



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2011

## Burgeoning curators and education: The evolution of curating in Canada

Donegan, Rosemary

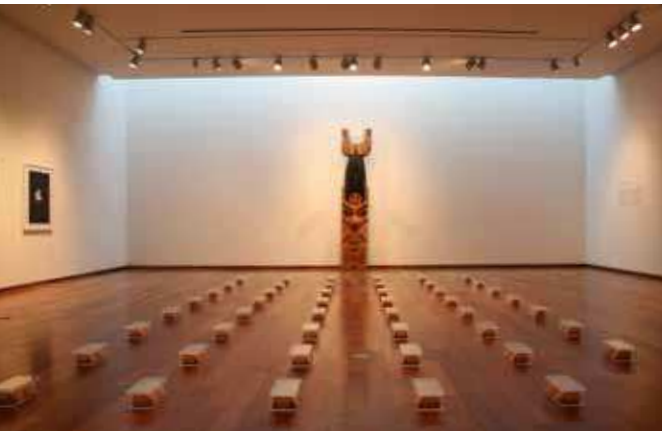
---

### Suggested citation:

Donegan, Rosemary (2011) Burgeoning curators and education: The evolution of curating in Canada. Sketch. pp. 38-39. Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1541/>

*Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.*

*The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at [repository@ocadu.ca](mailto:repository@ocadu.ca).*



**past now:** Curated by Suzanne Morrisette and Lisa Myers. Photography by Meryl McMaster and painted woodcarvings by Luke Parnell.

# Burgeoning Curators and Education

## The evolution of curating in Canada

By Rosemary Donegan

**T**he work and practice of art curators—variously defined as writers, organizers, historians, stylists, friends of artists and intellectuals—has never had such

currency. In popular culture, the notion of the curator has taken on a chic and contemporary resonance as people curate auto collections, poetry readings, branding campaigns and clothing stores. Internationally, art curators have been elevated into glamorous art stars in mega-exhibitions like Germany's Documenta, the Istanbul Biennale and Sydney Biennale where the independent transnational curator often overshadows the artists.

In Canada, curating has evolved from the historical notion of the institutional keeper of the collection to a robust and engaged creative practitioner that reflects the changes in contemporary art and exhibitions practices, and parallels the 135-year development of OCAD University from a small art school on King Street West to the institution it is today.

To understand the evolution of curatorial education in Canada, it is necessary to examine it within the larger historical context of Canadian art. At the beginning of the 20th century, the few art galleries that existed in Canada either employed local connoisseurs/artists, like Martin Baldwin at the Art Gallery of Toronto, or hired English director/curators, such as Eric Brown of the National Gallery of Canada. Curators as keepers of the collection undertook acquisitions when there was money, kept track of artworks, undertook basic conservation, organized and installed exhibitions. Some, like Eric Brown, saw his curatorial role as a promoter of Tom

Thomson and the Group of Seven as a nationalist art movement.

By the 1950s, the line between directors, curators, dealers and artists was becoming more distinctive, even though they often overlapped. The new generation of gallery directors and curators came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were from undergraduate art history programs, a few were recent European immigrants who had professional experience in Europe before the war, while most learned on the job starting as secretaries, framers, registrars, artists and art teachers. In smaller galleries the curator would organize and install exhibitions, bring in travelling shows, run art classes, work with local arts groups, write press releases, and probably sweep the floor before an opening. The larger public institutions, such as the Art Gallery of Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum and National Gallery of Canada, hired graduates such as Robert Hubbard, Jean Boggs, Russell Harper and Doris Shadbolt from the new art history departments at McMaster University, McGill University and the University of Toronto.

In 1958, Alan Jarvis, then Director of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), initiated the first gallery internship program, which included "some art history, as well as connoisseurship [sic] and museum techniques." Interns received practical training in management and administration, conservation, security and standards for installation, lighting and storage. In 1967, the NGC expanded its internship program for artists and art history graduates from U of T, McGill, McMaster, Université Laval, Université de Montréal and even OCA. Many of the NGC summer students and interns from the 1960s were to go on to long careers in

Canada's major public galleries. The first formal museology program was established at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1969, later becoming Museum Studies within the University of Toronto.

