

Picturing the Toronto Art Community





This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted.

We wanted to be famous, glamorous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be.

We never felt we had to produce great art to be great artists. We knew great art did not bring glamour and fame. We knew we had to keep a foot in the door of art and we were conscious of the importance of berets and paint brushes. We made public appearances in painters' smocks. We knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists.

FILE, Glamour Issue, Autumn 1975

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Picturing the Toronto Art Community: The Queen Street Years

by Philip Monk

We all arrive in the middle of things. Toronto's art scene has attracted waves of artists and art-school graduates from across the country – from Winnipeg, Vancouver, Halifax and elsewhere. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the name of the area that attracted them was Queen Street.

Today in Toronto, the designation "Queen Street" is shorthand for the downtown entertainment and shopping district. Twenty years ago, before it gained currency in the media, the name offhandedly referred to an energetic art community that lived, worked and played in the neighbourhood. The current boom in administered loft-living trades on the imagined lifestyle of the artists who for the most part no longer live there and who, in fact, started to depart in the mid-1980s in the first wave of suburban discovery and commercial gentrification. This is no lament or accusation; art communities dissolve, as Toronto's of that time did. Some deconstruct due to internally motivated ideological disputes; others collapse with the departure of the generation that created the scene; all respond, inventively or disastrously, to the boom and bust of economic cycles.

Art scenes achieve a critical density by their ability to attract others – by the images of them that are produced, as well as by what is said and written. Artists create works of art and the context for their making. We call this context the art community. This scene has a social side that cannot be pictured merely through displaying the art works. Some may think the social side inconsequential to the meaning of works of art, but its dynamic can effect their creation. Other images, which tend to be those that an art community makes for itself, and then disseminates more widely, play an active role in the scene's self-realization. Theatrical, ironic, sometimes frivolous and often ephemeral, these self-fashioning im-



ages make an art scene self-conscious; but over time they are forgotten. They are left behind in the community's continuing development and consequent reorganizations, or they lose their visibility in favour of images that stabilize as collectable works of art – entering public collections and thus becoming the subject of art history. Since so many of the images from that time were published originally in magazines produced by Toronto artists, we have borrowed the magazine format here to document this Power Plant exhibition.

The first writing on this community *qua* community actually appeared, not coincidentally, at the moment that the art scene was imperceptibly dissolving, although a "crack-up" would not be so obvious until the recession of the late 1980s. The ensuing collapse of the art market and the structural realignments

Cover: Rodney Werden, *Self Portrait with Jorge Zontal* (1973); background shows screened detail from Colin Campbell's videotape, *Bad Girls* (1980)

Opposite page: Rodney Werden, *Portrait of General Idea* (1973), left to right, Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, AA Bronson

This page: General Idea, *Towards an Audience Vocabulary* (1978), part of Tele-Performance, photos by Jorge Zontal



The art scene was, as video artist Colin Campbell wrote about a participant lip-synching Petula Clark's hit, Downtown, for Tele-Performance (1978):

more downtown than Petula ever intended.



Pounding their fists on the floor to the lyrics, "Don't tell me what to do, Don't tell me what to say ..." the Clichettes were subconsciously helping to hammer out part of the foundation for a new woman's cultural community.

Clive Robertson, *Fuse*, Dec/Jan 1986

necessitated by a changing political climate only further disheartened an untethered, almost unfocused scene. A number of articles, published in *Fuse* and *C* in 1986, assumed an evolution in the art community towards some form of social responsibility – "Higher Social Work" *Globe and Mail* critic John Mays facetiously called it. In an article – worryingly and prophetically titled, "What Ever Happened to Queen St. West?" – cultural historian Rosemary Donegan wrote:

With the coming of age of the Queen St. West scene, Toronto of the 1980's appears to have developed its own official 'art scene,' full of budding potential and style. The scene not only focuses on music and the visual arts, but is also associated with theatre, design, fashion, and the perennial favorites – eating, drinking, and dancing. In recent years, the community has also developed a consciousness of black, feminist, gay, and lesbian issues.

