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No Great Exhibition: On the Continued Absence of a Major Exhibition of Canadian Art

The question is: what is a great exhibition? One could answer this question in a number of different ways. You could make disparaging remarks about temporary exhibitions and say something like: I prefer permanent installations such as Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, just outside of Quemado, New Mexico, or his *Earth Room* in SoHo, or Donald Judd's installations in Marfa, Texas. Or one could also accept the question and answer: the last really great exhibition I saw was Zurich-based curator Philip Ursprung's *Herzog & de Meuron: Archaeology of the Mind* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal that took place in 2003.

Where few exhibitions of art or architecture are conceived to be experimental as exhibitions, *Herzog & de Meuron: Archaeology of the Mind* distinguishes itself as a rarity. Architecture as it exists is impossible to exhibit, so most curators display finished models, plans, text panels, and audio-visual documents. *Archaeology of the Mind* resists these conventions and instead presents an enigmatic yet satisfying solution to the difficulties inherent in the curating and exhibition of architecture: it hinges on a conceit adopted by Philip Ursprung in collaboration with the Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron: an exhibition assembled by "archaeologists of the future" who have descended on the archives and collections of the architects and attempted to organize it. These nameless "archaeologists" claim not to understand much about the contents of Herzog and de Meuron's archive, but, like all curators, they participate in the institutional drive to categorize, display, and interpret.

The "archival" material, representative of the process of making architecture, is further augmented by a diverse assemblage of objects including toys, photographs, insect collections, Chinese scholars' rocks, fossils, commercial catalogues borrowed by numerous private and institutional collections, as well as works of art, such as Andy Warhol's camouflage *Self-Portrait* (1986), Gerhard Richter's abstract painting *612-1 Untitled* (1986) and Donald Judd's cadmium red wood and brass box

Untitled (1964). This fanciful construction allows the curatorial team to reveal the architect's creative process and to display its attendant accumulated waste previously stored in the archive. Listed by the architects as project 183 in this catalogue (each of their projects is assigned a number), *Herzog & De Meuron: Archaeology of the Mind* is considered to be a work. *Natural History*, the accompanying publication, is beautiful and intelligent. This is Jeff Wall's photograph *Dominus Estates Vineyards* from 1999; it was used strategically to say: this is an exhibition about architecture at some remove. You can see the Herzog and de Meuron structure in the distance. Some have described the picture as the most reluctant architectural photograph ever taken.

However, given the international context of this panel, I want to look at a particular kind of Canadian event: the significant group exhibition. By this I mean an exhibition that has been important for artists, curators, and critics across the country, one that included strong and ambitious art and that was accompanied by a comprehensive publication. Let's say an exhibition where, in the very least, the country's professionals took notice and there was some sort of consensus. I think most Canadian art professionals will agree that in its time *Aurora Borealis* was a great exhibition of contemporary art. It was organized by guest curators René Blouin (now a formidable Canadian dealer), Normand Thériault, and Claude Gosselin. It focused on installation, a medium deemed to be of particular importance and topical at that time, and included work by thirty Canadian artists, most of whom were from the Montreal and Toronto areas and a few others from further east and west. *Aurora Borealis* was not an institutional venture, but one organized independently by the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, under the presidency of Claude Gosselin.

Aurora Borealis opened on June 15, 1985 and ran through to September 30, 1985. Place du Parc—a shopping mall, hotel, and apartment complex in the urban core of downtown Montreal—provided its unused basement retail space free of charge. The budget of \$500,000, huge at the time, was provided by various sources, including the Canada Council and various provincial and municipal government departments as well as corporate and private sponsorships. Geneviève

Cadieux's *Ravissement*, Betty Goodwin's *Moving Towards Fire*, and Vera Frenkel's *The Business of Frightened Desires (Or the Making of a Pornographer)* are all examples of works from 1985 created for the exhibition. René Blouin, one of the exhibition's curators, had seen Kasper König's *Von hier aus* in Cologne and felt many Canadian artists were working in a similar idiom. Such an exhibition, he has said, "allowed [him] to dream." I saw *Aurora Borealis*, but I was not in the position to tell you whether or not it was an important exhibition in the history of contemporary Canadian art. Having never before seen such a large exhibition of contemporary art, I had a beginner's understanding with no point of comparison. Artists and art world professionals swamped the opening. I went with a couple of artist friends. We looked around a bit and then left early to attend an action in a nearby empty lot where local artists were burning paintings in protest.

