John Anthony Rubino

John Rubino is an arts educator and independent museum consultant with an extensive background in environment design and art direction for film. After graduating from the Institute for Art and Restoration in Florence Italy, John assumed the role of production designer on the feature film 32 Short Films about Glenn Gould. In his museum work, he has focused on exhibition as a medium for public engagement. At the Royal Ontario Museum’s Institute for Contemporary Culture, he developed adult and community programs for the exhibitions Shanghai Kaleidoscope and Housepaint, Phase 2: Shelter, a major exhibition on street art. Along with fellow Museum Studies graduate Valentine Moreno, John traveled to Venice with the curators of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery to open the Canada Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art. He is currently co-chair of the Royal Ontario Museum Advisory Committee on Accessible Exhibition Design.

Abstract

The social life of Canadian art museums is evolving as institutions adopt more experiential models of public programming. Today, visitor-centred approaches to public programs delivery exist alongside, or in place of, traditional tours and lectures, standardized presentation formats which tend to operate through the unidirectional transmission of art historical and curatorial knowledge. Contemporary programming strategies, on the other hand, encourage audience participation and often take place in creative, dialogic and relational settings. In a 2009 survey of 15 art museums and galleries in the Southern Ontario and Ottawa region, John Rubino conducted a series of live, telephone and e-mail interviews with museum curators and public programs directors in order to develop an overview of the current state of adult museum programs. Audience development was a key concern shared by the survey respondents, yet attendance was not the only factor determining the types of programs offered. Curators and directors expressed a wide range of reasons for the design of their respective programs, articulating philosophical positions that were as various as the programs themselves. The results of this comprehensive survey have been compiled in the following report, which describes the numerous programming formats adopted and identifies 7 strategies currently being deployed in art museums: visual culture and contemporary world culture; local culture; artist practices; social environment; community; education; and professional development.

Introduction

Methodology

In order to draw out underlying approaches to their work, and to understand the state of public programming practice in contemporary Canadian art galleries today, John Rubino, a graduate student in the University of Toronto Museum Studies Program conducted in-depth, live, email and telephone interviews with curators and public programs directors from 15 art galleries in the Southern Ontario/ Ottawa
region. Baseline interviews were conducted with all participants between July and September 2009, and follow-up interviews were conducted during the same period on the basis of the original responses. The interview questions were designed to ascertain the nature of adult public programming practice in individual galleries, and questions focused upon the type, structure, intent and outcomes of programming initiatives. The study is qualitative, designed to provide a general overview of current practices and to locate specific strategies. No attempt was made to rate or rank the programming practices or the institutions responsible for them.

Participants

A total of 20 art galleries were contacted and 15 of these participated in interviews. All of the respondents were individuals directly responsible for the direction, creation and maintenance of the public programs in their respective institutions.

Participating Institutions

- Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University, Kingston
- Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
- Art Gallery of Peterborough, Peterborough
- Art Gallery of York University, Toronto
- Institute for Contemporary Culture, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto
- Justina M. Barnicke Art Gallery, University of Toronto, Toronto
- London Regional Art and Historical Museums, London
- McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton
- McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg
- Mercer Union Centre For Contemporary Visual Art, Toronto
- Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto
- National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
- Oakville Galleries, Oakville
- The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto
- University of Toronto Art Centre, University of Toronto, Toronto

The Frame: Galleries Portraying Contemporary Art

Each of the galleries in this survey represented a unique approach to programming for contemporary art. The different approaches depended on a number of factors including: the availability of resources and talent; the programming philosophy of the institution; the material or thematic content of collections, exhibitions, presentations or performances; the intended “target” audiences of programs; and, the precise nature of the aesthetic or educational experiences. In order
to frame the basic concerns of public programming in terms of the main functions of galleries, the presentation of artworks, survey respondents were asked how they chose to portray contemporary art within their programs:

How do you portray contemporary art within your programs?

a. As a product of culture  
b. As a product of individual creation  
c. As part of history or art history  
d. Within a theoretical context  
e. Other  

The Assistant Curator of Programs at a large urban gallery responded: “the current thinking is that contemporary art embraces all of these things. The extent to which we emphasize one aspect or another depends on the project, the interests of the artist, curator, speaker or animator” (J. Davies, personal communication, August 19, 2009). Most of the respondents agreed that this was the case, but the exceptions are noteworthy. Points of contention were the relevance of art historical and theoretical approaches to the interpretation of artworks. A number of galleries were uncomfortable with the notion of art history as the focus of exhibition and programming content. The over-emphasis on art historical approaches was seen as restrictive, even by representatives of more traditional institutions where art historical interpretation is the norm. One respondent noted that art history can overshadow other important elements of collections, such as political or social content. One university gallery representative stated that he considered art history an academic, elitist approach to the understanding of contemporary art, maintaining that the limitations for interpretation are inherent to the discipline itself. Another respondent believed that art history could be a significant aspect of programming, but only as “it relates to artist practices that are often in dialogue with art history” (E. Gaito, personal communication, August 7, 2009).  

