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Artist-Run Centres: Strengths, Assesments, Perpectives

Points de forces : les centres d'artistes, bilan et perspectives.

Conference organized in Montreal by le Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec et La Centrale. October 14 to 17, 1992

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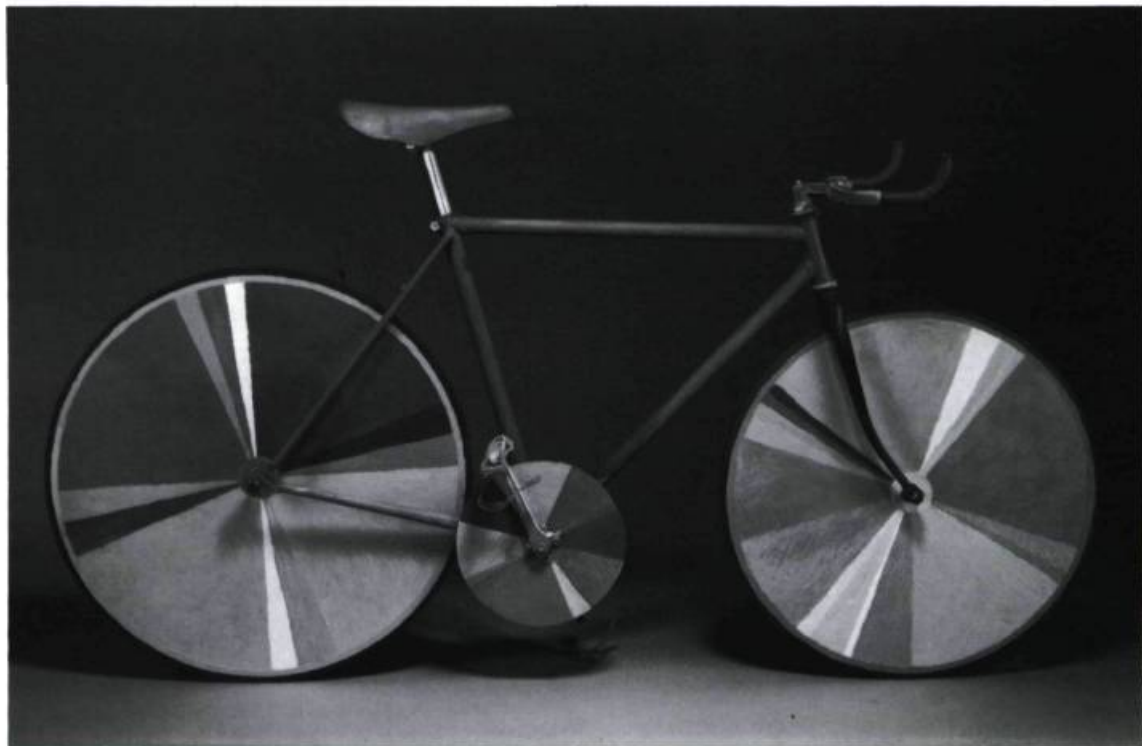
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ARTIST-RUN CENTRES: STRENGTHS, ASSESSMENTS, PERSPECTIVES

Points de forces : les centres d'artistes, bilan et perspectives. Conference organized in Montreal by le Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec et La Centrale. October 14 to 17, 1992



Greg Curnoe, *Funny Bike*, 1986. Huile sur bois, plastique, acier et aluminium ; 96 x 170 x 37 cm. Waddington & Gorce, Montréal.

The form of the conference was adapted to permit the artistic voices to be heard on historical and theoretical levels. Thematic panel discussions alternated with artist testimonials and response to the various discussions. The structure lend itself to a prolific exchange between artists and contributors active in the same milieu. A cabaret of performance art brought all together at *Le Lyon d'Or* for an evening that maximized the possibilities for exchange. Parallel to the conference, the artist-run centres in Montréal and the centres of Matane and Lac Saint-Jean participated with exhibitions pertinent to the group dynamic of the conference.

The intention of the conference was not to provoke a global or a particular questioning, but rather to define priorities and to find the most precise directions for determining short, medium and long term development. It was, in fact, an attempt to examine the collective structures that such management has defined and put into place in artist-run centres, to look at the effects derived from media criticism on the role of artist-run centres, and to evaluate the results of a lack of a constant dialogue between artist-run centres and museums, institutions and universities in rela-

tion to terms such as interdisciplinary, technology, and exhibition framework. In short, to attempt to examine some of the connections that exist between art and politics.

Artist-run centres have strongly contributed to a questioning of the role of museums, art dealers and the art market, while restructuring the traditional means of production and distribution. New means of distribution have in turn produced new artistic disciplines: performance, *in situ*, video, art in public places, spontaneous forms of happenings and mail art. This has allowed for a redefinition of the artistic milieu and its affirmation.

