedestrian speech acts" where rhetoric develops, creating an individualized city in which personal meaning is assigned to spaces that supersedes the original, primary function of the site<sup>12</sup>. During

11 DE CERTEAU, Michel. "Walking in the City". In *The practices of everyday life*. Translated by Steven RENDALL. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 91-110.

12 *Id.*, p. 97.

the first walk, twenty-five visitors participated. Only a handful of these accounted for friends of the organizers. Participants ranged considerably. An elderly woman living in Chinatown, a neighbourhood bordering the AGO, participated in the first walk. Attending solo, she explained her interest in better understanding the art in her community since much, but certainly not all of it, appealed to her personal tastes. Repeat participants in both tours included an eleven-year-old boy accompanied by his mother, who idolizes local street-art legend SPUD and hopes, himself, to become a talented graffiti artist. After a review in the *Toronto Star* newspaper that covered the front page of their “Life” section, the second tour boasted almost one hundred attendees. The artists have since been invited back to the AGO to host similar private and public tours. (fig. 11)

*Youthful Perspectives* invited adolescent visitors on an artist-led tour of the AGO’s collection of contemporary art. Starting in the Weston Family Learning Centre the artists led this free tour through the AGO’s collection and ended in their own installation. None of the youth who attended the tour had ever been in the Young Gallery; indeed, most had never crossed the threshold of the FRANK restaurant. Despite being active members of the AGO’s Youth Council, spending their free, after-school hours in the gallery as comfortably as if it were home, this free gallery space did not feel accessible to them. Sometime after the tour, the group returned without the artists to spend time in the exhibition, leaving traces of their visit by inserting thoughtful drawings and writing on the comment wall.

The artists also ran *Gift Shop Gift Shop* with the AGO’s gift shop as a parallel project during the course of the exhibition. This store within a store featured souvenirs of the AGO’s gift shop itself, rather than the expected art mementos, as well as other related open-edition art multiples. *Gift Shop Gift Shop* works by Martindale and Paquette were available alongside both collaborative and independent multiples by other local Toronto-based artists, designers and illustrators. The products for sale developed out of self-reflective art making

and many of the works transformed raw street and everyday materials and images into privileged, valuable objects. (fig. 12)

This project built off of a trajectory of subversive commercial practices of artist gift shops from Toronto’s own General Idea and *The Boutique from the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion* (1980) to contemporaries like Stephanie Syjuco’s *Shadowshop* (2011) at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art or the Toronto International Art Fair’s *Everything Must Go* (2010) boutique curated by designer Jeremy Laing. Taking inspiration from existing gift shop souvenirs or using gift shop overstock, these commercial items were examined and reworked to deconstruct how consumable objects are given value. By the end of the exhibition’s run, over forty artists contributed work to the gift shop.

Recognizing the gallery’s direct connection to FRANK, a dinner hosted in the restaurant’s private dining room brought their slogan, “ART. FOOD. TALK.” to life. The private dining room is intimately coupled with the gallery, as two doors open directly from the room into the south wall of the gallery and therefore become part of the space’s identity. A subsidized dinner, jointly sponsored by a private donor and FRANK, gathered forty-five participants together, combining those who frequented and those who had never dined at the restaurant. This dinner integrated gallery and restaurant space, accepting and working within the parameters of the site to bridge tensions and separation.

Exhibition programming aspired to bring together communities of different audiences, including youth, local artists and arts supporters, restaurant diners, gift shop shoppers and AGO staff. The word community is an over-used term, often employed without definition. While on the surface this word seems benign, in fact, “community” presents highly problematic implications. What defines a “community”? Foremost, a community entails a group of people, but what group? Among its numerous uses, the word “community” refers to people connected by a shared geographical



location, a common ethnicity, religion, or profession, and/or a similar set of social values. It can be self-defined or externally imposed. Regardless, defining people based on established criteria always divides as much as it connects. Inclusion unfailingly involves exclusion. Therefore, these “complex form(s) of identification” have dual capabilities<sup>13</sup>. Community possesses the ability to break down barriers between people and create a space for understanding and conversation while at the same time this construction retains the capacity to standardize difference and diversity under an umbrella term<sup>14</sup>.

