

## Museums and Collaboration

Since 1989, when the CMA dedicated both its annual conference and a theme issue of *Muse* to the collaborative process, more and more museums have entered into collaborative projects.

As management structures are changing with a growing emphasis on team work, museum staff are collaborating on the development of research, exhibitions and programming. Museums are collaborating with one another to create larger projects than they could manage alone or to develop travelling exhibitions drawn from several collections. Curators and educators are collaborating with communities, artists and collectors to interpret artifacts from different perspectives. The list goes on. A growing sense of social responsibility, the importance of demonstrating the museum's benefit to society, and ever increasing financial pressures have converged, fuelling the trend towards collaborative initiatives.

With the following article by Annette Hurtig, *Muse* is initiating a series of articles on collaboration. Annette shows how changes in the conception "of art as idea and action, as information or investigation" has changed relationships between artists and museums. She shares her experience developing collaborative exhibitions with artists while at the Glenbow Museum and concludes that museums must be prepared to accept the challenges and risks involved in developing true collaborations. *Muse* welcomes comments and suggestions for the series.

CATHERINE COLE,  
MUSE EDITORIAL BOARD

# COLLABORATIONS WITH ARTISTS: A Wake-Up Call For Sleeping Giants

BY ANNETTE HURTIG

**I**N THIS ERA of rapid and ubiquitous change it has become a cliché to say that change is the only constant. Yet many Canadian museums remain essentially unchanged. Even with the introduction of a corporate ethos or new communications technologies, some museums still seem to be mausoleums. And although organizational structures and workloads in these institutions may be altered, public perception continues to identify them as things of the past.

Meanwhile, contemporary art has undergone immense change. Since at least the mid '60s, artists have been struggling with practical and theoretical concerns that have irreversibly shifted the nature of art, its function, and its formal, social and political possibilities. These shifts in the art world, which have had an impact on museums, can be traced to the crisis of modernism, to the global ferment and social breakdown that led to the unrest of 1968. At that time, a widespread sense of social despair and impotence about solving crucial political, economic and environmental problems, most of which are still with us today, provoked a rejection of established ways of thinking. Investigations of alternative approaches in every field of human endeavour followed. Artists too considered new approaches and objectives. The acceler-

ated pace of innovation that ensued was marked by renewed interest in the role of the artist in society, by an impetus to make art relevant and accessible to various publics, and by a distaste for and rejection of the intensifying fetishization and commodification of the art object and the artist. These concerns prefigured those of museums today.

Refusing the conventional limits of fine art, seeking broader audiences and relevancy by situating themselves and their work in the social and the quotidian, artists explored new materials and methodologies. They used electronic media, computer technologies, popular culture. They mixed media and genres, crossed disciplinary and cultural boundaries. They created happenings, actions, performances, posters, magazines, books and video, audio and earth works. Rejecting traditional ideas about the autonomy of the art object, about authenticity and authorship, some artists collaborated or worked collectively.

The "dematerialized" art object that ensued from the '70s art of technology, environment and idea was often not intended for the museum. Perceived as an elite sanctum with a limited audience, or as an overly expensive storage bin devoid of life,



Barbara Todd with a banner made by her and her son for "Art in the March," an event organized in conjunction with the *Rita McKeough: an excavation* project. Some 1000 lovers of art celebrated International Women's Day 1993 by taking to the streets with anything they "could push, pull, carry or perform." The march, which was the largest event of its kind ever held in Calgary, ended up at the Glenbow Museum, where many participants visited the McKeough exhibition. Photo: Judy Cheung

Barbara Todd porte la bannière réalisée avec l'aide de son fils lors de *Art in the March* (L'art en marche), un événement organisé dans le cadre du projet *Rita McKeough: an excavation*. Un millier d'amis de l'art ont célébré la Journée internationale des femmes de 1993 en envahissant les rues avec tout ce qu'ils « pouvaient pousser, tirer, porter ou performer ». La marche, la plus importante du genre à avoir lieu à Calgary, s'est terminée devant le Glenbow Museum où beaucoup en ont profité pour visiter l'exposition McKeough. Photo : Judy Cheung

the museum was increasingly disdained as a rarefied and uninteresting site.

With the advent of feminist, queer and post-colonial thinking through the '70s and '80s, deconstructive and critical investigations informed the new and hybridized postmodern art practices. In the '80s and '90s, interest in cultural and identity politics and the politics of representation resulted in art that overtly challenged established codes and categories, canonical texts and master narratives. The museum was not immune to these queries: it became the topos for critical examinations by theorists, curators and artists.

