

Sept. 10/90 meeting CLG

Title of publication:

The Case of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery: a study on visual art in Canadian culture from 1965 to 1990

or

"This is not an Art Gallery": Canadian art and the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, 1965 to 1990

In the trajectory of cultures, as in the life of individuals, a span of 25 years represents a serious measure of value. Naturally it is an occasion for feeling; but far more to the point it is an occasion for review and evaluation, for an accounting of difference.

The Carmen Lamanna Gallery will have been operating 25 years in June of 1991. Those 25 years have seen vast changes in the expectations that Canadian artists, critics, curators and their public have come to hold towards their own communities and towards the institutions of Western international culture. June 1991 marks an important moment for serious examination, and this proposed publication is intended to provide just that.

A basic premise of the authors is that throughout the period under review the Carmen Lamanna Gallery has occupied a distinctive, even unique, role as both model and catalyst for much that has shaped the expression of that period. Brydon Smith and Pierre Theberge in the sixties, A Space and the artist-run centres in the seventies, the "new" commercial galleries in the eighties - all have had close connections to the "CLG". Internationally, the Carmen Lamanna Gallery had for years the reputation of being the only "dealer" in the country, an attitude of significance given the immense power invested in dealers within the politics of contemporary art. The gallery, then, represents a valuable point of departure from which to view a period that has seen "Can-Cult" shed much of its colonial isolation and academic infancy, and establish a rapprochement with the world at large.

A second premise of this study is simply that history must be written if it is to be secured. Without a history, our expanding concerns and identifications cannot find a voice, and clearly will not find an audience. In the last ten years this fact has been increasingly recognized, and the basis for a published history is being laid. We have surprised ourselves, somewhat, by a recognition of just how rich our history is. But compared to other national cultures, and especially those in whom we have a

particular interest, we need an immensely expanded tapestry of 'discourse' and documentation. Without this, the tapestry is merely hearsay, and no culture - today - can exist on hearsay. No-one has understood this better than Carmen Lamanna; his instinct for documentation and his rigorous commitment to production and to engagement with 'the institutes' provides an ideal fulcrum by which to frame our institutional inheritance. The 'case of the CLG' must be considered central to the cultural and critical literature we require in order to define our progress through history.

Organization of the Publication:

The central focus of the publication will consist of three 'essays' by three different authors whose authority to write is based both upon their historical association with the gallery and upon their professional recognition. While each author will address a defined 'era' - the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s - none are expected to limit themselves chronologically. Rather, they will consider certain attachments of value, and the theoretical and logistical shifts which demarcate those lines of attachment. Consequently, there will be intersections, interruptions, and even contradictions operating between the different views. This is intentional: no single interpretive stance on this period is expected, or desired. The authors believe that the reader will be prepared to distinguish one for themselves on the basis of 'informed debate' and available documentation. To assist in this, the essays will be bracketed by a general contextualizing history of the gallery and by an illustrated documentary record of the exhibitions which have formulated the public perception of the gallery's concerns.

THE CARMEN LAMANNA GALLERY: 25 YEARS

An Abstract of the Essay for the 25th Anniversary Project by Walter Klepac

This essay will concentrate primarily upon the first generation of artists to be chiefly associated with the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in the early 1970s. It is my contention that taken together the body of work of these artists signals the appearance of the major tendencies that will become the hallmark of some of the most mature, original and important contemporary art in Canada throughout the decade. Because of the cogent, authoritative and sustained articulation of these tendencies, work by such artists as David Rabinowitch, Royden Rabinowitch, Ron Martin, Murray Favro and Paterson Ewen establish for itself, I shall show, a secure and distinct place within the range of significant international contemporary art of the period. This work not only clearly staked out its own territories of investigation for each individual artist, but also evolved its own syntax out of the radical formal innovations that had then recently been made by advanced art. I shall demonstrate by means of in-depth analyses of key works of these artists and others that, operating independently of one another but out of a common core of assumptions, concepts and principles, these artists reasserted the energy and fresh potential of late modern painting and sculpture as well as cleared the ground for extensions into untraditional modes of artmaking. Perhaps most importantly of all, I shall argue, their work convincingly mitigated the very distinctions between abstraction and representation which were to figure so crucially in postmodernism's conception of itself and its historical position.

The final section of the essay I am proposing will seek to argue for the persistence and continuity of a number of these tendencies within the work of

the younger generation of Gallery artists who came to maturity and critical attention in the last half of the seventies. This claim is interesting and even ironic in light of the widely acknowledged influence artists such as General Idea, Robin Collyer, Ian Carr Harris, Collete Whiten, Shirley Wiitasalo, et al. have been said to have had on the issues, multidisciplinary strategies and priorities of artists who emerged during the "postmodern" 1980s. The purpose of demonstrating this unexpected continuity is to clarify the significant differences between the work of the second generation Gallery artists and the art and critical rhetoric of the eighties. It should also suggest available options as advanced art in Canada enters the 1990s -- a time when many of the tenets of postmodernism are being rejected or ignored. These discussions should lead to a reconsideration of the concept of criticality in art today and of the necessity for a critical subject to whom that art can address.