Tied to a physical location, museums—such as the Art Gallery of Ontario—are naturally situated within a geographical community. Yet to define people who visit these sites by geography, ethnicity, education, profession, or income bracket ignores the complex and personal reasons that influence audience attendance and experience. Within the art world, community continues to be a heavily debated concept. Historically, museums of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries sought patrons with the appropriate moral and social behaviours of the upper middle class in order to influence individuals to form a civic-whole comprised of ideal citizens<sup>15</sup>.

Museums, as heterotopias, operate as physical sites that mimic—through representation, contestation, and inversion—the cultural norms of the society in which they are located<sup>16</sup>. Ordering people as much as objects, the museum establishes standards of behaviour acceptable for its visitors. Order and, supposedly, objective truth, are valued above mess, chaos, and error, traits typical of interactions amongst people. Places of “showing and telling,” the museum asserts superiority and

control over the other by placing difference on display as subject<sup>17</sup>. These historical practices of categorizing, standardizing, or exoticizing and looking remain embedded within the behaviours supported by the conventional museum system.

In contrast, community arts in the 1980s and 1990s defiantly offered a more open, democratic definition of community. Community arts consider the collaborative creative process between a practicing artist and a community. Here, “community” refers to a self-defined group of individuals, electively joined together as much by diversity as by sameness rather than made uniform by externally established similarities. Community arts practice gives voice to socio-political and cultural issues through a collaborative process. However, community arts practice itself is not unproblematic. Even the notion of giving voice to others suggests an unequal power dynamic and the ability of one individual, in this case an artist, to give authority to someone in a lesser position.

However, community arts envisions a valuable issue-based participatory arts practice that grants equal value to the process of creation as to the final product<sup>18</sup>. Here art is but one means to build a temporary community based on interest and engagement. The *NOW* exhibition aimed to build such provisional communities where people were able to come together through art to contemplate, converse, and participate in relevant social and cultural issues affecting daily life in Toronto. These were communities whose existence was temporary and bound to the exhibition. (fig. 13)

13 KESTER, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004, p. 15.

14 *Ibid.*

15 DUNCAN, Carol. “Art museums and the ritual of citizenship”. In: Ivan KARP and Steven D. LAVINE (Ed.). *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museums*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p. 89.

16 BENNETT, Tony. *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 1.

17 *Id.*, p. 3.

18 FERNANDEZ, Melanie and Angela LEE. *Community Arts Workbook...another Vital Link*. Toronto: Ontario Arts Council, 1998 p. 7; LACY, Suzanne. “Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys”. In: *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Edited by Suzanne LACY. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 38; JACOB, Mary Jane. “An Unfashionable Audience”. In: *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Edited by Suzanne LACY. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 52.

## Curatorial Strategies

Collaboration in art is not a new practice. The process of working together with other artists, curators, and audiences is a long-established strategy. From apprenticeships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to studio assistants in the 21<sup>st</sup>; from community arts practice to relational aesthetics, joint projects have an extensive history both inside and outside the art gallery. Yet every time new people come together on a new project, unexpected results ensue. The *NOW* project is one example where collaboration was integral to the artworks, not simply lip service to a popular theory.

In Kester's concept of dialogical art practice, collaboration operates as an artistic methodology that strives to reclaim a positive relationship with the audience. In this case, Kester's theory offered me a framework for enacting a curatorial methodology that endeavored to produce a positive working relationship with collaborators while maintaining a critical mindset as I investigated, alongside the artists, the Young Gallery as a contested space of public and private interests that are both intimately connected and rife with tension. Through this curatorial project, I aimed to explore the impact and results of my collaborative approach while working with the artists and the institution. Therefore, before any artworks were created, floor plans were drawn up, or programs were established, extensive consultations took place among contributors.