A majority of the respondents stated that theoretical contexts played little or no role in their interpretation of contemporary art for the public. The main reason given for this was the audiences themselves, which may not have the interest or expertise to deal with theoretical content. Several respondents stated that their galleries currently had no audience for theoretical content, and that certain visitors would find an emphasis on theory to be intimidating or confusing. One gallery representative indicated that curators might seek out artists based on specific theoretical criteria. In these cases, theory played a significant role in curatorial conceptions, which could ultimately reflect upon the understanding of exhibitions, whether or not theory was explicitly taken up in public programs.  

The galleries surveyed offered a number of additional approaches for the portrayal of contemporary art. Respondents from two of the more traditional
institutions in the study stated that interpretation was organized to facilitate the views and expressions of experts or to focus the themes of exhibitions. Two smaller galleries, a public gallery and a university gallery, emphasized that their approach to interpretation was not academic, but instead “driven by artists.” Curators at the university gallery conceived their interpretation as a process of “mimicking artist strategies,” in which all the cues came from individual artistic methodology (P. Monk, personal communication, August 4, 2009). One respondent, from a major exhibiting gallery in an urban area, stated that his gallery’s aim was to promote ongoing dialogue on the nature of contemporary art (J. Davies, personal communication, August 19, 2009), while another respondent from a public gallery in a suburban area proposes interpretation as a “tool for social engagement” (C. Sicot, personal communication, July 22, 2009). In addition, one representative from a downtown university gallery took this thinking a step further, maintaining that interpretive programs could operate as vehicles for institutional or cultural critique.

**Programming Approaches and Forms of Practice**

**Approach: to highlight themes in contemporary world culture and visual culture (focus on culture)**

In the description of its contemporary art collection on its official website, the National Gallery of Canada links contemporary art practices with social issues:

“Seeking out different ways to engage with the larger social and political state of the world, contemporary artists continue to choose interdisciplinary modes of self-expression that transcend and explode the traditional categories, materials and genres of art.” (The National Gallery of Canada)

The McMaster Museum of Art’s mission states that one of its main goals is “to engage the public in an understanding of, debate with, and engagement with, the many ways in which the visual arts define themselves and the world we live in” (McMaster Museum of Art). The survey respondent from the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) emphasized that their programs are motivated by themes and issues pertinent to the human condition, while a representative from Oakville Galleries indicated that their programs are designed to create links between exhibitions and states of the world.

The development and creation of culture was a major concern of public programmers in this survey. A respondent from the McMichael Canadian Art Collection noted that his institution maintained an unstated but pronounced attachment to the concept of “Canadian culture writ large,” and that this was an area that public programming could explore, enhancing and perhaps redefining Canadian cultural principles through the visual arts (S. McDonald, personal communication, August 12, 2009). The respondent from the Art Gallery of Peterborough contrasted the functions of museums and galleries in the creation of culture. She stated that the role of the gallery verses that of the museum is one of “leading not following,” maintaining that art galleries lead in the development of new culture and push culture forward, whereas museums follow culture in their evaluation of historic, cultural
movements (J. Wild, personal communication, July 22, 2009). She noted that, although art galleries may deal with history through retrospective exhibitions or surveys of art historical movements, galleries tend to deal with the history of creating thought and the generation of new ideas. In keeping with this notion, the Power Plant has framed their presentation of contemporary art as “the art of our time,” in an effort to show the present state of visual art and to document the most current practices and practitioners (J. Davies, personal communication, August 19, 2009). The respondent from the Power Plant described their programs as platforms or forums for discourse. One of the programs offered by the gallery is the International Speakers Series, designed to expose local audiences to issues in contemporary art and culture unfolding in the rest of the world. Although talks with international speakers are commonly offered by Ontario galleries, the strategy, in this case, is a deliberate attempt to promote a convergence of culture. Invoking the notions of international exchange, one respondent from the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) stated that his gallery tries to be global in its concerns. While, another university gallery, the McMaster Museum of Art, has formulated a local version of global discourse in its exploration of the role of contemporary art as it applies to interdisciplinary issues and to diverse communities within university and local populations. The programs consist of cross-disciplinary projects where specialists from various interests “collide” around discussions of visual culture.

