

Infusing

visitors' artwork into gallery spaces

Expanding possibilities and developing relationships

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Abstract

Art institutions have been undergoing massive changes as they attempt to develop deeper connections with diverse audiences. Yet, aesthetic choices pertaining to the acquisition and display of artworks are still typically determined by a small and elite group of individuals. The voices of community members are traditionally left out of these decisions. This article explores how educators in small art galleries can effectively infuse diverse student work into their galleries as a method for becoming more democratically engaged with a variety of audiences. The particular challenges facing small non-commercial art galleries in this effort are examined. Three projects with non-traditional publics, including young children, high school students, and university students training to become generalist elementary teachers, are presented. By aligning the projects to the circumstances of the gallery and the needs of its participating publics, the students were able to develop meaningful artwork and were offered opportunities to display this work in the respective gallery setting. The example projects demonstrate a variety of ways that small art galleries can enable the work of their visitors to take on more social and empowering roles through display, assisting these institutions in becoming more meaningfully and actively engaged with their publics.

The issue

Art museums¹ and galleries are increasingly being recognized as important resources in the education of students. Kydd (2007) has noted that a number of educators are realizing that they are "limited by the environment of the classroom and that deep learning takes place when children are immersed in rich experiences in the community" (p. 120). Art museums and galleries are ideal community-based locations to spark creativity and curiosity in students' minds. However, due to a number of constraints, student visitors are typically involved in relatively quick museum visits where a guide or volunteer delivers information to this audience through a tour.

1. The examples in this article focus on the realities of developing and implementing educational programming within small non-commercial gallery settings. Literature that examines education in such settings is scant. Research on art museum education is far more readily available. Art museum education literature is applicable to this discussion, as today's art museums and non-commercial galleries are attempting to make their institutions more meaningful to a wider variety of audiences. Although there are certainly major differences in these types of institutions' visions and functions, which will be examined in this paper, art museum education literature will be employed to support this discussion.

Although this type of traditional museum visit is certainly beneficial, it is limiting. The traditional guided tour, focused on the transmission of knowledge to a less knowledgeable public, became an essential component of museum education during the modernist era. During this time, museums were seen as exclusory, object-centred institutions. Hooper-Greenhill (1991) noted that during the modernist era, “[a] new generation of curators was less interested in the public use of museums, and more interested in the accumulation of collections” (p. 25). Fleming outlined that this object-centered museum was intended for a particular group: “...museums have restricted themselves to serving the interests of an educated and prosperous minority, which has jealously guarded its privileged access” (2002, p. 213). In this climate, museum education played a subordinate role to curatorial endeavors, where educators were to communicate ‘truths’, according to the art historical world, contained in the collections to passive audiences—a “transmission model of communication” (Silverman, 2010, p. 15).

Over the past three decades, the museum world has been experiencing a dramatic paradigmatic shift, where more public-centered approaches to engagement are becoming increasingly accepted and, in some cases, fervently endorsed. Mayer (2007) argued that the postmodern era left the modernist museum under attack. She stated that “a biting critique of museums as socially irrelevant grew from the social and civil unrest of the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 44). This led to the formation of new, community-focused museums including “the integrated museum in Latin America, the ecomuseum in France, and the neighborhood museum in the United States” (Silverman, 2010, p. 16). Each of these forms of museums became “embedded within its specific community, operating as a powerful tool for development and social change” (p. 16). We have also witnessed major shifts in “communication theory as well as empirical studies that revealed museum visitors to be actively involved in making sense of what they encounter” (Silverman, 2010, p. 15). Such changes have placed greater emphasis on context, inclusion, critical inquiry, and meaning making. Additionally, there has been an increase in museum visitation by nontraditional publics, who have different expectations from traditional ones. In response to these circumstances, museum education has begun to take on a new, more prominent role, where active engagement was to become central (Ebitz, 2005;

Hein, 1998; Willumson, 2007).

The emerging prevalence of education in museums became clearly apparent in 1984, when the American Alliance of Museums² (AAM) disseminated its *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*, which championed education in the museum. The report states: “If collections are the heart of museums, what we have come to call education—the commitment to presenting objects and ideas in an informative and stimulating way—is the spirit” (p. 55). The report promoted learning as a goal for the museum as a whole. Furthermore, this document referred to the museum’s responsibility to become meaningful to their increasingly diverse audiences. It was certainly an influential report that affected the workings of North American museums. At the same time, foundations such as the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Pew Charitable Trusts poured money into the field of museum education, as well as other areas of museums’ workings, to “find innovative ways to reach out to changing populations” (Schwarzer, 2006, p. 213).