As the link between the artists and the AGO, my goal was to provide the necessary resources for Martindale and Paquette to engage in their own research into the *Toronto Now* series and the Young Gallery. Together, we conferred with a variety of the gallery's departments. To this end, we met with the Artist-in-Residency program coordinator, the youth program coordinator, the FRANK restaurant manager, and the ShopAGO manager and product developer.

Our first meeting was with the Artist-in-Residency coordinator, Ann-Marie Pena. Her focus primarily involved connecting AGO members and the general audience with contemporary artists, so she provided a wealth of knowledge on different methods of audience engagement. Together, we discussed several programs for the exhibition. This resulted in subsequent meetings with the youth program coordinator. Meeting with the FRANK restaurant manager, Courtney Henderson, came next. Due to the constant tension between the needs of the restaurant and gallery, I was most excited and most apprehensive about this meeting. Because the gallery and restaurant are joined spaces, integration and acknowledgment from both sides was integral to how I saw the project. While I entered with the preconceived notion that the décor and image of FRANK could not be altered or impinged upon in any way, Henderson proved open to a visual presence of the artists in the restaurant. The restaurant's excitement about the artists' involvement in their space set a positive tone for the entire exhibition run.

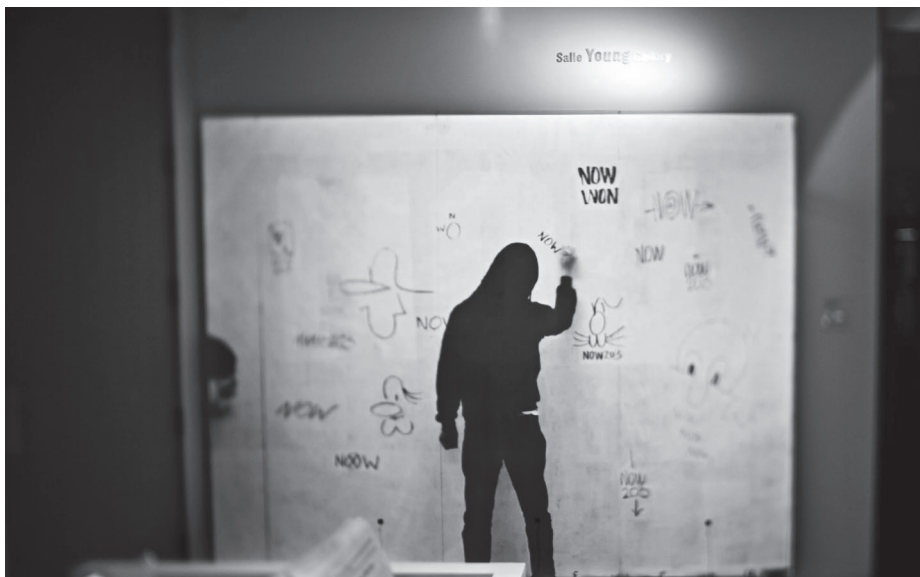
Our final meeting was with the AGO gift shop manager Kirstin Mearns and product developer Joanne Russell. This meeting happened at the ideal time because the gift shop had nothing scheduled for the slow winter months and was looking for a new project to promote. They were immediately receptive to the artists using their front window display thus extending the presence of the project from the edge of the AGO to the main gallery entrance, on the condition that the artists produced a product for sale in the store. At this stage, no one knew the expansive project the artists were about to initiate. This conversation led to the development of *Gift Shop Gift Shop*. (fig. 14)

As the curator of the exhibition, instead of offering a theme for the exhibition, I proposed grounding the exhibition in ideas of collaboration and positive complicity, as well as a general framework of site-specificity to address the Young Gallery as a location