The development of curating as a profession within public art institutions parallels the social and cultural shifts of the late 1960s and 1970s that mobilized the energy of the period and resulted in the establishment of new exhibition spaces at the local/regional level and in major urban centres. The first aspect of this shift was an increase in regional public art galleries as many cities, prodded by local artists and art societies, took advantage of federal Centennial funds to build new art galleries and exhibition centres. These new galleries were assisted by the federal government's initiation of the National Museums Corporation in 1972 to make museums and galleries more accessible and to decentralize programs and activities. Substantial sums of money were fed into public galleries and museums to develop effective administrative and registration procedures, conservation, and to establish education departments and extension services. The Museums Corp (as it was known) was integral to the establishment of a national network of local exhibition centres that offered young graduates in art and art history positions in education and extension services departments. Many would go on to curatorial positions.

Simultaneously, throughout the early 1970s, the creative and energetic application of government employment funds, such as Opportunities for Youth and the Local Initiatives Program (LIP) and the creative use of unemployment insurance benefits, provided the seed money for numerous independent artists' exhibition spaces. The first was A Space



Mary MacDonald: *bonfirecity* (2011)

Photo by Zach Pearl



Meryl McMaster: *Horse, Buffalo* (2010);

Photo by André Bénéteau

**Best Before** (2011): Curated by Lisa Myers. Foreground: KC Adams, *The Gift That Keeps Giving* (2011). Background: Suzanne Morrisette, *solve for spur to burn area, for some* (2011). On the right: Peter Morin, *Salmon and Bannock* (2005/2010).

in Toronto (1971), soon followed by one in virtually every major city. Many of these spaces focused on the new practices of video, performance and installation art that defined the exhibition space as a "vessel to be filled by the artists who used it."

Once established, the network of artist-run galleries were funded by the Canada Council of the Arts and various provincial arts councils. With the various councils' acknowledgement of the principle of paying artists exhibition fees (which had been advocated by Canadian Artists Representation) there were funds to pay artists, and eventually fees for writers and curators. Funding for exhibitions enhanced and strengthened the independent curators' role, which combined with the councils' more demanding jury processes required applicants to develop complex exhibition proposals such as curatorial thesis statements, budgets, schedules and catalogue essays.

Simultaneously, curatorial and critical writing was fostered in catalogue essays, magazines, books and eventually within academia in new art publications like *Vanguard*, *Parachute*, *Fuse*, *C Magazine*, *Provincial Essays*, *M5V*, *Back Flash*, *Borderlines*, *Public*. The energetic engagement with critical writing reflected the international interest in critical theory in the art world and the paralleled development of feminist, gay and post-colonial art criticism. The development

of these new critical voices, particularly in curatorial and critical writing, brought together issues of representation, race and gender, in addition to a more theoretical approach to critical and curatorial practices. This combination of artist-run spaces, art magazines and the funding of the arts councils supported an informal apprenticeship system for artists, critics and curators that provided a creative laboratory for new art forms and a new generation of audiences.

These varied investigations of new art practices, critical theory and curatorial practices that originally took place in bars, galleries, lofts, artists' panels and at conferences gradually converged in the 1990s into formalized programs of study, in the form of critical and curatorial studies, within various art colleges and university art departments.

It is within this Toronto context and in the exploration of "the artist as curator" that OCA mounted its first undergraduate courses in criticism and curatorial practices in the mid-1990s within the Sculpture/Installation program through the administrative efforts of Ian Carr Harris. The Criticism & Curatorial Studies (CRCP) interdisciplinary program combined seminars in curatorial practices, critical writing, art history, field study placements and thesis. Over the past 13 years the CRCP program has graduated 69 students, many of whom are working as independent curators, gallerists/dealers,

institutional curators and critics/writers, while others have gone on to work in community arts and education or to graduate school.

Following the success of the undergraduate program, OCAD launched its first graduate program in Criticism & Curatorial Practices in 2008. Now in its fourth year, the interdisciplinary program, while drawing on the proximity of the local Toronto art scene and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), integrates a range of curatorial practices within a theoretical framework emphasizing cultural history, research and investigation, analysis and critical writing.

The success of OCAD University's graduate and undergraduate criticism and curatorial programs has provided young and emerging curators and critics with an engaged education in which they can develop their curatorial eye, write essays, undertake critical research, hang shows, paint walls, develop websites, organize events and respond to local communities, such as emerging Aboriginal curators, and most importantly work directly with artists.

It is fitting that in celebrating its 135th anniversary, OCAD University is graduating critics and curators who are entering the art and design world with big ideas, solid practical experience and new ways of thinking, writing and working with and about art, design and media in the 21st century.

---  
Rosemary Donegan is an Associate Professor at OCAD University and an independent curator.