Treating contemporary cultural issues in more informal formats, Oakville Galleries offers Conversations on the Porch, a mediated discussion group at its Garloch Gardens site. The Art Gallery of Ontario has also incorporated practices that promote direct dialogue with audiences into its adult course, Art in Dialogue: Exploring the New Installations at the AGO. Potential topics covered in the program include: “issues of power, myth and memory in the Canadian galleries; AIDS activism and globalism in the Contemporary galleries; and women in art and identity politics in the European galleries” (Art Gallery of Ontario). To articulate topics in contemporary culture, the Institute for Contemporary Culture (ICC) has also adopted dialogic strategies to programming, in direct correlation with its exhibition mandate. Respondents from the ICC offer as examples town hall discussions between audience members and expert speakers on political, social and urban issues raised by the contemporary art on exhibit.

**Approach: to build local culture or represent local artists (focus on local culture)**

Attending to local issues with public programs took a number of forms in the galleries surveyed. Many of the regional galleries had mandates to present contemporary work by artists from the immediate area, and programming activities were driven by the artistic production in the region, as well as the geographic distribution and demographic composition of communities. The respondent from Oakville Galleries indicated that her gallery’s community did not have a developed “art scene.” The gallery, therefore, needed “to create bridges” between their work and the specific needs of the community (C. Sicot, personal communication, July 22, 2009).
She admitted that, in practice, this is more challenging than programming practice might be in an urban area with a confirmed art gallery public. In order to engage the local community in the interpretation of artworks, Oakville Galleries recruits guest community mediators for exhibitions. Unlike community docents (trained, volunteer tour guides and teachers), community mediators are selected for their respective roles in the local community. For a recent outdoor exhibition of work by artist Alex Metcalf, featuring installations of interactive listening devices in nature, the gallery invited a geographer from an Oakville environmental advocacy organization to host a conversation group and to give a tour of the grounds in response to the pieces. In such cases, the guest speaker often invites a specific group to the gallery, and this particular event attracted an audience interested in nature. The curator at Oakville Galleries is cognizant of the fact that the local community contains a wide range of skill and interest groups. And, while seeking out new audiences from outside the art community, she conceives of her gallery as a “guild” in which all artists can potentially participate (C. Sicot, personal communication, July 22, 2009). A number of gallery representatives in this study insisted that attention to local culture should include the local art community, which may or may not have had previous formal contact with the institutions. A recent initiative by the Art Gallery of Peterborough brought together 30 local, indigenous artists in a 7-day, multidisciplinary art festival. For the Ode’min Gidis, or Strawberry Moon Festival, local first nations groups curated a major gallery exhibition. The festival also featured an outdoor market and convened a pow-wow (a gathering) in the adjacent Del Crarry Park.

The issue of the representation of local artists in both exhibitions and programs was a theme taken up by the respondent from MOCCA. The gallery’s location within a local art community has provided the rationale for a unique program, which consists of a series of learning sessions, talks and tours that begin in the gallery, then move to community spaces (classrooms or conference rooms), expanding outward into the city with visits to art dealers, collectors’ homes, other galleries and cultural institutions.

**Approach: to feature or follow artist practices (focus on artist strategies)**

Many of the gallery representatives participating in this study articulated the desire to represent current contemporary art practice within their programming, but the extent to which art practices actually guided programs varied greatly. Several galleries linked their programs to the specific concerns of artists raised in exhibitions, while the artists’ aesthetic approaches were less discussed. A handful of galleries featured artists working live on new projects, in settings more interactive than typical artist demonstrations. Five of the fifteen galleries had specifically chosen to adopt contemporary art practices as motivating factors in their programming. The AGYU had taken the decision to base not only public programming, but also the gallery’s entire institutional ethos on contemporary art practice. The gallery respondent describes the institutional mandate as a process of moving in tandem with artists: “We say we copy artists, but we also challenge artists and channel artists. We move in
parallel with artists and their creative strategies” (P. Monk, personal communication, August 4, 2009).