Semiotic Strategies of the Seventies

My essay will deal with a "second generation" of artists who began exhibiting at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in the early 1970s. This was a group that was not necessarily younger than the artists who established a presence for the gallery in the late 1960s on, such as Ron Martin, David Rabinowitch and Royden Rabinowitch. The exhibiting careers of this "second generation" began under different critical conditions. If the first group could be said to have begun working as young artists under the aesthetic order and theoretical influence of minimalism, that of the "second generation" made work under the new conditions conceptualism created. This is not to say that the concerns of minimalism were dismissed in the general opening to the world of international conceptual art after minimalism's reductions. Aspects of minimalism continued to assert its presence for some of the sculptors but not purely in its formal or phenomenological bearings. New conditions, in part deriving from minimalism, included the recognition of the language structuring of the work of art and the introduction of photography into the discourse of art. Together these were to influence the trajectory of art practice to the degree that we can talk of an art of the 1970s. This history is a result of the evolving relations between language and photography, or image and text, during that period as art moved towards semiotic and representational art practices, even if in cases the practice remained sculptural.

The artists to be studied in particular include General Idea, Ian Carr-Harris, Robin Collyer, and Shirley Wiitasalo, with reference as well to Vincent Tangredi, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, Robert Fones and John Scott, but moreover to artists that seem to be connected to the first group mentioned above, such as Paterson Ewen and Murray Favro.

Philip Monk

CARMEN LAMANNA GALLERY: 25 YEARS contribution by Ian Carr-Harris

Abstract of a proposed article for inclusion in the publication.
The article would complement two other articles by Walter Klepac and Philip Monk dealing with the Gallery in the 1960s and 1970s.

Tentative title:

"FROM OBJECT TO REFERENCE - AND BACK?: EIGHT ARTISTS AND THE CARMEN LAMANNA GALLERY IN THE 1980s".

This article will investigate the position of the Gallery within contemporary art and culture since 1980.

Eight artists whose representation by the Gallery dates from the '80s will provide the focus for this investigation: John Scott, Louise Noguchi, John Brown, Rae Johnson, Marc de Guerre, Joanne Tod, Magdalen Celestino, and Robert Wiens.

While reviewing the authorities and historical "validities" of these particular artists and their work, the article will nonetheless emphasize the roles of contingency and relationship. Artists shown but not ultimately represented by the Gallery, and artists whose representation predates this time will be examined as appropriate to pursuing the question: "why these artists, and not others?" Artists outside the Gallery's history will not generally be a point of reference, but critics and curators impacting on the Gallery will be. The role of Carmen herself is, of course, pivotal, but will be viewed not as a point of personal "intuition" remote from debate, but as an arena of "calculated" decision.

The article, then, will concern itself with decisions the Carmen Lamanna Gallery has made since 1980, and what this suggests about contemporary art in Canada.

Structure:

A "discursive" approach will be adopted, employing fragments, anecdotes, quotations and so on in order to build up a "picture" adequate enough to justify the concept of contingency, but adequate enough also to justify the isolation of central concerns. From this a basic set of trajectories, within which these 8 artists can be placed, will be constructed for cultural conditions current from 1979/80 (the year John Scott and Nancy Johnson were first shown) to the present.

Included for examination will be certain institutional relationships which bear upon the Gallery - and these artists - during this period: the Canada Council, the artist-run centres, the Ontario College of Art, the Power Plant, the AGO, and the National Gallery, as well as other "private" institutions like the S.L. Simpson gallery and the Ydessea Gallery (and Foundation) in Toronto, and the Rene Blouin Gallery in Montreal. In addition, the relations between the Gallery and Vanquard, Parachute, and C Magazine will be considered.

Working Thesis: **

The Gallery has shown a consistent commitment to the tradition of the avant garde: that art, to be significant, can and must disclose its own condition while revealing the historical conditions which describe its own context. Within this consistency, however, changes of emphasis occur; the work of artists represented by the Gallery in the '70s sought generally to demonstrate and - overtly or covertly - to 'deconstruct' the context of historic (social) conditions of their culture.

This position appears to shift with the eight artists represented since 1980. It is a shift which seems on the surface perhaps at odds with much of the most publicized artwork of the time, though this may be deceptive. There is less interest in the mass-cultural 'sign' (whether mass-marketed or historically positioned) as a coherent point of departure. Instead, these artists appear interested rather more in an 'archaeology of signs' whose positioning is less mediated and (hypothetically) less suspect. That is, there seems a shift away from deconstruction (and implied social 'reconstruction') towards a re-investment in personal anxieties and fascinations which might be characterized as a new, or revived, existentialism in which actual or imagined historical 'moments' figure as image rather than as proposition.

The arguments which support this shift as progressive or at least inevitable, and those that oppose it as a form of betrayal will of course be reviewed. The question which the article means to stress, however, will be the inner contradictions this reveals about the Gallery itself, both as a matter of determining the role it continues to play in contemporary Canadian culture, and as a matter of determining the implications for the Gallery's own direction.

** A thesis is not fully developed at this time because it is expected that in the process of researching and writing certain implications concerning the Gallery's historical positioning will become more tangible than at present. It is not intended that the article should develop an a priori thesis - whether 'supportive' or 'critical' of the Gallery - for the purpose of argumentation; it is intended that the article provide a research opportunity to arrive at supportable conclusions.

Summary:

This article is conceived as a vehicle for reviewing contemporary concerns which have materialized within the visual arts of the last decade or so, and for situating the Carmen Lamanna Gallery within those concerns. The Gallery has an undisputed reputation as the longest-running and principal private venue for committed representation of Canadian artists associated with the history and theory of contemporary art. It is therefore of great interest, at a time when Canadian artists exhibit a stronger cultural independence, and find themselves competing in an expanded international field, to track the development, and evaluate the contribution, of this representation.