

A Space in Toronto – A History

Over a period of fifteen years, Canada has produced a network of artist-run centres, properly called “alternative” or “parallel” galleries. A Space was Canada’s first and most famous, and a model for subsequent development both within and outside the country.

A Space as a name came into existence in September 1970 and was incorporated under the Nightingale Arts Council on January 6, 1971. The Nightingale Arts Council – a non-profit, charitable organization – basically was an open charter that allowed the NAC to act as an umbrella and representative for whatever needs new art and artists expressed: from a gallery to a publishing house; from workshops to a film theatre; from a video cabaret to a production centre. While virtually synonymous with A Space at the beginning and again today, at one time the NAC included A Space Video Co-op and the publication *Only Paper Today*. A printing press and other video co-ops and access units informally operated out of A Space as well during its residence on St. Nicholas Street from 1971 to 1978.

Ironically, A Space – so much an alternative to museum and gallery exhibition and support structures – started out as a commercial gallery, the Nightingale Gallery, founded by Chris Youngs in late 1968. But it was a commercial gallery for non-commercial art – a gallery oriented to artists and soon run by them. The exhibition *Concept '70*, which presented video and conceptual art and the production of local art in the context of international figures, set a direction for the future of A Space. Similarly, the first exhibition at A Space’s second location after it moved to St. Nicholas Street in the Spring of 1971 brought the conceptual art, body works, performances, video and film of the students and teachers from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to Toronto. Marked by changes in administration and location, different personalities and energies, A Space has remained consistent with its initial concept as an artist-initiated and artist-run centre. From its start it was concerned with projects inappropriate for commercial galleries. It was a space – a neutral space – meant for experimentation and exploration rather than simply the display of art objects. With its deliberate lack of a representative or associative name and its flexible space and programming, A Space took the form of a situation for events and performances, music and poetry, information and dissemination, correspondence and publishing, as well as exhibition of new media works. “Information” was the word that set the aesthetic for documentation and distribution. It seemed only natural that artists who wished to bypass critics in the making of a conceptually and contextually oriented art would want to control their own spaces of presentation and represent themselves in their own programming and production. Similarly, video at the time was seen both as a means of documentation and access to art information. Accordingly, A Space set out to exhibit, record and archive, and later to produce. And at a time

when video was expensive and hard to get A Space could serve as an access centre. In the early counter-cultural '70s, A Space’s first major public funding was for community video access – training and production – under the Federal Government’s Local Initiatives Program. (A Space had been supporting itself through minor grants and a cafe.)

While programming remained open, “disciplines” developed into their own series: the Poetry Front from an early date; Video Hotel with its own curator in 1974; artists’ film; new music – jazz and instrumental; and dance. In the mid-'70’s, A Space was an appropriate milieu for the performance-event – a type of pop-cultural media celebration that combined many of the above modes. Not only did it act as a temporary node for a network of performers that brought A Space in touch with, for example, the Western Front, but gave the Hummer Sisters and Video-Cab a tenure at A Space as well. *Only Paper Today* similarly catalyzed a local community as a monthly tabloid devoted to writing on art by and about artists in Ontario.

Before A Space moved into its present location on Queen Street, in the heart of Toronto’s artist community (March 1979), two directions influential for the future suggested themselves. The first, a programme of guest artist curators, started in 1975, was later to develop with the change in location into the major cultural projects. The second was the notion of “Art in Public” put forward in 1977 as a means of extending the audience and taking art into the city. Ben Mark Holzberg’s *Rolling Landscape* – a photographic exhibition replacing the advertisements in one of the cars of Toronto’s subway system – was a first tangible expression of this direction, as was the sponsorship of studio exhibitions by the city’s younger artist. *Art in Public* set the parameters for the future of A Space, at the same time that A Space was entering a crisis of its own representation of the art community that it had helped to stimulate in the first place. This crisis led to a Consultative Committee Report and an annual members’ meeting that voted to accept a proposal to dissolve the old A Space, move it to an office and concentrate on satellite programming. The idea was for “a museum without a collection” with decentralized programming proposed and curated by artists disseminating out of an office run by professional administrative staff. Emphasis was given to production projects conceived with new means of distribution and new audiences in mind. Ian Murray’s *Radio by Artists* and John Watt’s *Television by Artists* broadcast in 1980 were immediately consequential.