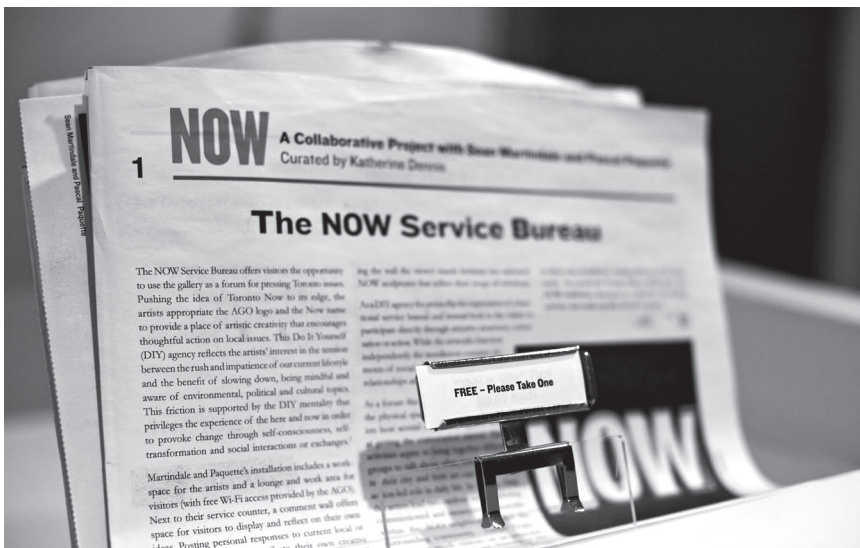


*Figure 8*  
**NOW Service Bureau – installation view, 2012.**  
**Art Gallery of Ontario**  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]

70



*Figure 9*  
**NOW up, 2012. Art Gallery of Ontario**  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



**Figure 10**  
**NOW Newspaper – installation view, 2012. Art Gallery of Ontario**  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



**Figure 11**  
**Tagging Along – public program, 2012. Kensington Market**  
[© Photographer: Katherine Dennis]



*Figure 12*  
*Gift Shop Gift Shop*, installation, 2012. Art Gallery  
of Ontario  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]





**Figure 13**  
Post NOW comment wall – detail, 2012. Art Gallery of Ontario  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



**Figure 14**  
shopAGO window display, 2012. Art Gallery of Ontario  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]



where public and private interests converge<sup>19</sup>. Working together with the institution, the artists and I transformed a small-scale installation into a multi-faceted project that was, at once, an exhibition, a relational practice, an educational program, a marketing/public relations extravaganza, a commercial venture, a multi-artist collaboration, and an interdepartmental infiltration of the museum. By providing the environment for others to explore their own ideas, together the participants were able to produce a more dynamic and expansive project than any one person could do alone. A multitude of people, circumstances, situations, and decisions came together in a complex network to arrive at *NOW: A Collaborative Project with Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette*.

Of course, at any pivotal point in the project's development phase, at minimum three people's interests were competing as much as supporting each other. With many distinct individuals collaborating on this project – all with their own ideas, points of views, and goals – easily grew and expanded beyond any established frameworks. At times, roles for Martindale, Paquette, and myself became unclear. Artistic, curatorial, administrative, and managerial distinctions disintegrated under the pressure of accommodating and accomplishing all of the project's demands.

In order for the project to succeed, the idea of positive complicity became the base for all interactions. Positive complicity intertwines with collaboration when the community formed by the project is connected by difference rather than sameness. To be complicit in an act spontaneously brings to mind a wrong-doing of some kind: something to cover up or gloss over. However, this highly charged idea has both positive and negative associations. A positive application of complicity can be grounded in the constructive yet complex processes involved in collaboration.

American artist Andrea Fraser argues that the “institution” encompasses the “entire field of art as a social universe”, including artists themselves<sup>20</sup>. If artists, curators, and gallery staff are equally tied to these systems of power, change begins with acknowledgement of this position. The notion of positive complicity underlying the exhibition necessitated recognized yet qualified participation that reflected the value of multiple and diverse interests. Martindale and Paquette's love of local, sustainable practices reflected the culinary focus of the FRANK restaurant. While ShopAGO is a profit driven business, *Gift Shop Gift Shop* demonstrated how merchandise sales and art projects that critique value attribution and consumer waste can work successfully together. Innovative programming began with providing tours for all the gift shop and restaurant staff that are frequently unaware of and uninformed by the artist or curator about the exhibitions on view in the Young Gallery. Institutions themselves have long supported artistic practices of institutional critique, which is seen once again in the appropriation of the AGO's logo by Martindale and Paquette. The negotiation of these diverging priorities ultimately resulted in a temporary middle ground, not of concession but of consent<sup>21</sup>. Although there are tenants of institutional critique within the project, visible most clearly in the *NOW Service Bureau* and *Gift Shop Gift Shop*, it is the collaborative, participatory, and dialogical aspects that are the heart of the exhibition.

