

## Liz Wylie

### Naming and Defining the Current Issues for Collections in Canadian Public Galleries

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The subject is, “naming and defining the current issues for collections in Canadian public galleries.”

The first part of this paper will recount the story of my intimate nine-year relationship with my own institutional collection. My thinking and text will then ripple outwards and will encompass the thoughts and opinions of several colleagues who have been kind enough to tell me about their own institutional collection situations. I would like then to ruminate in general about the pitfalls of the unspoken assumptions about public art collections that we’ve all had to face. Finally, I’ll consider our national situation vis-a-vis these art collections and assess our status.

When I was first hired as the University of Toronto art curator in August of 1996, it was to step very quickly into a position that had been vacant for almost two months and that required me to open a brand-new public gallery in three months. This included obtaining loans and installing the inaugural exhibition. Needless to say, it was some time before I was able to turn my attention to the University of Toronto’s art collection. Once I began looking at the collection files, I realized that, while things were not in a state of complete disarray, much work was needed.

I had inherited old paper inventory sheets created in 1982 by the University’s first art curator. Additional documents for works acquired under the regime of its second curator, my predecessor, were also present. Only a few hundred works had been entered into a computer database that had been set up by her casual part-time assistant. So these are the early years of my relationship.

I was able to obtain funds from a kind donor to our fledgling art gallery and hired a part-time casual employee to assist me with the database project. Together we decided we’d see and examine any object before its description and location were entered into the database, hoping to avoid any “garbage in” scenario. This method helped us to create what would become a usable, reliable tool for our collection

management. While this work of ours was going on, I also had to run the gallery until we had a paid director begin in the fall of 1998, and continued to change the modest installations of works from the collection in the galleries. In the meantime, more and more people became aware of our existence, and the collection became inundated with offers of gifts.

Because the University of Toronto had not had its own gallery until 1996, no active collecting had gone on. So the picture I began to have of our holdings was of a very spotty conglomeration indeed, something of a vast doily in terms of gaps that needed filling. Therefore, a great number of the offered gifts were vitally important to bring in, and over the next nine years I was to double the original collection holdings. I kept up the pace of processing annually some two to three hundred works of art as additions to our collection, and without meaning either to complain or brag, this present company will know more than any other audience just how much work that entails. Once in a while I did come up for air and ask myself what I was doing, but not in a very engaged or profound way.

Once, David Silcox, who was our director from 1998 to 2001, came back from a trip through the Canadian West, where he'd managed to visit several public galleries and talk to other directors and curators about their situations, including their collections. He said to me that he was concerned that, by and large, we all seemed to be collecting the same thing, and that was the result of what we were all being offered: largely contemporary Canadian art with slight regional variance in terms of individual artists. At the time, this comment meant nothing to me, as I would have assumed this to be the case and had not previously questioned it. However, it somehow began to eat away at me, and I started to think harder about what we were all doing and what the issues were. Why were all the galleries collecting, and why virtually all in the same area? Certain aspects of my own collection began to bother me as well. I became increasingly aware of its conservative nature. It did not and does not reflect or embody at all the wide range and variety of artistic practice that makes up modern and contemporary art in Canada. Because we had and have no acquisition funds at all, I was playing a highly passive role, rather like the volunteers at a fundraising telethon, standing by to take the call of the next donor.

Sometimes these were artists, and once in a while, if I felt comfortable with an artist I knew, I would drop a broad hint that an offer of work from them might be warmly received. I felt guilty, however, as all I could offer was a charitable tax receipt, not cash. But the gifts offered from collectors were largely paintings, prints, drawings, very rarely sculptures or photographs, and never the rights to an installation work, a work in new media, a sound piece, etc.

The result of this is that the collection is made up only of works in traditional media, and the majority of that could be termed conservative in terms of the kinds of imagery or issues being explored in the works. Finally, two years ago, my misgivings heated up to an even more uncomfortable level when I finally had filled our storage vault completely, despite my frantic deframing of works on paper for flat storage and twisting small framed work sideways on lateral shelves to consolidate every bit of space that I could. I currently have room for only a handful more of flat works on paper, and all the drawers in the plan files that we currently have room for will then also be filled to capacity. But we were full in terms of paintings of any size about two years ago, and I began to decline offers of works for donation or asked people to delay their offers if possible, hoping a solution for our space crunch might be forthcoming.

It was at this point I conceptually hit the wall and began to look back critically at what I had collected. Would I have accepted absolutely every piece had I known I would be running out of room so fast? In the great majority of cases, to my personal relief, my honest answer was yes. I'm attached to, even cathected to, my collection. Having been the only person involved in adding each work, the only person writing the essays for our applications to Cultural Property, the relationship I have with many of the pieces really does feel quite intimate. The collection now has grown so large that I can program in-house exhibitions with it, which I have done. I am planning a show of works on paper for 2006 that will actually have a theme, the holdings are so extensive. Many of the works of art I was able to bring in have deep personal meaning to me, and each adds a specific particular element to the collection as a whole, and I'll just give a few examples.

