

ROSEMARY DONEGAN

Between Zones, Spaces and Sites: A Methodology of Curating

Being asked to participate in a panel on curatorial methodologies has forced me to examine my own methodology. Intellectually and politically, my approach to curating historical exhibitions is rooted in my reading and understanding of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian pedagogue, from whom I learned that people learn and come to understand and make sense of their world through their own lived experience. I have also been influenced by the English critic and cultural historian Raymond Williams, who taught me, among other things, the importance of observation, analysis and pure inquisitiveness.

While these thinkers inform my curatorial practice, I was not sure if my approach qualified as a methodology in and of itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “methodology” as a number of related practices: the orderly arrangement of ideas, regular habits, a scheme of classification, and a special form or procedure. This definition addresses the organizational work of historical curatorial methodology – the many practical tasks like researching potential resources, ordering photographs, locating artwork, making piles and organizing files and slides. However, it does not take into account the larger and more complex aspects of curating, which concern the analytical practice. My curating often seems to take place between zones, disciplines and practices – between the museum and the gallery, past and present, fine arts and popular culture, private memory and public action. As a result, my work involves a lot of research time searching government archives, arts institutions, local museums and galleries, religious and labour institutions, looking for documents, photographs, promotional materials, researching film and

sound sources, and so on. It also involves searching for privately owned local history materials, contacting local collectors and utilizing their information and memorabilia. I talk to people I do not know, asking questions and following the many divergent and seemingly insignificant details that can so often lead to odd and interesting conjunctions of information and documentation.

The process of ferreting out materials is parallel to the process of locating the gaps and omissions, figuring out why they exist, what their significance is and what their relationships with already located materials might be. Alongside the practical tasks of research, therefore, is an analytical process that weaves the various narratives, documents, repetitions and absences into a conceptual framework informing both the content and form of the exhibition. The analysis involves a continuous process of assessing the visual power – the aesthetics – of individual images and of discerning the meanings and significance that are underscored or released by possible groupings of the images and documents. It is vital to allow the existing materials to govern the possible meanings and to avoid imposing pre-set assumptions upon them.

During this cumbersome, often labyrinthine-like, process of research, I use the potential form of the exhibition as the framework within which I continuously assess the possible placement of the various materials and judge whether, in this or that arrangement, the components can be read as a larger whole. The potential audience's likely response to the exhibition is integral to how I conceive its form. As an educator, the viewer's dialectical experience of the final exhibition – the synthesis of images and information with all its varied integral contradictions – is central to my interest and motive in curating exhibitions.

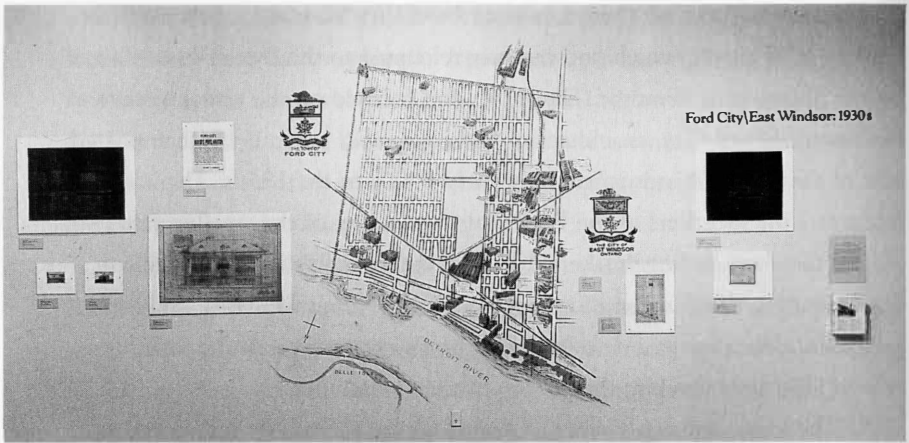
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Recently I have had responses to an exhibition, a catalogue and a book that I have produced, that have helped me clarify and understand how the methodology I have used is reflected and evident in the viewer's/reader's experience of the final work.

In the summer of 1994, I curated *Ford City/Windsor* for the Art Gallery of Windsor, which had recently relocated to the Devonshire Mall on the outskirts of Windsor. The exhibition focused on the visual history of the town of Ford City, an industrial and residential community that existed east of the city of Windsor from the early 1900s to the 1950s. The area's features – the locations of the Ford plant and many of the smaller auto plants, the surrounding workers' housing, the assembly line employment opportunities, the division of management and labour lifestyles, and local politics – were all relevant to the exhibition's exploration of the defining role of industrial work in the history of the community.

The historical significance of Ford City is particularly interesting since recent de-industrialization is quickly evacuating local urban and industrial history from Windsor's physical landscape. At a theoretical level, the exhibition explored the shift in the cultural geography of the city, as Windsor changes its economic basis from heavy industry to a new economy of entertainment. This shift is symbolized in rather flagrant form by the government-owned casino, which recently opened in the former Art Gallery of Windsor, while the gallery relocated to quarters within a temple of consumption – the shopping mall.