Fuse, Fall 1986

At the same time, Clive Robertson retrospectively wrote of the Clichettes' first lip-sync performance (pictured here) of Leslie Gore's pop hit, *You Don't Own Me*:

Looking back, it can be argued that the birth of the Clichettes coincided with the birth, or public emergence of Toronto's recent progressive cultural scene. For 1978–79 was the year when the gay community would look for and receive cross-community support in the first court battle of The Body Politic. And 1978 was also the year when Immican, the Regent's Park Caribbean community organization, emerged publicly as the generator of dub poetry and reggae music. At the same time, the decade-old downtown artist community was about to make a tentative leap into the larger cultural milieu, aided by external allegiances of gender, sexuality and class politics.

Fuse, Dec/Jan 1986

In 1978, as the Clichettes' performance proved, cultural criticism could be fun, too, rather than earnestly moralistic, and control of the means of representation could mean a playful engagement with the "oppressor." In 1986, however, the model for the art community to which these writers adhered seemed to demand responsible forms of organization and the delegation of representation away from self-fashioning images and toward inclusion of the practices of others (those believed, traditionally, to be marginalized by art communities, even ones in formation). Especially frivolous images are disdained in the subtle iconoclasm that bureaucratic organization breeds. Such attitudes, implicit in the above articles, are sharply delineated in Dot Tuer's 1986 article on the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC), where she counterposed General Idea's ironic semiotics to CEAC's Marxist political agenda. CEAC's "political and social ideals," rather than any body of images, is the basis on which a Toronto history should be written, Tuer contends. General Idea's image manipulation – whereby, in their own words, "We moved in on history and occupied images, emptying them of meaning, reducing them to shells. We then filled these shells with glamour, the creampuff innocence of idiots, the naughty silence of sharkfins slicing oily water" – was dismissed by Tuer (and others, including myself) as a capitalist model.

At the risk of contradicting my own past by a similar flirtation with "the naughty silence of sharkfins slicing oily water," I am re-presenting such dismissed images, whose production coincided



Lip Sync & Air Guitar

Performance in Toronto grew out of the art community's association with experimental theatre in the early 1970s and the literary programme of A Space combined with parodies of popular-culture forms, notably fashion and pop music. Examples of the latter during the 1970s were General Idea's 1970 and 1971 *Miss General Idea Pageants*, Dawn Eagle's and Granada Gazelle's *Glamazon* (1975), David Buchan's *Geek Chic* (1976) and *Fashion Burn* (at CEAC's *Crash 'n' Burn* club, 1977) .

with the period of the Toronto art community's self-creation during the 1970s and early 1980s, and suggesting that they are implicated in that self-creation. Even if they had to be unearthed from archives or dislodged, as if from memory, from artists' studios, they are essentially affiliated with the lasting artifacts of that period. Together, they offer a unique portrayal of a period when the art community in Toronto improvised itself. While there has been a tendency in Canada, perhaps rightly so, to fetishize the image of production and distribution in the mantra of the "artist-run," you will not find here images, archival or otherwise, of production (whether studio or artists' collective) or of bureaucratic organization (whether display or dissemination). Contrary to such dour self-effacement, this exhibition brings forth the shining images – if sometimes dishevelled or decadent – of the people – practitioners and habitués – and places that made this scene.

Opposite page: the first performance by the original Clichettes (Elizabeth Chitty, Janice Hladki, Louise Garfield, Johanna Householder) at Tele-Performance (1978)
 Above: General Idea photographed by Murray Ball, *FILE* (Summer 1978)
 Below, left to right: David Buchan as Lamonte Del Monte performs with the Fruit Cocktails in Tele-Performance (1978), photo by Rodney Werden; page from *Art Communication Edition*, #6 (1977); photo by Isobel Harry from "Fashion Burn" at CEAC (1977)