The AAM’s 1992 report, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, was even more direct with its encouragement of education throughout the institution (Hirzy, 1992). This highly significant report emphasized the central role education should play in the museum (Hein, 1998). Although all ten of the report’s recommendations are of great importance to museum education, its first recommendation could be the most crucial for both museum educators and the museum as a whole:

Assert that museums place education—in the broadest sense of the word—at the center of their public service role. Assure that the commitment to serve the public is clearly stated in every museum’s mission and central to every museum’s activities. (Hirzy, 1992, p. 7)

With this statement, it becomes apparent that the AAM was calling for museums to place education at the very center of their functions—for education to seep into every aspect of the museum’s workings. Additionally, the report championed community service as a high priority, as well as diversity of perspectives.

In 2002, the AAM produced *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*. This report was even more focused on public commitment. It advocated the use of effective engagement strategies that are centered on generating meaningful experiences rather than object-centered knowledge acquisition. The report

2 The American Alliance of Museums was previously called the American Association of Museums.

placed the museum at the “center of community life” (Williams, 2007, p. 62). Williams effectively summarized this report’s community-focused vision:

Civic Engagement called for rethinking and restructuring the meaning of collaboration; cultivating endowments and funding; emphasizing researching, teaching, and public commitment; responding and engaging in conversations in and out of the museum community; and testing creative solutions for public programming that fosters life-long learning possibilities for the broadest spectrum of society. (p. 62)

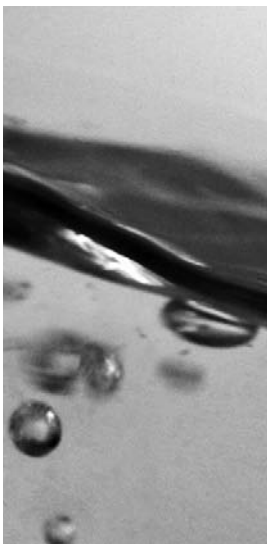
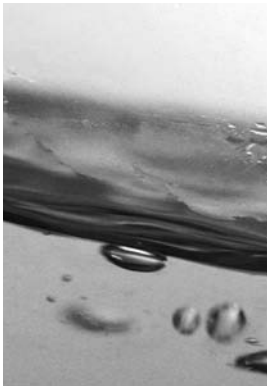
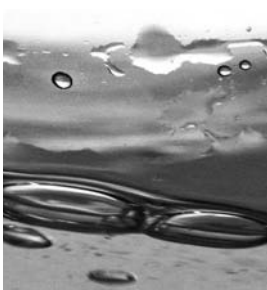
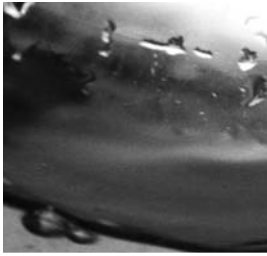
The twenty-first century museum aims to be grounded in community engagement. Referring to the work of Stephen E. Weil, Schwarzer (2006) elucidated: “the successful museum has gone from being about something to being for someone, a human place filled not primarily with things but more importantly with our memories, our stories and our emotions” (p. 217). She went on to refer to the need for museums to be malleable, transparent, trustworthy, and to reflect our constantly transforming societies.

Despite these great advancements in inclusive and community-focused practices over the years, the choice of what is exhibited is still determined by a select few, reemphasizing boundaries and hierarchies. Art museums have traditionally held the roles of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting valuable objects, and setting standards for aesthetics and taste (Jeffers, 2003). As Karen Hamblen (1987) aptly noted, “Art museums tend to collect and display particular types of works that already have established value or, through exhibition, are believed capable of developing a reputation of value” (p. 14). This often results in the development of blockbuster shows that focus on attracting large numbers of visitors and offering these individuals shallow and often ‘disney-fied’, encounters with reputable pieces. This clearly works against the vision of the twenty-first century museum as a location for diverse publics to engage in *meaningful* encounters with the museum and to layer their narratives into these locations.