A suite of watercolours by underknown senior Toronto artist Ann MacIntosh Duff

are wonderful, as is a series of a hundred target watercolours displaying the entire spectrum of pigments available in watercolour by Ron Martin. I'm fond of a Manet etching of *The Philosopher* we were given by a collector and which I included in a small show called *Problem Pictures* in 1998. Ontario artist Will Gorlitz gave us his German version of the suite of works on paper done on the Xeroxed text of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. I showed that when it came to us in 1997. Last year, I brought in a 1923 nine-foot-long double-side virtually unknown A.Y. Jackson oil from a cottage in Georgian Bay that I hope to display in the gallery once I have a supportive gazebo kind of structure designed and built for it so it's in its proper position and you can see it from both sides, and this year we've been offered a vintage Michael Snow *Walking Woman* painting, which is really fantastic, by a colleague of mine who's moved from a house to a condo—thus the offer—and a spectacular wardrobe of black dresses and shoes by Toronto's Cathy Daley.

These instances are some examples of moments of deep pleasure and great excitement for me in the history of the relationship with my institutional collection. Despite my feelings of happiness about all the wonderful gifts I've been able to amass, I was still troubled about what it was I'd been doing. Could I have been charged and found guilty, in curator Melanie Townsend's words from 2003 here in Banff, of hasty stockpiling? And what about all the other galleries in Canada? Surely they too must be facing a similar crunch. This ruminating became the impetus for my proposal and research for this paper, and I'm most grateful for the opportunity to have been able to explore the topic, and for the information and ideas that have been supplied to me by my colleagues, which I'm going to report to you about.

I certainly felt the need to know if my counterparts at other public galleries were in fact being nagged by the same doubts and issues I was. So this spring I asked other Canadian public gallery curators a set of questions, first about room and infrastructure for their collections. Were they okay with the amount of time they had for research on their collections? Then I went on with more complex questions about the workability and suitability of the fair-market value-based system for tax receipts for donations of art, and the process of acquisition committees at the public galleries. Do these curators feel empowered to shape their collections to

the same degree as they might their exhibition programmes? I received replies to my queries from curators at fourteen public galleries in Canada and was fortunate to also receive a great, meaty email from our colleague Ihor Holubizky, currently in Australia, on this topic, of his own volition.

Nothing I will present here can be taken as a statistical sample, but the information will nevertheless impart a flavour or an inkling of where we are. And just so that you know, I'm going to briefly list the institutions that I heard back from, and in each case, it is the curator that I contacted, not another person on the staff. So, going... starting in the East:

The Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown  
Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in Halifax  
The Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's in Kingston  
The McIntosh Gallery at the University of Western Ontario in London  
Museum London  
The Art Gallery of Hamilton  
The Art Gallery of Ontario  
Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa  
The Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto in Mississauga  
The Rodman Hall Art Gallery in St. Catharines, Ontario  
The Winnipeg Art Gallery  
The MacKenzie Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan  
The Edmonton Art Gallery  
and the Vancouver Art Gallery

So now you have a little map of where are all these people or what they're talking about.

Of these fourteen institutions, only five report having any room left in their storage areas for more works of art. five of the fourteen—but not the same five—have already moved to the use of off-site storage. Only two of the fourteen curators say they feel they have sufficient staff and financial resources to properly care for their collections. Three curators do not feel they have the time or staff to conduct research on their collections, except when it is project-driven and funds and staff are made available. However, eleven of the fourteen are comfortable with their opportunities to exhibit works from the permanent collections. So one does wonder, then, based

on that aspect of the responses, how deeply researched these installations of works can be, and some curators did voice concerns about this. Even at galleries where installations of the permanent collection are part of annual programming, some curators feel these are seen as filler by both the marketing people on the staff and even by, perhaps, some members of the public. The curator at Museum London, Melanie Townsend, likens her own work in this area—that is, installing works from the permanent collection—to be interior decorating, not really curating.

Ihor Holubizky, who has worked as a curator in several of Canada’s public galleries in the past, comments on the importance of research on the permanent collection. He says, “Acquiring is only the first step. You have to know more about the thing itself. It’s always easier to collect more than to reflect on what has been collected and why.”

In January of this year, I was fortunate to be able to attend the Canadian Museums Association Museum Research Summit in Ottawa, which had been two years in the planning. Curators and other staff from all sorts of museums are in the same dilemma when it comes to finding resources to commit to old-fashioned curatorial research. As a result of this conference, the CMA is putting forward recommendations for a new museums policy for the department of Heritage, and research will be one of its cornerstones. We can all anticipate some positive trickle-down effect from this, and should strongly advocate for it.

It was in my replies to my more thorny and complex questions that the unspoken assumptions out there with regard to permanent collections came bubbling to the surface. These formed a few thematic clusters that I will now elucidate.