One of the first principles of this approach involves advocating for artists. The university gallery does this by supporting the practice of specific artists, but also with more formal methods such as writing on art practice. The first project undertaken by the gallery’s new assistant curator was a national survey on the economic status of Canadian artists. The gallery considers this project a program that promotes greater awareness of the issues confronting artists today. The nature of artist careers has also been the concern of initiatives undertaken by Mercer Union, the Justina M. Barnike Gallery (JMB) and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC). Mercer Union offers a program for recent art school graduates, Resource Group for Recent Grads, which brings the developing artists into contact with professionals in the arts as a means of career-building. The Exposures program, offered by AEAC, hosts local photographers in a master class situation to produce new works that later appeared in a juried exhibition.

Featuring artists in the act of production, in live performance situations, is a strategy deployed by a number of galleries to demonstrate art techniques and, to a lesser extent, to interpret collections and exhibitions. Three galleries in the study cited live performance as a means to revealing the processes and strategies that artists utilize in the development of their work. The Power Plant and Mercer Union sponsor series of live events and performances by independent artists, activities that are often interactive or relational in character. The respondent from the Power Plant notes that such performances can stand on their own as separate artistic works. The immediacy of live presentation and performance can serve to define current practice or to animate the gallery space. These were the dual objectives of an interactive exhibition program at the Institute for Contemporary Culture, which hosted several street artists to paint on the walls of the gallery over an extended period. The live painting sessions brought the artists into direct contact with the viewing public, offering opportunities for informal dialogue between the artists and their audience.

Deploying and Following Artist Practices

The JMB Gallery offers a yearly art performance program to young artists. In one of its configurations, this took the form of a weekend-long project, wherein video artists led a group of participants with little video-making experience to produce original film works. In this program, discrete from exhibition, practitioners were “invited to engage in the details of their practices” with young artists currently attending or recently graduated from post-secondary art education programs (T. Ajji, personal communication, July 30, 2009). In collaborative teams, the participants utilized the various environments of the historic Hart House student centre to create filmic scenarios complete with costumes and props. In the process, participants received basic instruction in camera, lighting and editing techniques.

Respondents from AGYU explicitly rejected academic approaches to public programming and have pursued instead an active policy of adopting artist strategies
in all of their activities. One respondent from AGYU stated: “[E]verything that we do is interpretive of the artists that we are exhibiting. We don’t necessarily have a separate education program anymore. Our exhibitions and our forms of interpretation are our adult programs, which are not conceived on an academic model” (P. Monk, personal communication, August 4, 2009). Embodying this philosophy, the gallery works closely with artists on multi-phase projects that serve to generate new work authored by professional artists as well as public program participants. In this model, artist practices come to influence not only the direction of interpretation and public programming, but also the workings of the institution itself.

We took every function of the institution as being an intellectual endeavor on one hand, and being an artist project on the other hand, and we would commission artists to work with us. We began to use the whole institution as an interpretive device... (P. Monk, personal communication, August 4, 2009).

Partnering with selected artists, the gallery instituted an artist residency program at the Drake Hotel in Toronto. Over the years, their sponsorship of artists has expanded into national and international artist residency exchange programs, which re-iterate the principles of collaborative interchange and parallel production between the institution and the artists. In its enactment of artist strategies, the gallery sees its work as performative. “Instead of being a synthesis - that we translate an artist’s work for the public - we perform it” (P. Monk, personal communication, August 4, 2009). This approach can take several formats including artist-led community projects and instructional workshops, as well as interactive events where the public participates directly in the artist-led initiatives. An example of this is the performance bus, a regularly scheduled trip from the downtown core to the suburban gallery, wherein artist/hosts engage the public in performative activities en route.

**Approach: to create a social environment (focus on the promotion of an art scene or the development new art audiences)**

To “build a social and cultural milieu, a creative social scene” are central programming objectives of the artist-run gallery, Mercer Union. The curator of programmes at Mercer maintains that social participation can spur creative collaboration, sustaining the gallery’s role in “artist development” (E. Gaito, personal communication, August 7, 2009). No other galleries connected social activity directly to creative production, but a number of survey respondents linked social activity to educational and audience development initiatives. Both Mercer Union and the London Regional and Historical Museum stage events styled on Open Mic Nights, in which audience members interact with visiting artists. The London Museum has also offered dance lessons in conjunction with their exhibition Dance Hall Daze, in a program that was meant to entertain, instruct and interpret the exhibition. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) regularly runs the program ArtBites, a 3 to 4-week course that focuses on one exhibition each week in an hour-long talk. A night course, ArtBites provides an informal approach to art viewing for working adults with free evenings. The National Gallery’s Enquiring Eye program combines education and social activity in a 60-minute tour followed by discussion over coffee. For the last three
years, the National Gallery has hosted Artsparks, a DJ and crafts night designed to reach an 18+ audience. The multi-media event features visiting artists and includes hands-on components in an educational, social setting. Also geared to younger patrons, The Power Plant’s Saturday Playlist is a weekly, outdoor summer event featuring live music and DJ performances. Many of the socially-oriented programs described by participants in this study cater to specific demographic or interest groups in strategies designed to build new or underrepresented audiences. All of the galleries surveyed also pursue event-based fund-raising initiatives, which tend to be categorized as development ventures rather than public programs.