When value and taste are determined by a small elite in museums, these institutions leave out diverse publics in decision-making, thereby stunting the democratic potential of these *public* institutions. When referring to democratic approaches in the museum, I am specifically calling attention to the potential for museums to enlist a variety of publics in decision-making procedures. In the anthology *Art in a Democracy*, Doug Blandy and Kristin G. Congdon (1987) proclaimed: “Democracy is realized through the active participation of all citizens in sensitive, reasoned decisions which influence the well-being of the individual and her or his community” (p. 46). Obviously, experts in the field are necessary. But, these practitioners hold an incredible amount of power, and this power needs to be exercised with responsibility and openness. Coffee (2006) has outlined that “The narratives conveyed by museums are generally viewed as definitive and authoritative, while the objects displayed are presented as representative of normative culture” (p. 435). In order to reveal the subjectivity of these choices and break down hierarchal barriers between museums and their publics, more space for democratic practices in exhibition content and display, in which the publics’ opinions and artistic products are valued, could be and even should be provided and encouraged. This is especially true with the case of institutions that are supported by public funding, like many Canadian museums and galleries.

Potential for community engagement

David Dean (1996) has asserted: “Museums should be like leaky vessels or sponges in their communities. Ideas should seep in from all directions and be sifted constantly, searching for those that fulfill the criteria of public service and education” (p. 12). Dean emphasizes education as a primary goal of exhibitions and clearly upholds a commitment to community in exhibition processes. He promotes audience assessment to determine community needs



and expectations, which he feels should be at the very center of exhibition choices. Thus, according to Dean, there are promising possibilities for museums to take more democratic approaches to exhibition development than what has traditionally occurred. For example, the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History and the New York State Museum have engaged community members to participate in the development of exhibitions for their Native peoples galleries (MacDonald & Alsford, 2007). Another example is the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Following significant controversy around the museum's "representation of the cultural heritage of ethnic groups" (p. 281), the ROM established "a committee to consider future involvement of special interest groups in exhibition development" (p. 285). However, Fouseki (2010) reminds us that engagement of publics in curatorial decision making is not always as democratic as intended: "community consultation is not always a democratic process as power often resides with museum staff members who decide which community views to accept and which to ignore" (p. 180). In order to avoid this, Fouseki calls for community consultation processes that are grounded in shared authority, active negotiation, and collaborative ownership.

Exposing institutional processes to visitors and having them engage with these contexts can assist in this effort. Charles R. Garoian (2001) has called for museums to engage visitors in "exposing, examining, and critiquing the institutional context of the museum" (p. 247), enabling a starting point for dialogues between the museum's narratives and those of visitors to evolve, thereby softening the divide between the museum and its publics. The *Art Takes Me There* exhibition that was at the South Texas Institute for the Arts (STIA) offers an example of how museums can engage publics in critical investigations into institutional contexts. The STIA collaborated with youth through a number of entry-points. One of the objectives was to expose and problematize "traditional museum education and exhibition practices" (Reese, 2003, p. 37). In order to achieve this, the youth compared an alternative reading of a well-known story with the traditional reading. Through this, the participants were "introduced to the notion that a story could have variations depending on who tells the story as well as the context, such as when and where it is presented" (p. 38). STIA then explored the "idea of exhibitions as narrative" (p. 38) with the participants. The youth were given "Art Cards", which featured twelve works of art from the permanent collection. They were requested to write a story that

incorporated all twelve cards—which is "similar to the curatorial process" (p. 38). The youth observed that the same artworks could be employed to express different stories and perspectives. Reese noted that: "These two activities enabled participants to perform museum culture and institutional strategies as the youth and facilitators began to expose, examine, and critique the content and form of the museum" (p. 38).

It is my belief that museums can take these notions of democratic decision-making, the inclusion of public perspectives and aesthetic preferences, and the exposure and potential critique of institutional contexts a step further by displaying visitors' artistic productions. The artwork of the museum's public can then become part of the museum's discourse with the public and, through them, with the art world. David Burton has written extensively on the exhibition of student art. He has stated that: "Art exhibition reaches beyond personal studio experiences and individual, critical, historical, and aesthetic observations to a dynamic, public interaction where students' art and learning penetrate deeply into the social dimension" (2001, p. 41). Furthermore, Burton (2004) has expressed that exhibiting student art promotes the creation of "partnerships ranging from individuals to the community" (p. 41). Enid Zimmerman (2010) reminds us that:

Displaying [student] works in public venues, where they can engage in a dialogue with multiple audiences, is of prime importance for their own education and that of community members who often need to be educated about the value of creative self-expression in visual art education. (p. 4)

Authors such as Elizabeth Auger Ashworth and Daniel H. Jarvis (2009), David Burton (2006, 2004, 2001), and Lara M. Lackey (2008) emphasize the importance of offering students opportunities to not only display their art, but to develop exhibitions of their art through engaging in conception, development, mounting, and assessment processes. Burton (2006) has highlighted that by involving students in such processes, educators invite students to engage in important aesthetic choices and offer students opportunities to view their work in a larger, social context.