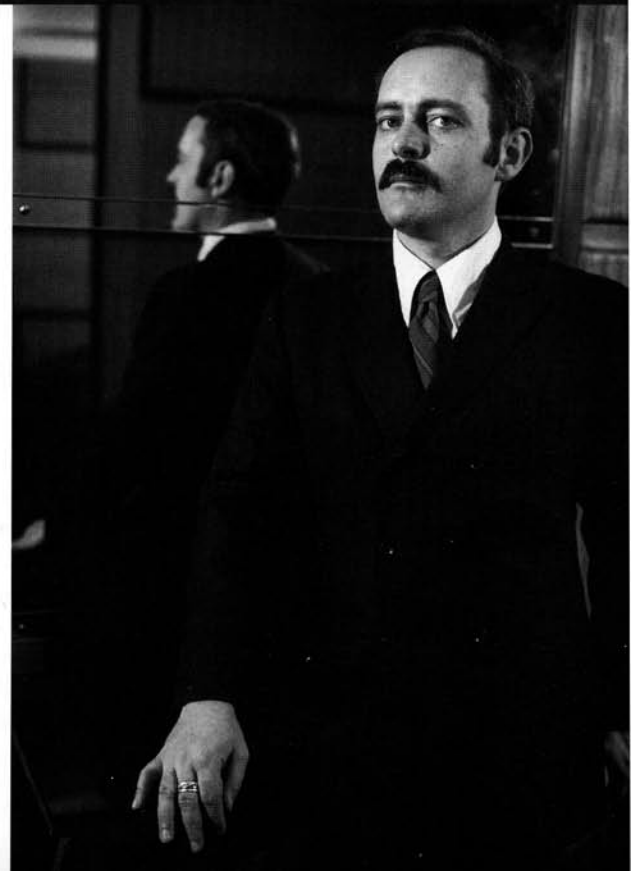




Portraits

Under the rubric of portraiture, “Picturing the Toronto Art Community” combines art works and archival material of varying status to create an image, but not scrapbook or photo-album, of the scene. By not distinguishing between these images in terms of status, we begin to see how the images may have functioned for that scene in picturing itself. Portraiture is the common element among the diverse material of magazines, book covers, ads, posters, artworks, studio portraits, film, videotapes, performance documentation and “snapshots” of the scene. All use photographic images of members of the art community, much like advertising, as the vehicle for their statements or promotion.

These images might be real portraits, as in the typologies of Arnaud Maggs and the three-minute super-8 portrait-films by Eldon Garnet (1976–86), or invented, as in Lamonte





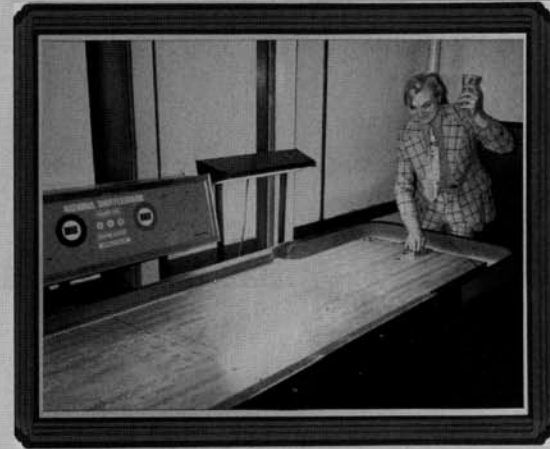
Del Monte's fictitious family (made up of art-community members) in David Buchan's *Roots*. The works might involve the artists themselves, as in GI's self-portraits, or others, as a loose ensemble of players, in various artists' videotapes.

Photographers create portraits of their social scenes or cliques and they also contribute to the making of others' works, as the captions for many of the images here show.

Opposite page, top to bottom: Arnaud Maggs, detail from *48 Views* (1981-83), pictured here is video artist Colin Campbell; Rodney Werden, *Portrait of John Bentley Mays* (1973)

Above: Kim Tomczak's photograph of video artist and Cabana Room co-founder, Susan Britton (1979)

Right: four fictional portraits (photographed by George Whiteside) for David Buchan's *Roots* (1979), collection the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, character portrayals by, clockwise from top left, Richard Banks, Chloe Town, Randy Gledhill, Tanya Mars



The art scene was a product of the 1970s, a fusion of two generations of artists – as countercultural hippie values from the beginning of the decade combined by its end with postmodernist, new-wave ones.