Approach: to link with communities and community agencies, or to act as a community resource (focus on community service)

A significant number of the institutions in this study have begun to conceive of their work in terms of the communities that they wish to serve, establishing partnerships with community organizations and inviting contributions from individuals and community groups. These initiatives have included: hosting community groups in gallery tours and visits, classes and workshops; presenting collaboratively developed exhibitions; coordinating or hosting festivals which target cultural or interest groups; sponsoring community art projects and interventions; and, pursuing co-projects with institutions that have complimentary interests or audiences. Often, these programming initiatives take place off-site, in spaces related to the communities of practice. Oakville Galleries has had several successful programs with the city’s main public library, in which one of the gallery’s exhibit spaces is also housed. Together the library and gallery offer lectures, discussions and readings which feature visiting authors. The gallery normally consults with the library to identify writers whose subjects form links with standing exhibitions. The library markets the events to their own audience, helping to increase attendance to both the library event and the gallery exhibition. In a similarly directed program, Mercer Union hosts a test reading series, which attracts a literary community not usually associated with the gallery. Such programs are not usually tied to exhibitions, and tend to attract a more diverse public. The respondent from Mercer explained that multidisciplinarity is an explicit goal of the gallery, and the institution deliberately “cultivate(s) relationships with individuals in ancillary fields who...bring another dimension to the business of the gallery...” (C. Sicot, personal communication, July 22, 2009).

Programming for diverse community interest groups demonstrably enhances gallery audiences, and a number of respondents in the study cited the capacity of community partnerships to build networks. The Curator of Outreach at the Justina Barnicke Gallery has had the specific mandate to consider the “city as a site of convergence of many diasporic and political communities,” and many of his projects have focused upon cross-cultural exchange between the Toronto’s diverse communities, as represented in the University of Toronto’s several colleges and departments such as African, Caribbean, South Asian and Equity Studies (T. Ajji, personal communication, July 30, 2009). Oakville Galleries has conceived their most recent project as a citywide network that utilizes the skills and resources of various
community organizations and institutions. Treating the histories of World I and II, the Vimy Ridge Project featured events and exhibitions at the Oakville Centre for Performing Arts, the Oakville Museum and Appleby College, as well as at the gallery. The sponsor organizations are marketing the gallery programs jointly, developing a website together, and offering a bus trip to and from three of the exhibition locations. The project represents an expansion of the gallery’s work with community agencies such as the public library. Like Oakville Galleries, MOCCA has partnered with local community institutions for the multi-venue learning sessions and tours of the Inside-Out Program. In a unique initiative by the University of Toronto Art Centre, the gallery space was just one of the locations for a community-generated performance project. Co-presented with the Chinese music group Tanso, an organization with contacts in the Chinese student community, UTAC staged a live concert in the gallery that linked simultaneously to performers in China through a live audio-video feed. The result was a collective concert, or performance artwork, that existed both in the gallery space and on an online network.

The galleries in the study presented a number of formats for hosting and networking with community groups. Increasingly, these strategies intersect with the central aspects of gallery work, namely the production of exhibitions or the creation of artworks for the purpose of exhibition. The galleries that promote community contribution to their exhibition practice deploy a range of strategies that incorporate varying degrees of community participation. A simple but effective strategy was undertaken the McMichael Canadian Collection to develop a survey-based, community-curated exhibition. The program, called Favourite 40, involved asking gallery patrons to select their favourite pieces from the gallery’s permanent collection for inclusion in an exhibition of 40 works. The final exhibition featured audience comments in exhibition text as part of the interpretation. In another major initiative, the Art Gallery of Ontario asked individuals and community groups, including the Adelaide Women’s Centre and the youth art organizations Sketch and Artstarts, to submit post-card sized self portraits in any medium for the exhibition, In Your Face: The People’s Portrait Project. The gallery sent out the original call for submissions by e-mail in January 2007, and by July of that year had received over 10,000 submissions. All of the portraits that met the criteria were included in a floor-to-ceiling display in the Zacks Gallery. Submissions of portraits regularly arrived at the gallery in batches, having been created as school projects, or by families, clubs or entire communities. The responses indicated that these groups had voluntarily taken up the museum project, translating it in terms of their own community structures.