I returned to the show several times, as my postwar art professor had assigned a research paper based on works in the exhibition. I was simultaneously confounded and seduced on each visit. I loved the humour and homage inherent in General Idea's Javex bottle snowbirds that comprised *Snowbird: A Public Sculpture for the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion* (1985). I had studied film history, knew of Michael Snow's films, and had lived in Toronto in 1982 when Eaton's Christmas promotion featured red bows tied around the geese's necks. The *Flight Stop* installation—Snow's portrayal of a flock of Canada geese in flight—made for a huge scandal. General Idea played on the banality of the location; they parodied the grammar of public sculpture for private places. One immediately compared the beige, claustrophobic architectural space of Place du Parc with the grander airy space of Toronto's Eaton Centre. I wrote my paper on Liz Magor's *Production* (1980-1985), and at the time was probably attracted to the visible process and accumulation of labour in the work. In conjunction with my art history classes focusing on contemporary art, *Aurora Borealis* triggered my interest in the curatorial field. From this point on, I wanted to work with contemporary art. This is the first reason why I think *Aurora Borealis* constitutes a great exhibition.

In retrospect, *Aurora Borealis* made a highly significant contribution to the history of contemporary art exhibitions in Canada. It represents an exuberant mo-

ment in the nation's history where curators chose to explore the subject of installation by Canadian artists, rather than ask what it means to be Canadian and fulfill regional quotas.

Those of us in Canada know how rare it is to see serious, large-scale contemporary exhibitions of ambitious works by this country's artists. I use "serious" because I want to stress the importance of a strong thesis accompanied by a substantial catalogue (by this I mean at least an inch thick). Such exhibitions and their companion catalogues ensure a discourse about a practice and its location where there would otherwise be a vacuum. The catalogue documents a history of art and a position about art that can be discussed and debated.

Fifty-three hundred square metres were devoted to *Aurora Borealis*. With some exception, the exhibition took the form of a series of solo exhibitions as each artist was given a distinct space. There were, however, some strong passages, such as the movement from Ian Carr-Harris's *Untitled* (1984) to Robin Collyer's sculpture *The Zulu (European version)*, 1985. It is rare that Canadian art institutions, with the exception of the venues focusing exclusively on the contemporary, allocate this amount of space to an exhibition of contemporary art.

Most exhibitions of this type within Canada have been organized by the National Gallery and they have been dogged by the issue of national representation and questions of identity. From 1926 to 1933 the National Gallery of Canada produced annual exhibitions of Canadian art; in 1953 they instituted biennials because the annuals became too big. Sometimes the National Gallery of Canada imported foreign curators, one example being the *Seventh Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting* in 1968, where William Seitz, an American museum director and former curator at the Museum of Modern Art, travelled the country for forty-five days and visited 188 artists. As former curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery, Diana Nemiroff has stated the gallery had just started to collect international art and wanted to be measured by international standards. More recent exhibitions are Jessica Bradley's *Pluralities* of 1980, which was followed six years later by Jessica Bradley and Diana Nemiroff's *Songs of Experience*. Then came the last and final national exhibition of this type: the *Canadian Biennial of Contemporary*

Art of 1989. Diana Nemiroff organized this exhibition, and the format was supposed to continue through the '90s by travelling to different institutions across the country. She states in the preface to the catalogue, "Over the next ten years, the Biennials will offer a series of shifting perspectives on art-making in this country, not one narrative but several, and within these, no doubt, others to be spoken elsewhere. The project thus has a consciously historical dimension, for its result will be a cumulative document of the art of the last decade of this century, an occasion to explore our differences and identities. It could be—at a moment when the complexity of the Canadian art scene threatens to fragment into many urban, regional and individual realities—one of those ritual events that allow us to experience our community."

Nobody picked the biennial up. It died.