The conference was organized by Carole Brouillette, coordinator of Galerie La Centrale and Bastien Gilbert, director of the R.C.A.A.Q., The Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec, an umbrella coalition for Québec artist-run centres and it was thematically divided into five sections over a three-day period. These included a historical perspective, with panelists Marcel Fournier from Québec; Sharon Kivland from London, England; Normand Thériault of Montréal, and Lise Lamarche of Montréal as moderator. This section was introduced by an artist's testimonial account of the twenty years of artist-run centre

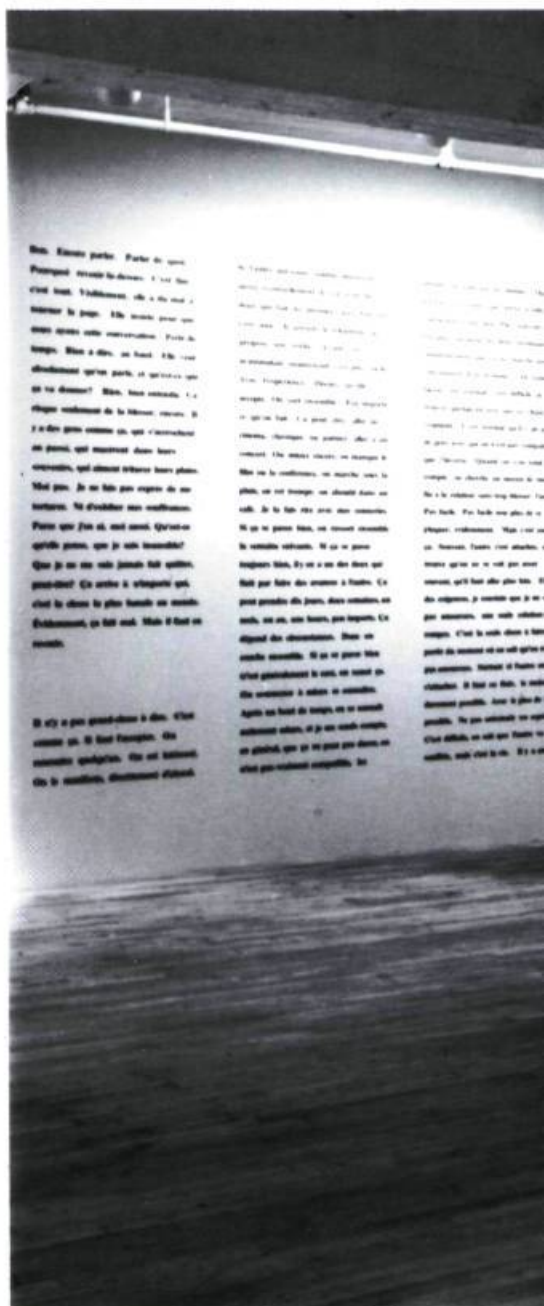
experience in London, Ontario and in Canada, given by artist Greg Curnoe, who was killed in an accident a few weeks after the conference.

In the Second panel, Clive Robertson, Ottawa - based artist and cultural critic and co-founding member of A.N.N.P.A.C.¹, before moving to Montréal, severely condemned the federal system that argues for public support for constitutional accords and trade agreements, while lacking the propriety and the accountability for such authority. He concluded: "If we believe that art is an intellectual activity of such importance to require both cultural resistance and activism, then I suggest that artists and cultural producers cannot perennially support public institutions that marginalize, sanitize or ignore their contributions. We cannot alternate between describing institutions as functional, when they support us, and dysfunctional, when they do not. The institutions that make up the art system need fixing or re-constructing, and we as artists, art scholars, curators and critics have the most to lose from their current state of anti-discourse and dysfunctional social autonomy."

In the Third panel, concerning Margins and Risks, Pascale Malaterre, video artist and writer, questioned the calculations and evaluations that can be undertaken when we don't possess socio-cultural data on an uncertain future. « Alors, maintenant que la tempête des années 80 est essuyée, comment les centres vont-ils gérer les années 90 ? Comme celles-ci s'annoncent très politisées, elles nécessiteront des prises de positions rapides de la part des artistes et des ripostes habilement échafaudées aux tentatives de manipulation qui apparaissent « magiquement » dès qu'il y a mouvement social ou autre.