Whereas In Your Face activated communities and individuals to represent themselves, the Peterborough Art Gallery’s Links to Wellness exhibition (May - July 2009) featured artworks that depicted the shared experiences of a marginalized group. Developed for young adults (late teens and early 20s) who had had previous interaction with the psychiatric system, Links to Wellness involved a series of art-making workshops with a community artist-facilitator. The participants produced art pieces in various media, which were often autobiographical in nature. The works included several self-portraits, and almost all the pieces documented the participants’
mental health issues and their involvement with the system. A form of social critique, the exhibition posited another form of therapeutic intervention: art-making. Oakville Galleries also works directly with youth who have experienced social and institutional segregation. For several years, the gallery has offered programs to a school for special needs students in the city of Hamilton. Using art “as a tool for social and civic engagement,” the gallery is also undertaking a series of art-based outreach projects directed at community groups, such as seniors, teens, newcomers to Canada, local artists and crafters, titled Art for Life: New Models for Community Engagement (C. Sicot, personal communication, July 22, 2009). Through partnerships with local support organizations, the gallery links community groups with art practitioners in “participatory,” community art practices. The starting point for these initiatives would be the communities themselves, and projects, including exhibitions, would take place in central community sites.

The AGYU has offered a series of programs that physically link marginalized communities with the gallery and the university campus. In the Black Creek United 2007 project, student guides from the local Jane and Finch community led a group of adults through the Black Creek, a nature reserve that forms a corridor between the neighborhood and the university. The route featured works by participants in response to the Black Creek eco-system. During the journey, the youth guides invited participants to create outdoor art installations using found objects and to engage in experiential activities. The strategies were the products of interdisciplinary workshops with artists Liz Forsberg and Laura Reinsborough, which culminated in exhibitions at both the university gallery and a community space in the Yorkgate Mall, known as “the Spot.” Respondents from the AGYU see the gallery’s role as one of intermediary between the university and the community, to address the disparity between the university, as a place of privilege, and the economically depressed Jane and Finch neighbourhood. The AGYU’s independent programming initiatives have made the gallery a model of practice for the university, which now runs a community engagement centre out of “the Spot.”

**Approach: to teach art techniques or to educate on issues in contemporary art (focus on education)**

In keeping with current learning and museum theory, many of the galleries in this study understand their educational programming in terms of learning communities. This represents a more nuanced approach to the recognition of learning groups than standard demographic definitions allow. One respondent admits that museums are very competent at demographic typing, and the institutions can tend to overemphasize or misinterpret the importance of demographics. A number of galleries surveyed are now looking to the visitor motivation theories of John Falk to articulate programs according to the specific needs and interests of gallery audiences (M. Richardson, personal communication, August 10, 2009). Education specialists at the National Gallery have implemented into their adult programs the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) developed in the UK by Re:source: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, now the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (M.
Richardson, personal communication, August 10, 2009). The categories of GLOs that are thought to impact the visitor include: knowledge and understanding; skills; attitudes and values; enjoyment, inspiration and creativity; action, behaviour and progression. The theories look closely at the way visitors approach, engage with and process museum experiences. Other theories put forth by survey respondents include the work of George Heine on education systems and Bakhtin’s theory of Heterglossia, which cites the existence of many possible voices in society, such as social dialects, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations, age groups, authorities, and passing fashions (Bakthin, 1934). But perhaps the most important theoretical influence on the programming practices discussed in this study is Eileen Hooper-Greenhill’s conception of “interpretive communities,” groups that learn and become shaped by cultural action (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). A number of respondents in the study cited Hooper-Greenhill’s work, and almost all of the participating galleries conceived of their public programs as shaping and building communities rather than merely servicing already distinct communities.