As these authors outline, the benefits that students receive from exhibiting their work are obviously numerous. In the context of museums, the exhibition of visitors' work is also beneficial for museums as they attempt to meaningfully engage with audiences and employ more democratic practices. Because of this,

a selection of large-and medium-scaled museums have created dedicated spaces for the exhibition of community members' work. For example, the Community Gallery at the Gloucester City Museum in Scotland offers a space for the exhibition of work "from any type of local group" (Gloucester City and Folk Museums, 2011, para. 1). Another example is the Community Education Gallery in the Bellevue Arts Museum, which is located in Bellevue, Washington. Through this gallery, the museum "celebrate[s] and nurture[s] the community by featuring student work and exhibits that promote educational enrichment and cultural awareness" (Bellevue Arts Museum, 2012, para. 5). Such galleries offer locations for diverse publics to showcase their work in museum settings, infusing their own aesthetics into these spaces.

These advanced, engaging practices should be encouraged even more in museums if we are aiming for these institutions to become more democratically engaged with their publics. However, for art museum educators, it is not always possible to involve students in such lengthy processes. These important long-term activities may only be plausible for a couple of groups of students per year. Art museum educators often see a number of groups of students in a single day; School teachers, professors, and community workers often only have time and funding to bring students or community members to the gallery once per year; Exhibition schedules are typically extremely full; And, educators often have to comply with the goals of curators and directors, who may not agree with holding large student exhibits due to these factors, as well as the problems this may pose to the typical aesthetic ideals that such institutions may be aiming to display.

There are even more restrictions regarding resources in small art galleries. Such galleries lack space for displaying student work on a regular basis. Small non-

commercial galleries often have even greater financial constraints. These smaller, frequently lesser-known art institutions have to fight for governmental funding regularly. Additionally, these galleries do not typically receive financial gains from entrance fees, since it is not uncommon for these locations to offer free admission or very low entrance rates. Because of tight budgets, they typically have very few educational staff members, if any. Yet, like their larger museum counterparts, these small galleries are increasingly becoming interested in reaching out to diverse publics in meaningful ways. Because of this, education is becoming progressively more present in the minds of professionals in small gallery settings. The above-mentioned challenges for small galleries can make the development and exhibition of visitors' artwork particularly difficult for these institutions. But such practices certainly can assist these institutions in their efforts to reach out to diverse audiences in meaningful ways and better represent their communities.

Between 2006 and 2010, I worked as an art educator in collaboration with two small art galleries in Montreal. These locations had very limited resources, especially for education. At the time, these two galleries were interested in reaching out to more diverse audience members and engaging them in meaningful learning experiences. Additionally, they were developing learning policies around these notions. They wanted to ensure that diverse publics realize that these galleries are for them and are aiming to include their narratives. For the plethora of reasons outlined above, the inclusion of student work in these galleries became an important aspect of my work, albeit a challenging one. I began to ask myself:

How can educators working with small art galleries effectively infuse student work into these spaces on a regular basis?

In what follows, I outline three projects that I developed while working with the FOFA Gallery at Concordia University and La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, both in Montreal, Quebec. During these projects, I collaborated with non-traditional publics, including young children enrolled in a local daycare, high school students, and university students training to become generalist elementary teachers, in developing and displaying their work. Each project was uniquely suited for the gallery's situation at the time—the particular exhibit that was being showcased, the gallery's goals for learning experiences, the physical space of the gallery, the time restrictions in place, and the needs of the particular public that was being invited to participate in an artistic action. By aligning the projects to these circumstances and needs, I was able to provide meaningful experiences for my participants, to contribute to the galleries' efforts to reach out to diverse audiences in meaningful ways, and to ensure that these diverse publics understand that these spaces are for them and that they are encouraged to contribute to these galleries. The example projects will demonstrate a variety of ways that small art galleries and pre-school, K-12, and post-secondary teachers can enable the work of their students to take more social and empowering roles through display.