Clockwise from top: Jorge Zontal, contact sheet of Zontal and Werden; Rodney Werden, *Portrait of Sandy Stagg* (1973); George Whiteside – drag portraits of self and Tom Dean (1979)





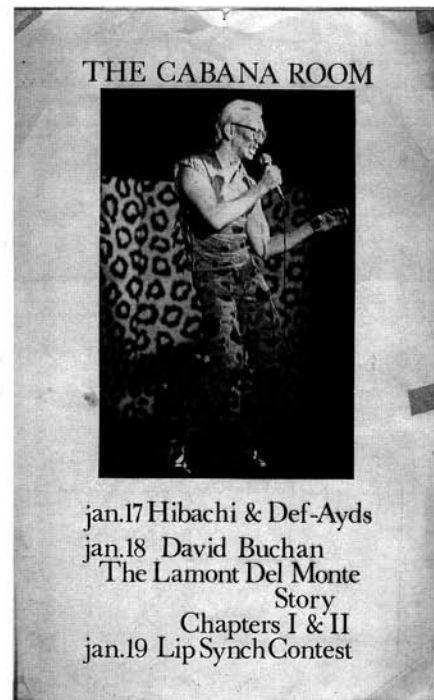
Spaces

In lazy, sunny days of distant origin, at a time when living was easy, Queen Street was a string of hippie haunts, wino flops, greasy spoons and after-hours booze cans. Artists lived there in apartments converted to studios and in lofts, as they had in the Queen & Spadina area for years. "Queen Street" took shape as existing artist-run institutions moved to the area at the end of the 1970s – the Music Gallery, CEAC, Art Metropole, A Space – and new spaces opened up – YYZ, Mercer Union, the Cabana Room. (See chronology.)

Much of the energy of the times was liberated by two spectacular blow-ups in 1978. First, federal and provincial funding for CEAC was cut off that summer in response to its leftist (some said infantile) posturing in support of the Italian Red Brigades by advocating art-world knee-capping. Then, at its annual general meeting that September, A Space's board was dissolved (along with its previous orientation) and Toronto's oldest artist-run centre was refitted for a move to Queen Street the following year.

With their focus on international avant-gardism, both A Space and CEAC were seen by younger Toronto artists and by those working in more traditional media to be exclusive, self-serving and unresponsive. The blow-ups functioned to fragment and to expand the art scene, creating ambi-

This page, clockwise from top left:
 Peter MacCallum, *Spadina Hotel at Night* (1979); poster for the Cabana Room; Peter MacCallum, *Marien Lewis and Andy Patterson, "Death of Television," performance at the Cabana Room* (1979)



tious new spaces and venues for all forms of art. Significantly, some of the video and performance programming joined music in bars – first, at the Cabana Room (co-founded in July 1979 by Susan Britton and Robin Wall), and then at the Cameron Public House and in the back room of the Rivoli, spaces that became the main hang-outs for the art community.

The boundaries of this new community were created by participants and onlookers travelling from performances at the Music Gallery or A Space to events at 31 Mercer Street or the Cabana Room (and later the Spadina Hotel's Subway Room), from openings at Mercer Union, YYZ and commercial galleries – such as the Ydessa Gallery (above the Rivoli) and the S.L. Simpson Gallery (just west from the Cameron) – to nightly beer, theory and gossip at the Cameron.





Above, top to bottom: three views of The Cameron Public House by Peter MacCallum – Queen Street facade (1987), the front and back rooms respectively (both 1982)
 Right: advertisement in *Impulse* (Spring 1982); photograph by Joanne Hovey of Mojah and Handsome Ned (1982)

Spaces

1976

- Music Gallery: 30 St. Patrick Street, January
- Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC): 15 Duncan Street, September (to May 1978)

1977

- Artist Cooperative Toronto (ACT): 424 Wellington Street West
- Crash 'n' Burn: punk club at CEAC, May–August

1978

- Art Metropole; Association National of Non-profit Artist-run Centres (ANNPAC, publisher *Parallelogramme*); Artons Publishing (*Centerfold / Fuse*): 217 Richmond Street West, Fall
- The Funnel: 507 King Street East, November (started September 1977 as part of CEAC, now separate, moved then closed mid-80s)
- Rumour Publications: 720 Queen Street West (moved to 31 Mercer Street with *Only Paper Today* 1979)