### All Together Now

The progressive aspirations of *NOW: A Collaborative Project with Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette* was not in bringing graffiti or street art into a major Canadian art institution but in the methods used to develop the project. In fact, very little graffiti was actually present within the gallery, although reception of this medium sat better with some stakeholders than

19 DRUCKER, Johanna. *Sweet dreams: Contemporary art and complicity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

20 FRASER, Andrea. “From the critique of institutions to an institution of critique.” In J. WELCHMAN (ed.), *Institutional critique and after*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2006, p. 129.

21 DRUCKER, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

others. In a large institution like the AGO, departments become silos with very different needs, assets, and direction. Rather than accept these silos or ignore their presence, the people involved – artists, curator, and AGO staff – worked to build off the existing expertise and resources available within distinct spaces and bring these strengths together to support the development of the exhibition.

From the outset of this curatorial project many individuals within various departments, from curatorial to education to commercial, were involved and supported the project. Drawing upon the expertise and experiences that already exist within the museum opened many doors. These interactions ultimately strengthened the *NOW* exhibition. Although this type of interaction and integration is not possible with every project, the mindset of working collaboratively, interdepartmentally and recognizing existing assets facilitated new approaches to programming a challenging space.

During the course of the exhibition one of the most frequent questions posed by visitors was: Where is the art? Without the art being immediately apparent as objects to look at, the gallery became a space where established behaviours—do not touch, food and drink belong in cafes not galleries, use pencils never pens, no photograph—became flexible, thereby encouraging new ways of inhabiting and interacting in the space. During the exhibition, the gallery acted both as a hub of activity and as a space that housed art objects. The successes of the exhibition were most visible when people were engaged directly with the artists, either during informal conversation or scheduled programming; or when visitors shared their ideas through drawings and writings posted on the comment wall. The Young Gallery, too often overlooked and underused, became a gathering place for people who were able to explore individual artworks as well as a myriad of ensuing ideas and conversations. (fig. 15)



76

*Figure 15*  
**OPEN OPINE** – installation view, 2012. Art Gallery  
of Ontario  
[© Photographer: Cindy Blazevic]

## Reference List

- BENNETT, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Translated by Richard NICE. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- DEZEUZE, Anna. *The 'do-it-yourself' artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.
- DE CERTEAU, Michel. "Walking in the City". In *The Practices of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven RENDALL. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 91 – 110.
- DRUCKER, Johanna. *Sweet Dreams: contemporary art and complicity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- DUNCAN, Carol. "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship". In *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museums*. Edited by Ivan KARP and Steven D. LAVINE. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 88 – 103.
- FRASER, Andrea. "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." In *Institutional Critique and After*. Edited by J. WELCHMAN. Zurich: JRP/Ringier. 2006.
- FERGUSON, Bruce W. "Exhibition Rhetorics: material speech and utter sense". In *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Edited by Ressa GREENBERG, Bruce FERGUSON, and Sandy NAIRNA. London and NY: Routledge, 1996, 175-190.
- FERNANDEZ, Melanie and Angela LEE. *Community Arts Workbook...another Vital Link*. Toronto: Ontario Arts Council, 1998.
- JACOB, Mary Jane. "An Unfashionable Audience". In *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Edited by Suzanne LACY. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, 50-59.
- KESTER, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.
- LACY, Suzanne. "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys". In *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Edited by Suzanne LACY. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, 19- 49.
- MCCLELLAN, Andrew. *The Art Museum From Boullée to Bilbao*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California, 2008.
- MEYER, James. "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity". In *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*. Edited by Erika SUDERBURG. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 23 – 37.
- MORIN, France, et al. "Beyond Boundaries: Rethinking Contemporary Art Exhibitions." In *Art Journal* 59.1: 2000, 4-21.
- ROSENTHAL, Mark. *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*. New York: Prestel, 2003.

