

REGIONALISM: RE-DEFINING A SENSE OF PLACE

Moderated by Darrin Martens and Jennifer Woodbury (with input from Catharine Mastin)

Present:

Virginia Eichhorn	Tom Thomson Art Gallery
Darrin Martens	Burnaby Art Gallery
Alexandra Montgomery	Gardiner Museum
Nataley Nagy	Kelowna Art Gallery
Sheila Perry	The Rooms
Celeste Scopelites	Art Gallery of Peterborough
Anthony Shelton	Museum of Anthropology
Robert Steven	The Prairie Art Gallery
Matthew Teitelbaum	Art Gallery of Ontario
Jennifer Woodbury	Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

Darrin gave an introduction to the discussion touching on ideas around the concept of regionalism as being relevant in a global art economy and how do we define regionalism. Jennifer added that there was the hope that a position of commonality would come out of this discussion. The discussion was then opened to all participants.

Alexandra: The context in which you operate is important, e.g. she shares the same region as ROM and AGO. She asked how regions can affect and impact how organizations collaborate or work collectively and asked how we can collaborate while protecting the best interests of our individual organizations.

She suggested that one needs to approach it proactively from position of strength not fear; collaborations should support expertise and should be used strategically to strengthen organizations.

There are many ways to define region; it can be national, provincial or municipal but can also mean peers and colleagues.

We need to have trust in each other for collaborations to be successful. We need to collaborate but also maintain our identities.

We need to emphasize why we matter and why communities should care about having a gallery/museums in their community. We need to convey why cultural institutions matter to community members, including those who don't participate in them.

Darrin: Collaborating seems to be part of the culture of our industry. The artist-run centres seem to collaborate more. Perhaps that's a result of scale. Is being a larger institution a stumbling block?

Virginia: Shortly after starting at the Tom Thomson, she met with the Museums manager and suggested the three organizations collaborate on marketing and programming. Museums manager's response was "Why would I want to do that?" One can only collaborate if the partners are willing and recognize it as a mutually beneficial opportunity. As of one month ago, Museums manager left and the

TOM is now running the museums and implementing collaborative marketing and programming opportunities.

Sheila: The ability to collaborate is hindered not so much by size of organization but by time constraints. Larger institutions need more than a few weeks notice to effectively collaborate. They are most likely to partner with groups of similar capacity to plan further ahead. This can lead to missed opportunities. For The Rooms, regionalism is intra-provincial and can be challenging. “Collaboration” isn’t just The Rooms doing the work for others. The Atlantic Provinces Art Council (APAC) is one means of dealing with the geographic challenges to collaborating – things like setting up a yearly curatorial retreat is one means of making things happen.

Anthony: Regionalism can’t really be defined without looking at globalism. All his curators and manager have national and international networks. As such, MOA has become a hub and centre of negotiation as they develop programmes. MOA does labour intensive temporary exhibitions that cost a good deal, they don’t really have the budget for them and they don’t travel the exhibitions. There is a need to establish a forum to look at what shows we have on and how we can work together on them.

Darrin: There is resistance to collaborating from some groups.

Alexandra: There is a need to look at how to leverage investments in exhibitions and to look at alternatives (such as on-line programming) so that there’s a legacy to those investments.

Jennifer: There is a need to share resources and vision. She suggested that staff as well as the Directors need to investigate those opportunities. The personality of people involved makes a big difference (positive and negative). We need a forum to bring those possibilities forward.

Robert: Respect and honesty are key to successful collaboration. There is the impression that if you are a smaller institution or far away from a large metropolis, then you are less of a professional. Attracting people to Grand Prairie is difficult. Ambitious artists and professionals leave. Regional galleries need to “lead from the edges.” There are significant challenges but also significant opportunities. We need to find ways of saying we respect each other, even if we’re different and even if we’re smaller. We need to get over the idea of ghettoization – including in our own minds. How do we distinguish ourselves as professionals?

Alexandra: The challenges of being deemed as “lesser professionals” is a challenge even in larger cities such as Toronto. Relationships help develop confidence in our professionalism.

Jennifer: All her staff come from somewhere else and their links to the community are therefore tenuous. Assumptions about professionalism and opportunities are often made based on geography.

Sheila: The fiscal challenges that are being faced now may help to make the environment we operate in more malleable. Economic challenges may encourage more opportunities for collaboration to happen.

Celeste: This is a prime time to develop a new model. The Art Gallery of Peterborough is starting to programme in anticipation of other events that occur in the community e.g. an international film festival. APG and Artspace (the local artist-run centre) were started in the same year and they are

working together to re-ignite that synergy through collaborating. Regional galleries feed the larger galleries.

Robert: If you live in a town of 50,000 and there are only one or two professional artists and the rest are amateurs, how do you nurture standards of artistic excellence?

Darrin: We need to look for opportunities to work with others to build capacity (cited the Pacific Standard Time Project).

