

“Why are we saving All these artist publications + Other Galleries stuffs?”

## THE EMERGENCE OF ARTIST-RUN CULTURE IN HALIFAX

---

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Canadian artists began to self-organize and establish independent spaces for creating and presenting contemporary art. These spaces were called “parallel galleries” or “alternative spaces” and are now known as artist-run centres. The evolution of artist-run culture in the 1970s is the result of the organic emergence of artist cooperatives and the efforts of cultural policy makers to redirect the alternative tendencies of artists into palatable funding programs with defined goals, objectives, and eligibility criteria.

Artists struggled mightily to find the right balance between their cooperative principles and the bureaucratic aspects of non-profit arts organizations, but by the late 1970s, artist-run centres were organized nationally under the Association of National Non-Profit Artist Centres (ANNPAC). Artist-run culture emerged as a vital force in the presentation of Canadian art and a new type of art institution was born.

On the surface, the move toward artist-run professionalism seems paradoxical, even hypocritical, given the anti-establishment views that led artists to self-organize in the first place. Interdisciplinary artist and writer Andrew James Paterson writes that artist-run centres “lost their initial energies and ‘alternative’ status when they became incorporated.” But artists were, and continue to be, conscious of the incongruities of artist-run culture. Artist and writer AA Bronson, who co-founded the artist-run centre Art Metropole in 1974, recalls that “we called upon our Canadian tendencies, the bureaucratic tendency and the protestant work ethic, and soon there were little artists’ bureaucracies having exhibitions and promotions and educational programmes and video workshops and concert series and anything else you might care to think of in this parody of that museum world we all supposedly were trying to escape.”

The most tangible evidence of the institutionalization of artist-run culture is the voluminous archives accumulated by artist-run centres, yet the very existence of these archives is rarely considered outside of the small circle of artists and archivists that collectively preserve this material. “Why are we saving All these artist publications + Other Galleries stuffs?” is the only question scrawled on a list of Eyelevel Gallery members present at a board meeting sometime in 1979. The reflexive question reappeared over the years, as evidenced by volunteer and paid archiving activities, committee work, historical retrospectives, and curatorial and creative explorations of the abstract concept of the archive.

By the mid-1980s, Eye Level Gallery established a custodial relationship with the Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia, but in 2004, the gallery decided to transfer its collection and donate new material to the Dalhousie University Archives. The Centre for Art Tapes followed suit in 2011, and donated its massive collection of art video and audio tapes in 2013. Together, the archival fonds of Eyelevel Gallery and the Centre for Art Tapes represent the largest and most diverse accumulation of publicly accessible archival material on artist-run culture in Canada.

Canadian author and curator Vincent Bonin describes the donation of artists' archives to cultural heritage institutions as a "cradle to coffin scenario" that effectively "closes the circuit" of publicly-funded art by placing the archival material under "house arrest". This is a conflicted state of existence: the promise of artists' exposure and recognition that escorts archival collections into cultural heritage repositories is tempered by the reality that these poorly funded institutions can only make the materials available through a "web of constraints".

This exhibition explores the formative years of artist-run culture in Halifax, from 1970 through the mid-1980s, by presenting posters, invitations, and other ephemera from the Mezzanine Gallery fonds, Eyelevel Gallery fonds, and the Centre for Art Tapes fonds in an integrated chronology. The chronological order is periodically disrupted by thematic groupings of textual records and ephemera clustered around quotations from early archival documents that capture the growing pains and aspirations of this nascent culture. The quotes present a *petit récit* of artist-run culture in Halifax, one of the countless narratives that can be constructed using these archival fonds.

To confront the "web of constraints" that pushes artists' archives to the periphery of our cultural dialogue, the complete archives of Eyelevel Gallery and the Centre for Art Tapes have been migrated from the University Archives in the Killam Library to a temporary Archives Room at the rear of the Gallery for the duration of the exhibition. These materials will be available for supervised consultation Tuesdays and Fridays from 12-4 p.m. In this space, documents that were originally intended for a limited audience can be "interpreted by another community of readers." Visitors are invited to perform research in the gallery and craft their own *petit récit* of the emergence of artist-run culture in Halifax.

Creighton Barrett

Dalhousie University

Andrew James Paterson, "21st Century ARCs," *Fuse*, Winter 2002, 58.

AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 34.

Vincent Bonin, "Documentary Protocols (1967-1975)," in *Documentary Protocols (1967-1975)*, ed. Vincent Bonin and Michèle Thériault (Montréal, Qc: Galerie Leonard Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2010), 55-57.