1979

- Y Y Z: 567 Queen Street West, February (moved to 116 Spadina Avenue in 1981)
- A Space: 299 Queen Street West, March
- Cabana Room at the Spadina Hotel: 460 King Street West, July
- Mercer Union: 29 Mercer Street, July (moved to 333 Adelaide Street West in 1982)

1980

- Grange Arts and Performance (GAP): 11 Grange Avenue, March
- David Bellman Gallery: 134 Peter Street
- Yarlow / Salzman Gallery: 185 Richmond Street West

1981

- The Cameron Public House: 408 Queen Street West (new owners: Herb Tookey, Paul and Anne-Marie Sanella)
- ChromaZone: 320 Spadina Avenue, September

1982

- Art Resource Centre (ARC): 789 Queen Street West (moved to 658 Queen Street West in 1984)
- Ydessa Gallery: 334 Queen Street West, February
- Galleries at 80 Spadina Avenue: Olga Korper, Wynick/Tuck, Fela Grunwald
- Eye Revue Gallery: 255 Shaw Street

1983

- S.L. Simpson Gallery: 515 Queen Street West, May
- Women's Cultural Building's (the WCB) festival, "Building Women's Culture": 563 Queen Street West, summer
- V tape: 11 Grange Avenue, Summer

1984

- United Media Art Studies (UMAS): 454 King Street West, June
- CITY-TV purchases Ryerson Building, 299 Queen Street West, evicting: A Space, Trinity Square Video, Toronto Community Videotex, Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, *Fuse* and a number of artists from their studios

1986

- Cold City Gallery: 30 Duncan Street, September





The social scene influenced the making of work itself, as in Colin Campbell's Bad Girls, serialized for presentation at the Cabana Room. Set in a fictitious Cabana Room, Bad Girls tells the picaresque tale of a suburbanite (a cross-dressed Colin Campbell) attracted to the downtown art scene at the Cabana Room and becoming a star. The co-founder of the real Cabana Room, Susan Britton, co-stars as Miss Susan.

"We read Adele Freedman's article in the Globe and Mail about the Cabana Room."



"I remember that night so well. When we came to his studio and - well - he told me that nude photography was, you know ..."



Above: George Whiteside's ChromaZone Fashion Portraits (1981) picturing, left to right, Eldon Garnet, Andy Fabo, Eleanor Galbraith
Right: video stills from Colin Campbell's *Bad Girls* (1980)

"toot toot ... beep beep ... toot toot ... bad girls ... beep beep ... talking about bad girls ..."





MONDO CANE KAMA SUTRA
DOG EAT DOG EAT DOG

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...BONE NJIT
SPARKLE lights up Toronto night life
meeting and meeting audiences at the
Gerrard, Spadina's and the Franks.
Billed as a musical spectacle.
BONE HOUR
Between Spadina and Spadina, author
Philip Monk, bright and behind camera
his spirit is in the air. He looks
to come to Spadina at his own expense.
(page 36)



Magazines

1970

- *Image Nation*
- *Impressions*
- *Impulse* (last issue in 1990, brief incarnations as *M5V* and then *Work*)

1972

- *FILE* (last issue in 1989)

1973

- *Proof Only*

1974

- *Only Paper Today* (previously *Proof Only*, last issue in 1980)

1976

- *Art Communication Edition*
- *Parallelogramme* (last issue in 1995, reincarnated as *MIX*)

1977

- *Artists Review* (last issue in 1980)
- *Strike* (previously *Art communications Edition*, last issue in 1978)

1978

- *Centerfold's* first Toronto edition (moved from Calgary where first edition was 1976)

1980

- *Fuse* (previously *Centerfold*)

1983

- *Incite* (previously *Image Nation*, last issue in 1984)
- *C* (previously *Impressions*)

Clockwise from bottom left:

David Buchan, *Under the Weather* (photograph by Paul Orenstein), set in the Cameron, published in *FILE* as an advertisement for the Cameron Public House (1984); *FILE* cover (1983); "bzzz" gossip column with photos by Jorge Zontal of entertainer, Sparkle and critic, Philip Monk, *FILE* (1982); *Fuse* cover with photo by David Hlynsky (1985).



"...Under the Weather" from David Buchan's *On the Rocks*.

Photography by Paul Orenstein

THE CAMERON PUBLIC HOUSE



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