A local daycare and the FOFA Gallery

During my work with the FOFA Gallery, I developed an on-going relationship with a local daycare. These young students participated in a number of events and art workshops related to gallery programming. Over time, my colleagues at the FOFA Gallery and I felt that it was important to engage these students in a project that would enable them to exhibit their artwork in this venue. Emma Waltraud Howes and Caroline Boileau's 2008 project, *Moving the Gallery*, provided an ideal opportunity. During this exhibit, these artists took over the window space of the gallery over the course of two weeks. They slowly transformed the space, intermingling their two artistic processes.



Moving the Gallery, a project by Caroline Boileau and Emma Waltraud Howes,
FOFA Gallery vitrine, Concordia University, 2008.
Photo by Caroline Boileau.

Waltraud Howes and Boileau created dresses out of paper patterns and wore these during the opening of their show. Additionally, they exhibited these in the window space. These playful paper costumes certainly became a discussion piece amongst viewers. When worn, the dresses, ironic because of their reference to the process of constructing clothing and to child's play, seemed to transform these artists into live dolls, especially when they sat on the shelves they inserted into the space. Thus, imagination and transformation became the focus of our educational programming for the young daycare participants. We visited the children at their daycare and explored imaginative play with them. After reading *Jillian Jiggs* (Gilman, 2004), a children's book about a girl with an incredible imagination and seemingly endless amounts of energy, we asked the children to imaginatively transform a series of everyday objects that we had brought with us. For example a hair brush became an oar from a great expedition, a pen became a magic wand, and a chair became a throne.

Moving the Gallery,
a project by Caroline Boileau
and Emma Waltraud Howes,
FOFA Gallery vitrine,
Concordia University, 2008.
Photo by Stéphane Gilot.



One week later, we greeted these students at the FOFA Gallery. Waltraud Howes and Boileau were working on their collaborative project in the window space at the time. We discussed these artists' work with the children and explored their processes and creations from the hallway, as all spectators do. Then, the children were invited into the window space by the artists. Boileau and Waltraud Howes talked about their processes and focused on their paper dresses. This led to a paper costume-making workshop with Boileau and Waltraud Howes. The students were given tissue paper, mimicking the paper patterns used by these artists. Students made capes, crowns, dresses, magical bracelets, and many more fantastical objects. Polaroid photographs of the processes were taken by the artists and these images were left on the windows of the exhibit for passersby to view.



Moving the Gallery, a project by Caroline Boileau and Emma Waltraud Howes,
FOFA Gallery vitrine, Concordia University, 2008.
Photos by Natasha S. Reid.

Though this was not an entire exhibition of student work, the infiltration of these young students' artistic processes and products enabled the students to engage with the artworks, the artists, and the general public in meaningful ways. The child-participants made clear connections between their art and the work of the artists, referring to the exhibition's components, and adopting the artists' process-oriented and collaborative ways of working. Their enthusiasm for this activity was very evident to all of the facilitators. The children became significant and active contributors to these artists' work and to this space. In their *Moving the Gallery* exhibit, the artists' physical bodies and movements were very explicitly integral components of the artwork—they themselves became part of the artwork. Boileau and Waltraud Howes' work was highly process-oriented, so much so they created before the public's eyes. The children participated in similar performative actions, coinciding with the method of creation these artists were engaging in. These children's bodies, actions, and associated artworks became part of the exhibit. Furthermore, the students became part of the collaborative processes that Boileau and Waltraud Howes had been working with in *Moving the Gallery*.



Moving the Gallery, a project by Caroline Boileau and Emma Waltraud Howes,
FOFA Gallery vitrine, Concordia University, 2008.
Photo by Lynn Beavis.

A local secondary school and the FOFA Gallery



Acting Between | Body Space Time,
FOFA Gallery, Concordia University, 2007.
Photo by Natasha S. Reid.

The 2007 *Acting Between | Body Space Time* exhibit at the FOFA Gallery featured various artists whose work deals with recognition of the body as central to agency in the physical world (FOFA Gallery, 2007). The artists examined the presence, absence, and traces of bodies in space and time. For example, drawing on a previous performance held in Halifax, the Parasite Collective developed an audio tour of the installation at the FOFA Gallery, with multiple tracks directing participants in different ways around, through, and outside of the gallery. They asked participants to find hidden objects, to pull items from their coat pockets, and to look into a freezer located in the centre of the gallery. They also included documents from the Halifax performance, recalling the previous event. The participants created new memories of the past event through engaging with the fragments left behind by the artists and through interacting with this physical space.