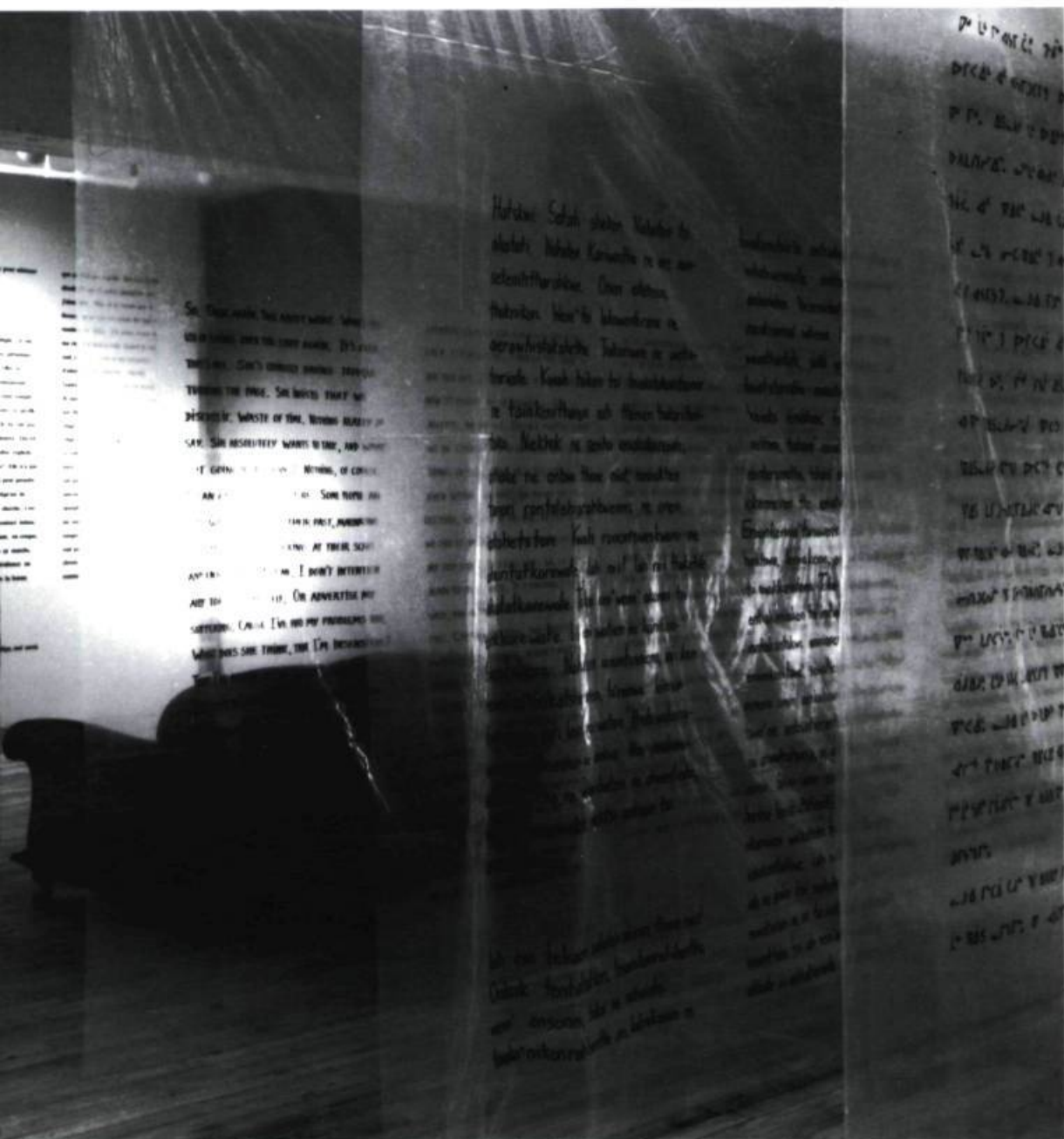
Donc, il ne s'agit pas pour les centres autogérés de devenir des petits conseils des arts avec pignon sur la rue, gérant un an à l'avance un roulement d'artistes ponctué d'événements sporadiques, mais bien d'élaborer des stratégies économiques de résistance à la veulerie qui cogne poliment à l'horizon. »

Gino Rodriguez, founder of the Alternative Museum in New York suggested, that while there are some new courageous foundations rebelling against the move to the extreme right, addressing environmental, social and gender issues and sponsoring a debate through some endorsement: "The move to the right is becoming something that is a global issue. The barbarians will suppress any and all thinking which does not further the great ideals of profit-making. With the New World Order will come the Fascist definition of what art should be. The question is: What will you do as an activist today to prepare for tomorrow?" In the panel on Effects of Art on Communication, Moderator Elspeth Probyn, author and professor at the



University of Montréal spoke of the doubling of art and communication: "If a transmission model of communication leaves something to be desired, polemically speaking, the eighties' mania for art and critical theory jargon has left me rather cold, unable to read yet another tortured piece of high theory... Instead of focusing on how an idea can be efficiently communicated, I want to propose that artistic and critical work is, or should be, about generating modes of 'becoming other', what Gilles Deleuze calls 'devenir' which then can be made to rhyme with 'désir'. It should be clear that this does not mean that we try to become 'the other', but that communication entails thinking differently, 'penser autrement'."