Art as idea, as action, as information or as investigation, rather than as product, are conceptions that have proven their viability. And one of the firm assumptions of contemporary

art—its criticality—is rooted in the rejection of the status quo. Art's new forms are unwieldy and difficult to categorize. Because today's art cannot be treated as mere artifact, object or commodity, it is often too risky and unpredictable for an organization concerned with developing and selling product. It should therefore come as no surprise that, three decades later and still perceived as bastions of the status quo, some museums have difficulty accommodating either the expanded range of contemporary art's possibilities or its subversive intent.

Some contemporary art needs no collection to house it, since it can exist simultaneously in various places. Furthermore, because art today is a global affair and its discourses are international in character, expanded possibilities for its production, presenta-

tion and dissemination have evolved. With the evolution of artist-run centres, Canadian artists who seek international audiences no longer need to depend on museums for the presentation or validation of their work. Moreover, most artists are extremely articulate; quite frequently they need not await official approval here to sanction their work for export, especially since so much of it exists as, or can be translated into, a photographic or verbal medium. And because they have concerns about how their work is presented, artists now expect to participate in exhibition planning.

These theoretical and practical shifts in art have implications for the relationships between artists, curators, museums and audiences. Curators can no longer operate on





Glenbow Museum

*Take it to the Teeth*, an installation work by Rita McKeough presented at the Glenbow from January 30 to April 4, 1993.

*Take it to the Teeth*, une installation créée par Rita McKeough au Glenbow Museum du 30 janvier au 4 avril 1993.

the basis of connoisseurship or authority vested in them by the institution. In the contemporary art world, curators collaborate with artists to ensure their agency and authority while also ensuring that the organization's goals are met. Although such innovations fly in the face of traditional museum practice, they are crucial to the survival of museums: they provide clues in the museum's search for ways to make itself more interesting, open and transparent. If we hope to survive this era of rapid change and intense fiscal restraint and accountability, collaborations with artists may present ways for museums to evolve into vital cultural resources.

A good case in point is *Rita McKeough: an excavation*, presented from January to April 1993 at the Glenbow Museum. Canadian artist Rita McKeough has developed an acute analysis of the conditions of socialized violence against women and the related contempt for sexual and other differences inscribed in Western culture, problems relevant

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to the everyday lives of many people. Deconstructing and critiquing the foundations of our social relations, working toward an ethical politics of agency, Rita McKeough's work challenges and disrupts the conventions, the symbolic codes and categories, and the decorum of the status quo. Rita McKeough builds domestic spaces within galleries, using textual, audio and, recently, performance components to animate the site with the voices of women and children. Resisting fetishization and commodification, her site-specific and ephemeral installations exist only for the duration of an exhibition. And yet, her work has a tangible and enduring

effect because her methodology is collaborative. By authorizing each of the many participants, she ensures that a multiplicity of voices are heard within the work. Collaboration is indeed central to her project as an artist, and to the meaning of her art.

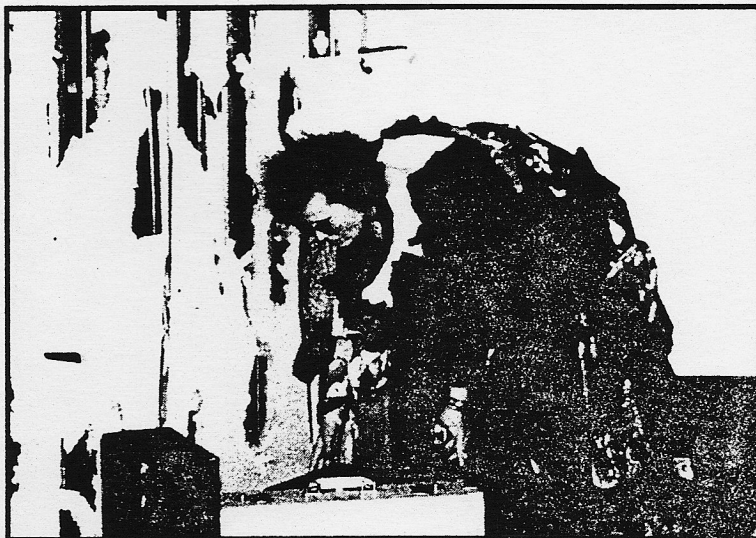
Initiated by Vera Lemecha, my predecessor as Contemporary Art Curator at the Glenbow, *Rita McKeough: an excavation* challenged the museum in several ways. Exceeding conventional exhibition parameters and objectives, it entailed a six-month artist's residency, the production of a new site-specific, multidisciplinary, multimedia performance/installation, a survey of the artist's previous work, formal and informal supplementary activities and events, and an adjunct publication package composed of a two-tape video compilation documenting previous and current projects together with a printed catalogue containing the artist's text, a curatorial essay and ten additional texts from commissioned contributors. It did not involve autonomous objects. Instead, the entire project depended on the artist's residency, her presence in the museum and her production processes on and off site. Rita cast, rehearsed and performed in the new work and in the production of its audio components. She coordinated and participated in the technical set-up and the construction of the new installation, as well as in the editing of the audio and video materials. She took part in decisions regarding the content selection, the presentation format and the design concept and she met with preparatory, design, audio/visual, publication, education, curatorial, executive and security staff to keep them informed and address their concerns. For many staff members, these meetings and negotiations were their first experience of consulting and collaborating with an artist. Some were often uncomfortable, possibly because lines of authority were unclear. Perhaps because it represented the unpredictable and unknowable, the project became derisively known within the Glenbow as "the exhibition from hell." And, unfortunately, it often met with obstructionism: for example, early morning meetings would be called at