Another example is Ana Rewakowicz's *SleepingBagDress*, which transforms from a kimono to a shelter built for two (FOFA Gallery, 2007). The work refers to transformation, transience, belonging, place, identity, and survival.



SleepingBagDress,
Ana Rewakowicz,
Foreman Art Gallery
at Bishops University,
2005.
Photo by François Lafrance.

Simultaneously, Candice Tarnowski's *May Day* work was being shown in the window space. The installation took visitors on a journey into a miniature world, inspired by *Gulliver's Travels*. When experiencing the work, one could imagine fantastical creatures existing in the space. The work evokes childhood experiences of fort construction, imaginative play, and storybooks.



May Day, Candice Tarnowski,
FOFA Gallery vitrine, Concordia University, 2007.
Photos by Paul Litherland.

Students from a local high school engaged in a guided visit of the main gallery. This guided visit focused on how our bodies act in space and time and the idea of traces of our bodies potentially being left behind. Additionally, when exploring Tarnowski's work, the students and I recalled childhood fantasies and engagement in free-play. During a studio workshop, students created clay sculptures of hybrid creatures that they could imagine living in Tarnowski's space. The sculptures were to be small enough to fit into the miniature tents in the window exhibit and were to be fantastical in nature, melding two or more animals or mythological creatures together. Students were then invited to reenter the main gallery and to strategically place their artworks in the space. They were informed that they were to leave these works on display for the duration of the exhibit, making these young artists part of the exhibit. This act broke down a barrier that seriously impedes the democratization of museums—the traditional emphasis on the hyper-valorization of technical skills and the sacredness of individual expression, which segregates so-called talented or gifted individuals from the rest of the community. Instead of emphasizing such hierarchies, this process focused on the importance of community and collective expression. This move from object-centered to community-centered practices is reminiscent of the primary goal set by UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) at a historic roundtable meeting held in Santiago, Chile in 1972. They called for a “move away from object-centered curatorship to new practices that put people and communities first” (Mutras & David, 2009, p. 150). This also parallels the AAM's 2002 report (*Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*), in that the artistic intervention demonstrated the gallery's public commitment and emphasis on the generation of meaningful encounters between the art institution and publics as opposed to object primacy.

These efforts can certainly pose a challenge to the traditional workings of museums and art galleries. Fortunately, Lynn Beavis, the director of the FOFA Gallery at the time, and I were committed to increasing active community engagement within the gallery and were open to promoting alternative practices in this effort. Additionally, this philosophy parallels the trend in contemporary artistic practices that places a greater focus on interactions between publics and artworks. Illeris (2005) has outlined this new tendency:

During the last decades there has been a significant shift in the art world from a prevalence of artworks

inscribed in modernist aesthetics to an increasingly intense focus on art as social settings inscribed in a different form of aesthetics, which the French critic Nicholas Borriaud has conceptualized as ‘relational’. (p. 235)

Artists working with relational aesthetics create “experiences to engage in” (p. 235), transforming audience members from viewers to participants engaged in a social relationship. Many of the works in *Acting Between | Body Space Time* contained elements of relational aesthetics, notably, the work of the Parasite collective. Thus, our decision to focus on community practice and active engagement in the artistic intervention connected to the aesthetic trends in contemporary practice that were featured in this exhibition.