Nearly two decades have passed since 1989, and there has yet to be another Canadian biennial. I can only surmise that curators and institutions are no longer interested in producing these big exhibitions as none have occurred. There are many possible reasons for this. There are few curators who continually travel the country and have a strong sense of what is happening. Large-scale exhibitions are very expensive: in cash-strapped Canadian institutions, big budgets are reserved for popular historic blockbuster exhibitions. A certain generation of Canadian arts professionals, now for the most part administrators and curators, became disillusioned with biennials. The continual costs incurred on institutions by these shows were seen as an imposition. It has also been suggested that by the late '80s Canadian curators lost interest in national exhibitions, including the type of grand narrative such an exhibition suggests, and were more interested in the international arena and seeing themselves and Canadian artists within this context. In a global age this response has a logic that is not without merit.

In a casual survey carried out last week, I spoke to an emerging artist, an established conservator, a dealer, and a senior curator of some stature. The artist thought an exhibition like this should happen once in a while, and he seemed a little shocked by the date of the last biennial. The conservator wondered whether Canada has the necessary critical mass of artists, but thought the country could handle such

an exhibition every three years or so. A fairly successful contemporary Canadian dealer said she saw no reason for such a show: she did not see how such an exhibition would change her or her artists' situation. The highly respected senior curator to which I spoke looked at me with an "Are you crazy?" type of expression when I raised the subject. He said this type of exhibition was a "quagmire, a nightmare. It is impossible to please everyone." In other words, the stress an institution suffers as a result of these exhibitions is too great to bear.

Let's look to Britain for a comparison. If we take the example of the Tate, it has a varied policy for programming contemporary art. There is Art Now—a room devoted to the exhibition of contemporary projects with an accompanying publications program. There is the Turner Prize—an award given every year that includes an exhibit of four shortlisted contemporary artists. The Tate also frequently features contemporary exhibitions in their programming. One can think of a recent exhibition, *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vita*, featuring the work of Angus Fairhurst, Damien Hirst, and Sarah Lucas (2004). However, a cornerstone of the Tate's contemporary programming is the triennial of new British art. In the recent past, there have been two of these exhibitions, the first being *Intelligence: New British Art 2000*, curated by Virginia Button and Charles Esche, and the second, *Days Like These: Tate Triennial of Contemporary British Art 2003*, curated by Judith Nesbitt and Jonathan Watkins. With *Intelligence*, the curators made a claim for using the intellect to understand new British art in order to counteract the perceived "tabloid" culture associated with much of the YBA's work. For the second edition, the organizers pronounced their decision to curate a theme-free exhibition, stating, "This is the only honest way we felt able to present the divergent, richly allusive, and independently minded work of the artists whose work we found so compelling."

In the United States, there is the Whitney Biennial. I think everyone is aware of its purpose. Unlike in Canada, curators and institutions in the UK and the USA think it is worthwhile to explore contemporary practice on a regular basis.

Whatever we think about Canada's record with regard to these types of exhibitions, the National Gallery of Canada, for better or for worse, has provided a series of exhibitions and texts that make for a history and a memory that can be easily

referred to and interpreted in a myriad of ways. But these exhibitions did a little more than this. They also provided a place, not only in the literal sense, to meet and discuss art. I would argue that there is no single venue in Canada where people from across the country see one another and look at and think about Canadian art. Ironically, our immediate context, the Toronto International Art Fair (so different from Art Basel), is one of the few events where art professionals from across the country meet and look at art. While there is much art here, there is rarely anything of the quality, scale, or ambition one would have seen at any of the previously mentioned exhibitions. However, it seems that marketplace, such as it is in Canada, has filled the void left in the absence of this type of exhibition.

The world has changed a lot since 1989, and I want to make it clear that I am not advocating for a major exhibition of contemporary Canadian art. Looking around at the main Canadian institutions, we keep very little interest in this type of exhibition. Neither does it seem to be of interest to independent organizations like the Centre International d'Art Contemporain in Montreal: their biennial has an international focus. Perhaps the current state of things is just fine. Perhaps there is no longer a need for survey shows of Canadian art. Or perhaps it is about time for a re-evaluation of the situation.

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