the end of the previous day, when the artist and I, the project leader, were working off site and could not be notified. In fact, during the preparatory phase we (Rita and I) often worked on and off site, at odd hours, often late into the night. The lack of understanding and flexibility in regard to the working habits of artists—their tendency to work at night and the necessity of working outside of the museum (in their studio, for example)—was symptomatic of the institution's difficulty in working in true collaboration with outside partners, in accommodating the lives of others.

The *Rita McKeough* project engaged outsiders too, paid and unpaid, who could not be normalized, naturalized, formalized or otherwise contained. The exhibition involved people from several sectors of the Canadian cultural milieu: a costume designer and fabricator, several singers, dancers, musicians and technicians, and audio and video producers from Calgary and elsewhere. EM/Media, an artist's video production and presentation centre, provided video editing expertise and facilities. Truck, another artist-run centre, donated rehearsal space. Local artists provided visitors with room and board and transportation. Other goods and services were donated by individuals, small local businesses and a transnational corporation. And many friends and colleagues travelled to Calgary to participate in the opening events and celebrations.

The Glenbow benefited immensely from the collaborative aspects of the project. The museum staff was exposed and introduced to formalized and unformalized voluntary collaborative working methods. The museum's engaged audience was expanded. Community-based, organizational and individual initiatives within the museum followed. The project opened the museum, made it seem

more accessible, more interested in cultural and social issues, less solipsistic, less internalized. Many new relationships ensued, relationships that endured and spawned further initiatives, partnering ventures and other collaborations. Among these was a thoughtful and considered critique of the museum initiated by two of the local artists who provided considerable voluntary support for the Rita McKeough project: Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello.



Rita McKeough giving a performance at the Glenbow.

Performance de Rita McKeough au Glenbow.

Judy Cheung

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As artists, Calgary residents, and members of the Glenbow, both women feel they are stakeholders in the museum. Both attended the Alberta College of Art, where they were introduced to a range of possibilities for artists. Upon graduation, they determined to use their skills and resources in collaborative, cross-cultural, community-based projects informed by feminist theory and designed to bring attention to the social conditions of women. These projects provide an example of the expanded possibilities for art today. Among them was *The Feminist Works From Glenbow's Art Collection*, an exhibition held at the museum from

March 1994 to March 1995 and which Joan and Mary Lou initiated as the organizers of *Feminist Spin*, a city-wide, cross-cultural, community-based visual art project held in March 1994. Their fourth such project, *Feminist Spin* brought together public and commercial galleries, secondary and post-secondary teaching institutions, and several media venues and public sites in a month-long program of exhibitions, performances, lectures, panel discussions, workshops, screenings and social events, all with free or sliding scale/pay-what-you-can admissions. It drew participants and audiences from a broad cross-section of the city's population, many of whom had not previously entered an art gallery or museum.

Because the Glenbow is promoted as the repository, custodian and presenter of Calgary's largest art collection, it was important to Joan and Mary Lou that the museum participate in *Feminist Spin*. As stake-

holders in the museum, they requested and secured the museum's agreement to exhibit its feminist art works. Joan, Mary Lou and I agreed to collaboratively co-curate the exhibition. As a result of many lengthy and lively debates about our curatorial thesis and our selection criteria, we co-authored a curatorial statement, a portion of which follows:

*In our exploration of the Glenbow's art collection [of 16,964 pieces] we sought works by women that somehow critiqued established conventions of mastery, monumentality, heroism, seamlessness, transcendence and the authentic autonomous fine art object. We looked for works that examine the nature of power, gender and sexuality. Or that privilege the female voice or the domestic arena. Or refer to craft or other realms traditionally marked as feminine and thereby devalued. Or artworks that investigate the attribution of symbolic and social subjecthood, or that consider*



the body as a construction site of identity. We located and identified 14 feminist pieces, the works by Canadian artists Gisele Amantea, Kyra Fisher, Susan Ford, Faye HeavyShield, Colleen Kerr, Rita McKeough, Colleen Philippi, Mary Scott and Helen Sebelius presented in this exhibition.