Although we can assume that the objective of most public programs is to provide some form of learning, a number of respondents stated that their programs did not sustain a strictly educational mandate. Respondents cited gallery resources, exhibition mandates, and considerations of audience needs and expectations as factors that determined educational objectives. The Power Plant’s representative felt that his gallery did not necessarily have an educational mandate, maintaining that their programs were deliberately broad in scope in order to engage many different audiences. The respondent from the McMaster Museum of Art stated that their programs are designed to further engage and/or “educate” their varied audiences, “in a didactic sense,” but that the term didactic was not always synonymous with instructional. She conceded that the gallery did not have in-museum facilities to offer hands-on programs, and that such services were better provided by the university studio art program or other area institutions. Instead, the gallery has chosen to showcase specialists form various university disciplines in a cross-disciplinary exchange that capitalizes upon research done at the university. According to the McMaster representative, such academic resources may not be easily accessible to public institutions. In a slightly different turn, the AGYU has sought out collaborations with specific university departments to compliment the gallery’s various projects. The Agnes Etherington Gallery at Queen’s University has a mandate to serve students and faculty, and they do this with art classes, free lunch-hour talks, post-secondary sessions and course-related services provided upon request. The University of Toronto Art Centre has identified the enhancement of student experience as one of its core goals. To achieve this, UTAC has taken a two-pronged approach, addressing the academic community to involve untraditional university departments such as Architecture and Computer Science, and through pre-existing “student scenes” (interest groups within the university community that align or identify with specific issues, such as politics or the environment).

A number of the respondents in this study have indicated that the types of collaborative learning opportunities available to university galleries are increasingly
serving as models to public institutions. Several galleries in the study have implemented, or plan to develop, educational programs in partnership with area post-secondary institutions. The London Regional and Historical Museum currently offers Continuing Studies courses and symposia through the University of Western Ontario. For the last three years, the McMichael Canadian Collection has offered a course in collaboration with Fleming College at the Haliburton School of Art. The program services the museum audience with college-level educational programming which utilizes the gallery collections and facility. The National Gallery of Canada is also exploring collaborative programming options with the post-secondary community. The academic audiences of the National Gallery have expressed interest in having greater access to gallery’s collections and expert staff. And, the gallery’s Director of Educational and Public Programs would like to promote access to the skill departments of the gallery both physically and online.

To build learning communities around their collections, the McMichael launched a digital program in November 2009, built on a Web 2.0 framework. Arranged along distinct narratives, the web-based initiative does not target gallery-goers or art enthusiasts specifically, but caters to hobbyists and niche interest groups. The National Gallery proposes its Cybermuse website as a learning platform, with online videos featuring art techniques, artist profiles and curator talks, as well as links to significant art historical research. Geared to a number of different audiences, the website also includes online exhibitions and games. Like many of the studio courses offered by galleries in this study, web-based programming initiatives seem to follow continuing education models geared toward the hobbyist/enthusiast or leisure user.

Approach: to develop young artists or museum and gallery professionals (focus on professional development)

The university galleries, particularly the University of Toronto Art Centre, the Justina Branicke Gallery and the Agnes Etherington Gallery offer art-making workshops designed for young artists, initiatives often connected to university departments of art. However, programs that emphasize artist development were not common among the galleries studied. This situation may change as cross-institutional collaborations progress. Notable exceptions are the services offered to recent graduates at Mercer Union and the artist residencies of AGYU. An unusual program for both this study and for the hosting gallery, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre’s Exposures program was devised to provide local photographers with professional development workshops. The McMichael Canadian Collection is developing a program for young Canadian artists that follows a similar master-class format, but within an artist residency framework. The initiative consists of two-week learning sessions at the gallery, focusing on art and gallery practice in a liberal studies model. The work-study program culminates in the development of new artwork, which can be submitted for inclusion in juried exhibitions.

In addition to its regular exhibition program, the University of Toronto Art Centre (UTAC) has a robust student exhibition program. Located in an adjacent gallery space, the Art Lounge at UTAC accepts proposals from student-artists to
exhibit their own work and from curators to exhibit the work of other students. UTAC takes a consultative role in the development of guest exhibitions. The gallery also collaborates with University of Toronto clubs, divisions and faculty on open-call juried and curated exhibitions, as well as other complimentary projects that utilize the lounge and adjoining spaces. The projects allow the students, faculty and community opportunities for professional development in a collaborative exhibition practice. Professional development at UTAC extends to critical writing through the blog/publication “a.centric,” in which student and faculty review national and international artist practices and exhibitions. “a.centric” is a model for publication, combining an accessible blog format with traditional collecting, as subscribers receive limited edition prints with each installment. Programs in support of art writing at UTAC have included practical talks by noted critics and curators. Located on the same downtown University of Toronto campus, the Justina Barnicke Gallery also offers a model of practice for professional development. The gallery works with sub-committees of the Hart House student centre to engage them in the intellectual responsibilities and practical implementation of the gallery’s education and outreach, collecting and exhibiting processes.