Anne Cauquelin, philosopher, essayist and painter, and professor of aesthetics in Nanterre and at L'Institut d'art de l'Université de Picardie, suggested that communi-



Isabelle Bernier, *Perte de temps*, 1992. Vue partielle de l'installation qui a été présentée en octobre 1992 à la Galerie Obaro, à Montréal.

cational structures allow for a way to stop seeing art as something autonomous and needing interpretation, but rather as a layering of roles and a shift in roles in pragmatic terms and in theoretically breaking down positions.

The Guerrilla Girls, art-activists based in New York, make use of venues free of the connotations of the art system to promote feminist concerns. Their acts are political acts intended to educate; not individual art, but action and pedagogy. Nell Tenhaaf, while also addressing gender issues, contended that the act of art is a disruptive moment with communication as its product, forming through a construction of the real a continuous formative process of identity.

In the final panel addressing the future of artist-run centres, Paul Panhuysen, artist and founder of the artist centre Het Appolohuis in Eindhoven, Netherlands, sug-

gested: "Collaboration is always a compromise. The future of art is that artists become responsible and learn to respect different points of view; it is important to retain a context in which other opinions may be voiced. The only way to become a good artist is to maintain this cohesively."

The Moderator of the final panel, Marie Perrault, art historian and critic, contended: "Les liens qui unissent les centres à un lieu de diffusion spécifique ne devraient pas être plus forts que ceux qui unissent la démarche d'un artiste à un objet et, en ce sens, demeurent encore à interroger. De plus, comme plusieurs intervenants l'ont soulevé lors du colloque sur le développement des galeries parallèles organisé par la Chambre blanche à Québec en 1988, l'implication des centres dans l'encouragement à la production d'œuvres demeure encore à exploiter. À la lumière

de ces quelques remarques, l'avenir des centres se distingue aujourd'hui de l'avenir des lieux de diffusion ou d'action spécifiques qui modèlent encore la conception que nous avons de cette prise de parole. À chacun de voir les limites qu'ils voudront se donner."

Corrine Corry, artist, professor at Concordia University, longtime activist for increased access for women to technology and artistic production, and representative as an artist member of the Galerie La Centrale, concluded that centres and educational institutions have a shared role and interest in the future of artist-run centres: "The artist-run centres have created art forms and thinking which would not exist otherwise. Art, as it inevitably supposes new identities, has need of institutions which are open, flexible, and not entrenched in a single ideological system, not transmitting a singular, dominant cultural system. A part of our role and growth as a contemporary art institution includes a recognition of our educational impact and responsibility."

In appreciation of the work of artist-run centres of the past twenty years, and the efforts of the Regroupement des centres d'artistes autogérés du Québec, the artist-run centre La Centrale and the many participants, I close with the final remarks by Claire Paquet and Suzanne Paquet on the final moment of the conference: « Ce serait nos futurs des lieux, du moins une part de notre avenir... »

Greg Curnoe 1936-1992

In tribute to the memory of Greg Curnoe and his remarkable contribution to Canadian visual arts and to the ongoing history of artist-run centres, I would like to quote directly from the summation in his testimonial at the conference. It is, I believe, a fitting tribute, following his tragic death while cycling near London, that we focus on his statement in closing: "Pressure to obtain support indiscriminately from corporate sponsors has increased, as artists have forgotten how corporate sponsorship is frequently employed to correct negative corporate reputations. Forest City has also begun to be criticized for the nature of its programming by Ontario Arts Council visual art juries, as artists who are unaware of London's highly non-specialized cultural milieu increasingly serve on those juries. It could be said that a sure sign of an institution is that its survival is more important than its function. At their worst, institutions lose track of their original purpose, and simply exist to keep the doors open. In the 1970s, Véhicule Art in Montreal was kept open by Canada Council grants simply because it was a very handsome space (although it had no constituency or board). It was said that those same grants paid for the legal fees of for-

mer board members on both sides of a dispute.

The parallel gallery system is not the same as the community-based artist-run centres that exist in Canada. If artist-run centres no longer have a constituency, should they remain open? Anything that strengthens the academic sense of art as a set of sealed-off disciplines works against cultural activity. It is a final irony that the places organized by artists to show, sell and perform their work should, over time, become the very places that encourage the segregation of that activity from its sources and potential public."

Greg Curnoe, Canadian painter and musician, was active for many years in artists' centres. His work concerned poetic and political issues that have often been crucial to artist centres. He will be remembered for his inestimable contributions up to the moment of his untimely death November 12, 1992. He will, above all, be remembered for his contribution to Canadian art.

MIKE MOLTER

NOTE

1. Association of National Non Profit Artist Centers.