Joan and Mary Lou's discovery of the dearth of feminist works, or works by women, in the Glenbow's art collection raised questions about collecting procedures and how an institution's collecting mandate and policies are determined. As we wrote in our exhibition note to *The Feminist Works*, the Glenbow's art collection "has been put together along well established and purposely restrictive guidelines.... extrapolated from the Glenbow's mandate [to] focus on the northwest.... The collection may be characterized as one rooted in a regionalized connoisseurship as practised by its founder, trustees, donors and curators. Consequently certain modes of art production that have been more recently or perhaps less commonly practised and appreciated locally are not yet represented. For example the collection does not yet document the late 20th-century diversification of art's forms and meanings...." This explanation was also a kind of manifesto that provides some guidelines for programming that would enliven the museum, bring it into play with more diversified and already interested audiences and with today's cultural and social discourses. *The Feminist Works* exhibition and *Mireille Perron: How Many Times ... ?*, a concurrent solo show scheduled as a further contribution to *Feminist Spin*, and one that also entailed several kinds of collaboration, provoked considerable interest: they were extensively viewed by the feminist community; they were well utilized by faculty and students from the art college and the university; and the March 1, 1993 issue of the monthly magazine *Alberta Report* considered them controversial enough to a warrant a reprimand in a feature article.

The lack of representation of feminist and other sorts of critical art

forms in the Glenbow's art collection or its programming may reflect another kind of problem—the common inclination of museums to avoid any controversy that could conceivably jeopardize their revenues from government and private-sector sources. Even though controversy by definition means excited interest, and excited interest means admissions revenues, the provocative or contro-



"Art in the March" participants at the Glenbow.

Des participants de L'art en marche au Glenbow.

Judy Cheung

versial nature of much contemporary art may make it too hot for some museums to want to handle.

Moreover, dealing with hot topics and big questions would require a major shift in the way many museums operate. Museums arose out of the humanist tradition. Rather than social issues and political concerns, they have traditionally focused on objects in their collection, with an emphasis on questions largely internal to the art work or the collection. They customarily examine art in formalist terms to establish its place in the art historical record. Confirming provenance and tracing influences are therefore typical concerns. However, this approach has been subjected to numerous assaults recently: from art movements that "dematerialize" art to contemporary critical theorists who have challenged notions of "authorship," argued for multiple readings of the same artistic "text," and raised questions about the role of social factors in canon formation and perpetuation.<sup>1</sup> Museums

that ignore these critiques of the humanist approach, that fail to confront the ways in which different social worlds penetrate and interact with one another run the risk of persisting in a hermetic view and, furthermore, of perpetuating the perception that they are pampered, expensive, overindulged but ineffectual and somnambulant giants.

Attempting to name the ways in which they want to evolve, some museums are now nominally situating themselves in the "knowledge industry" as knowledge-based businesses. This sort of reference indicates the persistence of certain problems. It suggests that knowledge can reside in a museum or that, object-like and static, knowledge can be packaged, purchased and thus possessed like any other commodity item. These museums are mistaken in thinking their audiences want factoids, sound or info bites, commodities or entertainment from them when there are cheaper and easier sources of entertainment: at home on TV or, for those who can afford it,

at Disney World. Today's audiences are aware that knowledge is actively acquired through a myriad of experiential information sources. Museums can expand the kinds of experiences they offer and increase their audiences by engaging in collaborations with artists.

Such collaborations are challenging. They entail unpredictable risks. They require openness, transparency, and big alterations to existing protocols, procedures and attitudes. But they are guaranteed to awaken a sleeping giant. ■

Formerly curator of the Gallery at Western Front (Vancouver), Executive Director of Mercer Union (Toronto), Director/Curator at Art Metropole (Toronto), all artist-run centres, Annette Hurtig was Contemporary Art Curator at the Glenbow Museum from 1992 to 1994. She is currently residing on the West Coast, where she works as an independent curator and writer.

ENDNOTE

1. See Steven C. Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions*. Routledge, London, 1992.