The exhibition included a double screen video projection, a large wall painting of the town of Ford City, architectural plans, documentary photographs, original drawings and ephemera by Franklin Carmichael, and a series of portraits by Yousuf Karsh. An adjacent space displayed the local history of a small auto parts plant called Motor Products Ltd. This section of the project grew out of a series of found anonymous photographs of the plant, which included a powerful black and white photograph of a group of women workers. When I published the women's photograph in the local paper, *The Windsor Star*, the response led to a series of video interviews with a group of women and men who worked at the plant in the 1930s and 1940s. The video interviews, along with personal photographs and mementos, were installed with tables and chairs and a comment book. Over the two months of the exhibition the audience wrote stories, corrections and criticisms in the book and it became an important component of the installation. People often spent twenty or



Ford City|Windsor, installation view, Art Gallery of Windsor

thirty minutes reading the book and adding their stories, some as much as half a page long.

The written comments were generally very positive and, on occasion, extravagantly enthusiastic, although there were some critical comments on the omission of a popular movie theatre. It appears the general public, even in the context of a shopping mall, will respond with genuine interest and remarkable enthusiasm to historical documents and images when they can connect them to their own families' experience and culture – as long as their history is presented with dignity and integrity. Visitors provided information on who worked where and when, where certain strikes or events happened. Interestingly, virtually no one provided information on what they did at work. It struck me that industrial workers placed little or no value or meaning in the actual activity or result of their labour.

There was one remark on the dominance of white faces in the exhibition. I had been aware of this racial imbalance in the documentation since the earliest days of my research. The question of how one accurately portrays the complexity of historical society is one of the dilemmas of historical curating since, in most cases, the original documentation reflects and mirrors only the dominant culture. Images of minority or marginal groups were rarely taken and seldom conserved. To complicate the issue further, the potential methods of dealing with the problem of absence, such

as including more textual information, additional didactic panels, or creating new visual images and materials are all problematic. These options do not have the tangible authenticity and reverberation of original images and documents that is the potency and vitality of a historical exhibition.

The most frequent remarks in response to the exhibition were nostalgic – memories of a more coherent time, namely, the past. The comment book and video interviews allowed visitors to locate their personal memories in a larger history and greater spectrum of meaning. This validation of personal and local history within the complexity of a larger public history is, for me as a curator, an important objective. Visitors come to the exhibition with their own experiences of where they have lived and worked: from there – the local – they can see and grasp how a larger culture of work and neighbourhood affects their personal definitions of self, family and community. The dialectical interchange between personal memory and public history helped shift the experience of the exhibition from a comfortable nostalgia for the past to a more complex view of personal history and its larger meaning.

The volume and scope of responses to the exhibition confirms for me the effectiveness of the curatorial methodology – the process of reading, researching, selecting and reselecting, of refining and examining all those decisions and assumptions which form the working theses of the exhibition. As a historical curator, I try to construct a visual and intellectual space for documents, images and ideas. Yet, I find interpreting people's histories a weighty responsibility that is touchy and awkward because, as a curator and historian, I am an outsider, but I have access to and an understanding of insider information.

In the *Ford City/Windsor* exhibition, the design of the textual information and the configuration of gallery space in the installation were somewhat unresolved and lacked the focus evident in earlier exhibitions – such as the geographic logic and density of images and meanings in the installation of *Spadina Avenue: A Photohistory* (1984) and in the subsequent book, or the visual symmetry and density in the exhibition *Work, Weather and the Grid* at the Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina (1991), which allowed photographs, textual documents, advertisements, small

paintings and large murals to maintain their own visual space while interacting through juxtaposition and correspondence.

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The two other responses to my work that shed light on methodology became known to me by happenstance. The first was learned when I met the artist Alain Bublex of Lyons, France. During an extended conversation half held in broken French, it became apparent that he and a friend, Milen Milenovich of Paris, were working with the catalogue I had written for the *Industrial Images/Images Industrielles* exhibition mounted in 1987 for the Art Gallery of Hamilton, which later toured nationally.

Milenovich was using the catalogue as a source for a book project and an ongoing travelogue on North America, while Bublex was using its images of industrial and urban Canada as the model for an imaginary city, Glooscap, New Brunswick. It was fascinating to see how as artists they had read and deconstructed both the academic and informal methodology inherent in the original research process, and the organization and writing of the *Industrial Images* catalogue, and were using it in their own “fictionalist” artwork. It was an interesting example of how the local can become relevant to the international, how the specificity of geographic place can be understood in a larger international context and how interest in architecture and space can be a shared experience – in this case the public space of twentieth-century urban industrialization.

I stumbled on another response in the form of a review of the book *Spadina Avenue* published in the Paris newspaper *Le Monde* on October 15, 1994. Originally an exhibition at A Space in Toronto, *Spadina Avenue* was subsequently published in 1985 and received an award from the Canadian Historical Association. The 1994 review, written by Henri Behar, described the design and layout of the book in detail, while responding to the larger historical meaning of the street. Behar’s review wove the complex history and geography of Spadina into a coherent whole, using the specificity of place to cross into the international experience of public urban reality.