Evidently in Canada we’ve undergone a sea-change in public galleries since the 1970s, at which time the collection was the core, or the heart, of each institution. Cared for by its curator, who often built a long-term and personal relationship with it, the collection was held in public trust for the community in which the gallery was located, and often there was a further relationship between the collections and the gallery’s publics. Due to several factors which I’ll speculate about, this is no longer the case for most galleries, whose exhibitions are driven by marketing and

sponsorship concerns, and where the bottom line and visitor counts are the driving factors often for decision-making. Galleries are now competing for the public's entertainment dollar, and blockbuster-style, often travelling-package shows are the order of the day. We all know this and have become accustomed, even inured, to it over the last several years. Some of us work in resistance to this situation, but nevertheless, in many cases the link between a given institution's collection and its exhibition programme was broken some years ago. Curators often now move fairly rapidly among posts at various galleries and can have little contact or connection with the permanent collection of each place during their tenure. There are always exceptions, of course. Mary Reid, the new Curator of Contemporary Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, has made a personal commitment to look at ten works from the public collection every week until she's seen everything in the vault. She has plans to involve local university students in curatorial and research projects around the Winnipeg Art Gallery permanent collection.

Several among the fourteen responding curators pointed out the schizophrenic gap between the programme of temporary exhibitions and the collection at the galleries, finding it troubling yet unsure of how to address that situation. Timothy Long at the Mackenzie Gallery writes, "In the last fifteen years, we've seen the pendulum swing away from curatorial research and development toward public access and programming. There's an urgent need to address the current imbalance. Ultimately, unless we're going, once in a while, to exhibit works from our collection in a meaningful and engaged fashion, then why are we collecting?"

Mary Reid cautions against collecting simply to have the works languish in the darkness of storage. She writes, "The future of the collection is to make it relevant and purposeful. Otherwise, there's no reason to collect." Ihor Holubizky writes that we need to be aware of what he terms "journalism-style collecting". By this he means collecting works because we feel we need to tell a story of some kind and that the works of art are the pieces of this narrative. This jives with the sense that David Silcox had that all the galleries are trying to tell the same story, the history of modern and contemporary art in Canada, with some regional variations. A recent exception to the external-blockbuster model is the newly renovated Art Gallery of

Hamilton, which took the daring move when they reopened in May of this year to have exhibitions of work drawn solely from their permanent collections. This was done quite deliberately, after much thought and discussion there, and speaks to the strong community ties in Hamilton with their gallery's collection. It also speaks to a highly aware gallery staff in their recognition of their situation and their decision to play to their own gallery's strength.

Another theme that emerged from my research centred around the curator's power and scope to shape his or her collections, and on the acquisitions-committee process and model. While only two of the fourteen responding curators felt unhappy with their level of power to shape their collections, many of the others noted that their power was virtual only, as there are either zero or very small acquisitions funds, inadequate to purchase the works of art they feel would add meaningfully to their collections anyway. Melanie Townsend put succinctly a feeling about the cumbersomeness of the acquisitions-committee model which is still in place in all the public galleries, saying, "It is a system of checks and balances of a sort, but a stupid one."

The final issue I have to table for discussion centres around our donor-driven system of issuing charitable tax receipts for donations of art, and concerns specifically the concept of fair market value, which is the basis for the appraiser to determine the monetary worth of the given piece, and therefore the amount of the tax receipt to be issued. While understanding that Ottawa has to have some sort of logical system in place, this notion of fair market value, specifically when it is linked strictly to sales of similar works during the last two years from the current date, seems too dependent on a market that is thin and weak for contemporary art and is non-existent for many artists. We are offered the loophole of "reasoned justification", but I've yet to encounter an appraiser willing to go this route except with a work of nominal value. After all, each of these appraisers is personally liable for every value they attest to. There are many works in all sorts of media by artists living and dead that I could acquire if there were a way of issuing a tax receipt for them, but the works have no actual verifiable fair market value, so it's not possible to bring them into the collection unless someone appears who wishes to make this happen

without any thought of personal gain. Which is not likely.

In conclusion, what then is our status in Canada vis-a-vis our public gallery art collections? Are we heading to a national dilemma? Certainly it would seem overdue to take a careful group look at what we have collected and where we are heading in the future, collectively. Otherwise, a crisis is looming, and anyone who's thought about this agrees. Jan Allen, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, for example, wrote to me, "There is a slow dawning understanding of the collision course that we are on."

With an aging population of professional artists leaving estates of works behind, where are we going to store this vast amount of cultural patrimony? One can also consider case examples of particular magnitude, like the crates of Cape Dorset collection of prints still in temporary storage at the McMichael, purportedly some 150,000 works, only about half of them catalogued. Who can ever take on this project, and with what resources? On the other hand, what are we stockpiling the works of art for? More can be more, but only if we know what it is for.

Without wishing to be alarmist, I would like to refer to an old model for the collecting public gallery put forward for consideration to me by Ihor Holubizky in this email. Perhaps, given our current situation, the model is an outdated one, but if so, we need to carefully examine what we are replacing it with. He posits the four pillars of activity for a collecting art gallery being to collect, to conserve, to educate, and to exhibit, and if any of the pillars are not given equal emphasis, if the heights become uneven, then the stability of the overall structure is threatened. Ultimately, the gallery will topple.

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