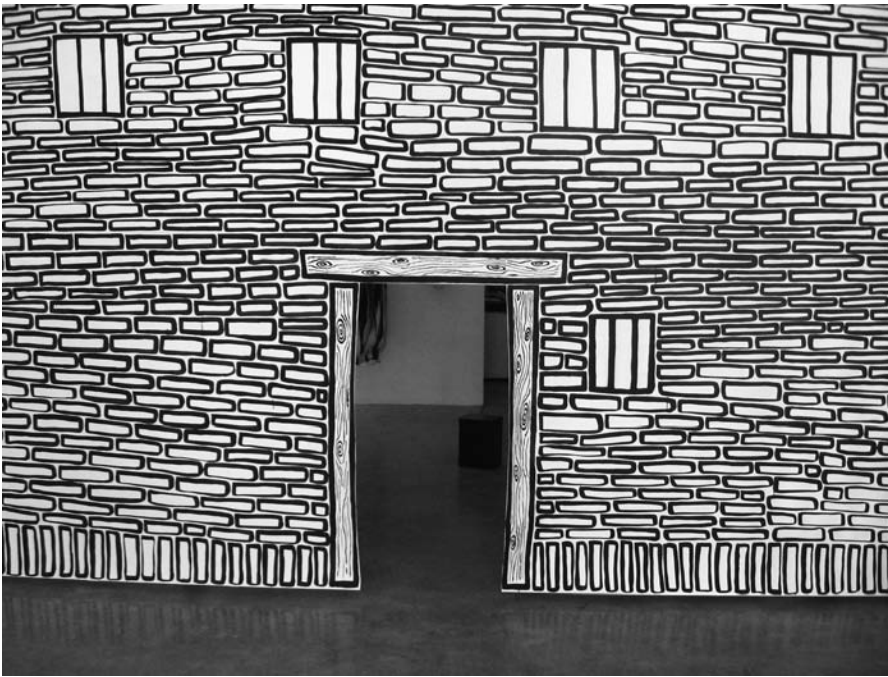
Additionally, this artistic intervention spoke to the main premise behind the *Acting Between | Body Space Time* show, as the students left traces of their bodies in space and time within the gallery environment and referred to the *May Day* show in the windows. There were visitors in the gallery at the time of this intervention, and they certainly witnessed the processes these students were engaging in. By leaving their work in the space, the students were able to communicate with visiting publics over the course of the weeks following the intervention, forcing these audiences to question where these creatures came from and who created them. Similar to the Parasite Collective, these works asked audiences to pay attention to details left behind by someone who had previously been in the space. Like Rewakowicz's *Sleeping Bag Dress*, these students' works referred to transformation, through their hybrid forms, as well as survival, as students were careful to place their objects in sheltered spaces, where visitors would not accidentally step on them. The works also clearly spoke to Tarnowski's *May Day*, as these creatures looked as though they just might have escaped from the dream-like window display.

Students were engaged in discussions relating to identity after they made their interventions. They were asked how they felt about leaving their work in the exhibition; what it meant to leave this trace of themselves behind; whether or not the act of leaving the sculpture behind was an artistic act in and of itself; if this felt like a rebellious act; how being anonymous felt in relationship to their artistic identities, and so on. Discussions about identity, anonymity, and subversion, as they relate to artistic practices were certainly appreciated by this group of adolescent girls.

Art in Early Childhood students and La Centrale

During Cynthia Girard's *Tyran Tritri* exhibit at La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, I engaged my students from the *Art in Early Childhood* course at Concordia University in an experience at this artist-run centre. Students in this class were engaged in a generalist teacher preparation program and were required to take this course in art education. The vast majority of these students had little formal experience with art throughout their lives, and had not entered contemporary galleries or artist-run centres like La Centrale, which left many of them fearful of engaging in artistic creation and interacting with contemporary gallery spaces. This course introduces students to methods for engaging young children in stimulating and meaningful artistic experiences and aims to make these student-teachers more comfortable with the idea of teaching art in their future classrooms. In the classes leading up to the event at La Centrale, I led students through a number of *papier mâché* workshops where they were guided to create imaginary bird sculptures—a lesson meant to inspire them in how they could work with their future early childhood students. Following this, I asked the students to meet me at La Centrale.

Girard's exhibit was clearly related to the work that we had been conducting in previous weeks. The exhibit was centred around *tyran tritri*, which is a North American bird known for being aggressive and territorial. A painting of the bird was featured, along with a costume of *tyran tritri* made of *papier mâché*, which the artist wore in a performance during the opening. An enormous, menacing black paper glove was close to the front of the gallery. Yet, the most clearly apparent feature of the installation was a prison wall, constructed out of paper and paint, which separated the gallery into two spaces, and left only a small door for access to the other side of gallery, where sounds of softly singing birds filled the space.



Tyran Tri Tri, Cynthia Girard, La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, 2007. Photos by Natasha S. Reid.

The gallery programmer introduced the students to the origin of La Centrale—an artist-run centre and gallery space that was established in 1973 by a group of women attempting to create an alternative exhibition space, since, particularly at the time, the art world predominantly supported the work of male artists in an overt manner. She discussed the main premises behind artist-run centres, focusing on how these organizations break traditional barriers set up in the art world, as artists take control of programming. This led to a discussion about the obvious barrier presented in Girard's exhibition—the prison wall. A lively discussion about physical and metaphorical barriers in society evolved. Equipped with digital cameras, students were then invited to find such barriers present in the vicinity surrounding La Centrale. Following this, students engaged in a dialogue, in which they shared their experiences and findings. Students revealed that barriers can be disruptive, restrictive, demeaning, and political. They also found that some barriers provided safety, security, and comfort.