Katherine Dennis, traduit par Micheline Giroux-Aubin et  
Alessandra Mariani

## NOW en dialogue avec le Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario

[NOW: A Collaborative Project with Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette]  
NOW, projet collaboratif entre Sean Martindale et Pascal Paquette était à la fois l'objet et le résultat de ma recherche personnelle à titre de conservatrice dans le cadre du cursus de la maîtrise en critique et pratiques de l'exposition à l'université OCAD (Ontario College of Art & Design). Cette exposition était l'onzième production de la série d'art contemporain *Toronto Now* au Musée des Beaux Art de l'Ontario, (MBAO). Sur leur site web, le MBAO décrit cette série comme un lieu capturant l'esprit des artistes qui animent les nombreux quartiers de la ville. *Toronto Now* offre une vue d'ensemble sur la richesse créative qui s'épanouit tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur du MBAO. Le MBAO a désigné la Young Gallery hôte de la série *Toronto Now*. Elle devient un lieu de base et de création libre permettant aux artistes un engagement spontané et dépourvu de liens bureaucratiques. Cette situation permet une plus grande ouverture pour l'exploration artistique et facilite l'acceptation des projets au sein du système de la division départementale de la Young Gallery qui est hautement hiérarchisé.

78

Malgré qu'elle fasse partie du cadre muséal et qu'elle soit sujette aux pratiques institutionnelles, la Young Gallery bénéficie d'une position unique pour négocier les conventions muséologiques traditionnelles. Le fait qu'elle soit reliée au restaurant Frank du MBAO, la galerie est toutefois confrontée, de par sa situation à la périphérie de la galerie principale, à des défis particuliers. L'exploration de l'espace de James Meyer, le lieu et la spécificité de l'installation in-situ permet de comprendre comment la situation de la galerie permet de générer un autre type d'espace qui soit fonctionnel. En contraste avec le site lui-même – un lieu singulier et actuel – qualifié d'unique, Meyer explique comment un site fonctionnel peut ou ne peut incorporer un lieu physique et insiste plutôt sur le processus ou l'opération qui est générée entre les sites.

Employant des formes convergentes d'art urbain, de graffiti, et d'interventions artistiques combinées avec de la peinture contemporaine, de la sculpture et du design, les artistes torontois Sean Martindale et Pascal Paquette ont créé une installation in-situ qui mettait de l'avant une production artistique collaborative. L'exposition réunissait des oeuvres créées en collaboration qui construisaient l'apparence d'un bureau de service fonctionnel. Le *NOW Service Bureau* était une version évoluée de l'appropriation du logo du MBAO par Martindale et Paquette et du nom *Now*, et cette appropriation avait permis la transformation de cet espace en un bureau à leur effigie.

Cette exposition ludique, qui recréait un espace de travail fonctionnel, incitait les visiteurs à participer en inscrivant leurs commentaires sur un mur consacré à cet effet. Les questions qui y étaient posées concernaient

des problèmes d'actualité urbaine à Toronto. Au lieu de répondre eux-mêmes à ces questions, les artistes demandaient aux visiteurs de proposer leurs idées et celles de ceux qui partageaient l'espace avec eux.

Avant l'exposition, j'ai travaillé de près avec les artistes et le restaurant FRANK du MBO, la boutique de cadeaux et le centre d'apprentissage familial Weston [Weston Family Learning Centre] afin de développer le contenu de l'exposition et le programme qui l'accompagnait. En prenant appui sur les idées de l'historien d'art et écrivain Grant Kester, ce genre de collaboration a informé la méthodologie de cette étude, basée sur la notion de processus. La structure de pratiques artistiques collaboratives définie par Kester et traduite en une méthodologie curatoriale, a ainsi engendré un processus de travail basé sur une consultation impliquant le croisement de perspectives diverses obtenues par l'écoute, la discussion et l'empathie.