Work, Weather and the Grid: Agriculture in Saskatchewan, installation view,
Dunlop Art Gallery

Both of these latter responses are rooted, I believe, in the French fascination with North American industrialization and urban space. It was personally very flattering (in my somewhat intellectually colonized ego) as *Le Monde* represents one of the highest international approbations in journalism. However, more significantly, it was rewarding that the history of representation held within and among the images, photographs, paintings and ads that others had created, but that I had researched, collected and organized, was able to speak so directly to a wide range of intellectual and historical sensibilities.



All the responses, reverberations and questions from the numerous people who responded to the *Ford City/Windsor* exhibition, and interpretations of

the French who have used my work in decoding the images, meanings and location of urban and industrial history in Canada, have assisted me in examining my own methodology. I have come to realize that the curatorial methodology that informs and defines my work is a combination of practical and conceptual approaches shaped by my objectives as an educator and as a historian. In curating exhibitions and preparing publications – bringing an arrangement of historical images and artifacts together – the curator has the potential to achieve a dialectical interchange between audiences and history. This potential releases an exhibition or document of it from its specificity of place. Such a methodology can render curatorial work relevant in a broad national and international context.

Discussion

WAYNE BAERWALDT (to Rosemary Donegan) I was wondering about those missing spaces in Windsor, for instance spaces of colour. How far do you go in reconstructing history to include those spaces?

ROSEMARY DONEGAN I might begin by saying that this is where the mirror to a large extent is accurate. Blacks, Asians, women were certainly excluded from this situation and where they occur it is in small places, at the edges. Yet I think you also have to consider that what you do have is a representation of a whole group of people, largely eastern Europeans, who otherwise have little history in Canada themselves. For the exhibition I was able to find one photograph that represented an excluded group and I combined it with text that talked about where they worked and so on. That was the only way I could really cope with this issue although I'm very interested in other strategies for solving that.

RICHARD FUNG Because your work is always disciplined by the actual historical artifacts, I was wondering about speculative history that seems to be very simple. I find myself in that trap also. I'm doing a project on homosexuality and prostitution in 1970s Chinese Canada. All the documents are not there so I have to create my own.

ROSEMARY DONEGAN I attempted to grapple with that with the video projection that was made for the show, which was actually constructed from historical sources. As a historian, it's really important to make sure you're accurate so that you can stand behind whatever you put out there. When you get into imaginary constructions, you're on different terrain and you have to understand very clearly what you are doing and why.

SYLVIE FORTIN If people who were not represented in source material are part of the issue, could a strategy be to move on to domestic space? For example, use family photographs?

ROSEMARY DONEGAN Part of the problem is that the *Ford City* exhibition was, at a certain level, about public history. It was about what existed in a public space, a public work site, a street, etcetera. At the same time, moving to the level of the home, using personal mementos is really important. Part of the difficulty is you don't find many photographs, especially in this period, of the kind you refer to. When photographs were taken in people's homes, they were usually dressed up for a special moment, a wedding or birthday party. You don't find pictures of the funeral. You don't find pictures of the mother in the kitchen.

PETER WHITE It's not only imagery or material that doesn't exist that raises serious questions about representation but imagery that does exist that is problematic.

ROSEMARY DONEGAN One of the ways of trying to deal with that is using a textual explanation. But what you find is that the viewers tend to miss that. Within the context of an exhibition, the visual power of the images is so much stronger than any kind of text.

JOAN BORSA With reference to speculative history, Rosemary, you mentioned that as a historian you're concerned with accuracy. I think that within any of these projects what we also have to include in our methodology is the inaccuracy of history that the limitations of historical archives have constantly pointed to. Somehow there has to be a disruption or an interrogation as well as a presentation of the historical. If it is something that is recognized as a necessity to the project but it is not in the historical archives, then we have to find it, whether it be through the oral or through some other means, such as Sara Diamond's labour history videos. I say this to push the notion that all histories are constructions to begin with, that the speculative is always within the historical.

SYLVIE GILBERT One of the difficulties with exhibitions is that they are often an exercise of closure. How do we as curators open up that closure? I am wondering if it would be more important to think of exhibitions as sentences. How could a curator – whether a curator in an institution or a guest curator – negotiate with the institution saying, "I'm going to do this show and whatever I find that's not

working with the show I'm going to do another show about." How could you break that mould of only having one exhibition?

FRANCE GASCON I'm not sure it's always a problem of representation. It might be a problem of rhetoric. Even if we go as far as possible to see what kind of material is available and not limit it to visual material, misunderstanding can still be generated if the subject is presented neutrally, as if the exhibition is a monograph on the subject. Maybe there is a solution in rhetoric that makes room for absence. I'm just throwing this out, but let's say *Ford City/Windsor* had been titled *Ford City, Men's World, or White World*. From the start the editorial position of the exhibition would have been obvious to the public and what had been evacuated not by the curator but by history would have come to the surface. Still, whether this would change the way the public would look at these absences is another question.

ROSEMARY DONEGAN It might in certain situations but you can't control the assessment the audience already brings with it. I try not to represent these issues as closed. I don't think any curator tries to do that. But I think it is perceived that way very often from the outside. I don't know how you read or challenge that.