The final step in the workshop asked students to engage with the material most clearly present in Girard's exhibition—paper. All of the studio assignments in this class focused on introducing generalist teachers to the processes involved in teaching art to young children. As such, in this workshop, participants were asked to imagine they were young children while creating their works. In order to examine the concept of barriers through an artistic intervention suitable for early childhood students, we focused on eggs as a symbol for cherished, fragile entities in need of a protective barrier. They were given one chocolate egg each and instructed to envision a precious object or entity inside this egg. In groups of three, they were asked to use black and white paper, the same shades used by Girard, to create innovative barriers to protect these precious eggs. Students collaboratively created their structures, which took a number of forms, including torches, getaway cars, and booby-trap nests.

La Centrale is located on a very busy section of Montreal's main street—St. Laurent. The gallery features a large window on street level, enabling passersby to view the artwork inside. Some exhibits are entirely meant to be viewed from the street, particularly during the staff's winter vacation. As the students in my class worked diligently on their constructions, people passing by would stop to look into the window to see their processes and products. It was apparent that a great number of people were drawn to this display, which was partially due to the fact that Cynthia Girard had the sound of someone knocking on the window amplified onto the street during this exhibition. Curious passersby walked up to the window, wondering what was going on inside. As Girard has mentioned, this knocking sound accentuates the fact that the window is a barrier between those on the street and who and what is contained in the gallery, making those inside feel like birds in a cage. It also naturally draws the attention of people, as we are conditioned to respond to a knock on a door or window.



Photo by Natasha S. Reid.



Artwork by
Tina Cutrone,
Ann-Marie Desrosiers,
Christine Laroche, &
Jennifer Moore,
La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, 2009.
Photo by Natasha S. Reid.



Artwork by
Paweena Manotipya,
Kaylin Pearce, &
Yi-Ching Peng,
La Centrale Galerie
Powerhouse, 2009.
Photos by Natasha S. Reid.



By creating and displaying this work based on the concept of barriers, these students engaged with the meaning behind Girard's artworks in this exhibit, as well as some of the main ideas behind artist-run centres in an age-appropriate activity for their future early childhood students. Since their work was so clearly visible from the street, students were given the opportunity to communicate with those on the other side of the window. In the case of this exhibition, it was not possible to leave these students' work on display for the duration of Girard's show. A permanent intervention would have required significant collaboration between La Centrale's programmers, the artist, and me. This would have been a highly involved and lengthy process, since artist-run centres engage in very collaborative procedures with their members. I did not embark on this process, as I was working as a very occasional volunteer at La Centrale at the time of the intervention. Additionally, my students' works were relatively large and very apparent, which would have disrupted Girard's work if the pieces had remained in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. Thus, unlike the example of the *Moving the Gallery* show and the *Acting Between | Body Space Time* exhibition, the work of these students was entirely temporary, leaving no traces behind after we left the artist-run centre. Despite this time restriction on their artwork, the students were able to see how their art can take on important social roles when displayed. This eventually led to discussions focused on the importance of enabling young children opportunities to display their works in public places. The student-teachers expressed how important this hands-on, empowering activity was to them in this introductory art education course.

Conclusions

In each of these projects, I was engaged as a gallery educator, challenged by time, space, and resources. The groups that I worked with—young children from a daycare, adolescent girls, and future generalist teachers—could certainly be considered non-traditional museum publics. I was aiming to offer these individuals opportunities to feel a sense of belonging in these spaces, to experience meaningful encounters with the artworks on exhibit, and to display their artistic productions and processes to the wider public. To achieve this, I found innovative, appropriate, and meaningful ways to display these participants' work in the gallery spaces through connecting to the artists' intentions, through using the way that the space was set-up, through working with the particular needs and interests of the participating publics, and through abiding with the particular restrictions on space and time that I was faced with. Through these efforts, many of the barriers between these non-traditional museum visitors and the gallery, the artists, and the general public were transcended. The students, gallery employees, and, in the case of the *Moving the Gallery* exhibit, the artists, collaborated and mutually benefited from the processes. Such mindful infusion of student art into gallery spaces can assist galleries in becoming more democratic institutions, and could lead to longer-term collaborations with diverse publics that include more involved exhibition development processes. This important, underused practice could become one of museum and gallery educators' best practices as they aim to help their institutions become actively and meaningfully connected with diverse audiences and become more democratic centres in the 21st century.

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