Virginia: The TOM has initiated a multi-year project involving a number of different communities and organizations (Ontario, Nfld, BC so far) including culture and business, under the title of “Canadian Spirit”. Each year is a different theme – projects are highlighted and promoted on the web [www.canadianspirit.org](http://www.canadianspirit.org). 2012 is the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Tom Thomson’s first trip to Algonquin, each year is a different theme leading up to “2017: Someday they will know what I mean” which is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tom’s death and 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary for many of the public art galleries. Organizations are starting to come to us to find out how to get involved.

Robert: The Prairie Art Gallery doesn’t have audience challenges as per capita they have a higher attendance than MOMA. They serve a geographic region that is larger than France. There is a duty to research and document their regional culture but they’re challenged by the fact that most successful artists move away; there isn’t much rigorous art work there. How do you document/support regional art that doesn’t have very high standards?

Anthony: Do we need to circulate what we do through the regions?

Celeste: So many artists are drawn to Toronto. Can we act as a bridge to TO? We need to encourage looking to the regional communities and what they’re doing.

Robert: It feels paternalistic to tell local culture that TO is better but we also can’t tell our local audience that the local art is as good as what’s in TO when it isn’t.

Anthony: Cited the Alert Bay/Dresden exchange as an example of the potential for meaningful and unexpected possibilities.

Sheila: Like Robert, we have similar issues. One is that there isn’t a level of production that is available for doing major shows on regional artists. Artists in Nfld often think and plan more for production and sales than exhibitions. The Rooms started the Elbow Room Residency for emerging and mid-career artists to support them in creating work that goes to the next level. They then get a small show at the gallery. It’s a way of trying to plant a seed so that they will push themselves.

Darrin: We have been working with CARFAC BC on professional development seminars for artists to boost their capacity and we work with local schools.

Jennifer: The Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba has two gallery spaces, one professional, one as a community gallery space. Sometimes we need to be firm and stand up for professional standards.

Robert: PAG got rid of doing shows of children's art work as it led people to feel entitled to shows there. There is no way to not be paternalistic.

Nataley: In Kelowna young people don't stay. Some professional artists come to retire but there is a responsibility to bring art the community should see.

Alexandra: Big theme shows usually bring in the crowds. There is a need for diversity and to measure success in many different ways. We need to look at why we are doing what we are doing and also how we define our peers.

Matthew: We need to see what the audience wants, to define who are we serving and why are we serving them. The sense of public interaction with art museums has changed from when we entered the profession. Not for profit museums need to always, always rethink their mission and relevance. Cited MOD example. We need to ALWAYS think and rethink what we're doing.

Alexandra: It comes down to who do we serve, why and how do we do it without compromising our core values. We need to look at allocating revenues differently ie not just traditional exhibitions. Authentic experience with objects is important but how do we do it and stay relevant? Objects are conduits for cultural and social discussion. Cited MOMA on-line courses.

Nataley: The Kelowna Art Gallery has just started strategic planning and the questions being asked include:

- Who is important to us?
- What do we want them to know?
- Do they care?
- How will we know they care?
- How will we ensure what we say about ourselves is true.

They will be inviting experts in different areas to talk about how they accomplished things that are/could be relevant to Kelowna. It will likely be a six month process.

Darrin: Every two years they check in with community to see if mission and values are still relevant. They are an institution that is always changing. Now in the process of discussing hubs and satellites as malleable sites.

Virginia: In the fall we started an off-site programme "TTAG - You're It!" Partnering with the mall and DIA – creating interventions, site specific installations, hands on activities, performance and live art projects. Very positive response and we're seeing a new audience also coming to the TOM proper as a result of these outreach activities.

Robert: There has to be a reason why we assume art is important and from there serve that belief.

Nataley: How is a public good different than social good? How do we develop real measures and justify what we do?

Alexandra: We don't want polarization but we need to make everyone understand that a gallery is an important part of a community. We can't win on an economic argument but we can speak to community cohesion.

Anthony: We're in a battlefield and we need to make the most of this opportunity.

Robert: Preservation of art works for future generations is a public good. Social good is becoming a better part of society.

Alexandra: Need to go beyond the art gallery and look at new opportunities for partnership.

Matthew: He attended this session to understand how the centre is understood by those outside of the centre but am sceptical about partnerships; the AGO has alliances but very few real partnerships. He asked how many of the regional galleries had had successful partnerships with larger institutions.

Jennifer, Alexandra, Darrin, Sheila and Virginia responded with examples. They were all different examples but the common ingredient of success was that there were clearly delineated and understood areas of responsibilities for the partners involved.

There was a discussion around Google Art and whether/why it is important. Matthew said we need to recognize that the on-screen experience is also authentic. He sees Google Art as an engine for international interest and contextualization e.g. Emily Carr is on the same site as Michelangelo.

There was a discussion around synchronized exhibitions and exploring common themes. Celeste cited the success of the Group Of Seven project that had been organized by the Ontario Association of Art Galleries (OAAG).

Matthew: Regionalism is everywhere. In TO, everyone wants to be in NYC. At the AGO they'll never have enough money and never have a collection like the Louvre but we have our ideas and they could be great. That's what we can own. We can be as good as anybody, anywhere. We need to believe this.