The situation in Toronto had effectively changed, and A Space could change and specialize because it was no longer the only alternative game in town. The Funnel Experimental Film Theatre (1977) served the film community, as the Music Gallery (1976) did that of the city’s music constituency. *YYZ* (1979) and *Mercer Union* (1979) exhibited the works of younger artists and mainly

painters and sculptors respectively. Each of these spaces encroached upon the programming of the others, and A Space has cooperated with all of them. A host of other short-lived organizations and spaces also had moved in to take up the slack of energy from the dissolution of the St. Nicholas St. A Space.

Of course A Space could not determine its specialization in production, given the changing conditions of contemporary art making (and given the change in A Space's own curatorial practices: from temporary A Space curators to the selection of proposals from the community at large.) A Space continues to serve the heterogeneous demands of artists and curators, whether it be for the exhibition of paintings in an office that once again has become a gallery, or an apparatus for funding, organizing and distributing projects. That is, programming remains mixed – in house and satellite, from painting, to installations, video, performance, and the publication of artists' books and catalogues. While media may not be consistent within any one project, the production and support of new work for exhibition is still emphasized. For instance, recent projects such as Language and Representation and Sex and Representation cut across media lines to examine or create issues from the diversity of current art.

Galleries like A Space continue to innovate in organization, production and presentation, and the representation of artists by themselves. They are no longer an alternative for contemporary art.

Philip Monk

Western Front, Vancouver

Im März 1973 trafen sich acht Freunde, um die Western Front Society zu gründen, das einzige von Künstlern verwaltete Zentrum in Vancouver, einer Stadt, die weniger als hundert Jahre alt ist und etwa eine Million Einwohner hat. Die acht Gründungsmitglieder waren die Künstler Kate Craig, Glenn Lewis, Eric Metcalfe, Michael Morris und Vincent Trasov; der Komponist Martin Bartlett; der Schriftsteller Henry Greenhow und der Architekt Maurice Van Nostrand. Michael Morris und Vincent Trasov leben und arbeiten heute in Berlin. Die Künstler Jane Ellison, Hank Bull und Patrick Ready sind zu den verbleibenden Mitgliedern gestoßen, um die Programme zu leiten.

1983 jährt sich zum zehnten Mal die Gründung der Western Front, dem wesentlichen und fortdauernden Bestandteil des Kulturlebens von Vancouver. Die Western Front erkennt die Bedeutung von Forschung und Entwicklung für die Kunst und den daraus resultierenden Nutzen für die Gemeinde und die örtliche Kultur. Eingedenk dessen wuchs die Western Front zu einem internationalen Schauplatz heran, wo wie eine große Familie hunderte von Künstlern aus aller Welt ihre Arbeiten zeigen. Die Society ist in einem geräumigen historischen, dreistöckigen Fachwerkhaus aus dem Jahre 1922 untergebracht, im geographischen Zentrum von Vancouver gelegen. Das Gebäude umfaßt eine Ausstellungsgalerie, einen Tanzsaal, einen Performance-Raum, Aufnahmestudios mit ausgezeichnete Video- und Ton-Anlage für Produktionen und Nachbearbeitungen, sowie Büros, Räume für Gast-Künstler und Unterkünfte für einige der leitenden Mitglieder. Diese einzigartige Lebens- und Arbeitssituation führte zu einer Fülle von denkwürdigen Veranstaltungen und Arbeiten, von denen viele in Video-, Ton- und Foto-Archiven dokumentiert werden.

Eine wesentliche Besonderheit der Programmgestaltung ist die Teilfinanzierung von Veranstaltungen durch andere Kultur- und Erziehungsinstitutionen in Vancouver. Die Society wird von öffentlichen Geldgebern unterstützt, wie dem Canada Council, dem B. C. Cultural Fund, der Stadt Vancouver, und wird über private Mitgliedschaften, Leihgebühren und Eintrittsgelder mitfinanziert. Unterstützung kam ebenso von der National Museums Corporation, der Koerner Foundation, privaten und Firmenspenden.

Das Ziel der Western Front ist es, in Vancouver ein Zentrum für die zeitgenössische Kunst zu schaffen und zu fördern, das den Bedürfnissen des Künstlers entgegenkommt und gleichzeitig der Öffentlichkeit die Möglichkeit gibt, die modernste und innovativste Kunst zu sehen. Allen beteiligten Künstlern wird eine Vergütung bezahlt. Die Western Front lädt Künstler auf der Basis eines Kuratoriums ein. Während der letzten zehn Jahre wurde sie zu einem bedeutenden Zentrum für Produktion und Präsentation aller Formen zeitgenössischer Kunst auf lokaler, nationaler und internationaler Ebene. Sie wird ausschließlich von Künstlern verwaltet und ist Mitglied der