Whereas university galleries, such as UTAC and the Justina Barnicke Gallery, have policies to support the development of aspiring museum and gallery professionals within the student body, the National Gallery of Canada has a mandate to support museum and gallery professionals nationally. The gallery offers an orientation program to museum educators from institutions all over Canada. As well, the gallery’s Department of Educational and Public Programs produces yearly conferences for museum professionals, such as the 2009 conference on museum accessibility, Connections, Collections and Communities: Making Museums and Galleries in Canada Inclusive and Accessible, hosted by the gallery in partnership with a number of national organizations.

Successful Programs and Perceived Reasons for Success

Respondents were asked to indicate which of their programs were most successful, and why. However, the survey question did not specify measures for success, leaving the question completely open-ended. This was a clear limitation of the study, making it difficult to arrive at a mutually agreed-upon definition for success. Understandably, many respondents interpreted success in terms of attendance figures, while others perceived success in terms of audience satisfaction. Other measures for success included consistency with the gallery’s mission or relevance to exhibition themes. Yet, despite the multiple definitions of success generated by the question, respondents repeatedly identified similar characteristics of successful programs.

Several respondents noted that the mere timing of programs could often determine their success or failure (i.e. whether a program was offered at a convenient time for the specific target group or in relation to other cultural activities in the immediate area). One respondent claimed that the most successful programs at her
gallery were those that required the shortest time commitment, while other respondents pointed to the rarity or novelty of programs as factors for success. One-time performances or presentations by popular figures were often well-attended because they represented singular opportunities.

All of the respondents agreed that artist and curator talks fulfill the basic function of providing information desired, and often requested by, the public. In terms of attendance, talks, lectures and forums could draw large audiences, but attendance was linked to a number of factors, including the subject of the exhibition or talk and the perceived status of speakers. In many cases, the specific interests of the speaker, and the speaker’s profile within a given community, served to attract new interest and community groups to the gallery for the duration of the program. Often cited was the fame or notoriety of speakers in attracting audiences. Other factors deemed to be significant by the respondents were the speakers’ associations with specific causes or institutions, and an individual speaker’s ability or talent to discuss issues and to engage audiences. One respondent noted: “It is not always the case that international speakers draw the largest crowds. It is often the well loved local artist, community member or political figure that attracts an already dedicated audience” (J. Davies, personal communication, August 19, 2009). For educational programs, high profile presenters, usually accomplished professionals in their field, served to attract specific skill groups. Whether in the form of demonstrations, animated tours, lectures, conversations, panel discussions or community forums, programs with guest speakers often introduced unexpected topics or themes - subjects more closely related to the speakers and the communities of interest than the work of galleries. This unpredictable, organic quality of talks and discussions was often deemed to be positive by the respondents, even when the topics raised were of a controversial nature.

Although survey respondents felt that programs were most successful when they linked closely with the content of exhibitions and collections, interdisciplinarity was repeatedly cited as a desirable feature of public programs. Examples of interdisciplinary programs given by the respondents included: events and performances featuring guest artists and speakers from different fields; structured exchanges between representatives from divergent and, often opposing, political, professional, academic and social groups; events or activities sponsored by community interest groups and outside organizations; and, ongoing collaborations with community groups and organizations. Survey respondents noted that such interdisciplinary approaches not only served to attract new audiences, but increased the relevance and accessibility of the art galleries to the groups concerned. One respondent noted that community collaborations were “successful... in terms of integrating and teaching about art and empowering a group of people” (S. McDonald, personal communication, August 12, 2009). Community partnerships were thought to, not only serve distinct needs within the community, but to highlight issues affecting the community. In some cases, the concerns raised by cross-disciplinary and community-based programs also served to refocus the gallery’s exhibition practice, particularly in terms of interpretation.
Several of the respondents cited audience participation and interactivity as key factors to the success of programs. Respondents used the term “participatory” in a number of different ways: to describe the participation of communities and groups in key initiatives; to define the involvement of program participants in discussions or activities; and, to refer to the inclusion of gallery visitors in the direct interpretation of artworks. One contributor to the study noted that simple strategies such as guest-moderated tours, “allow free reign to guest speakers to interpret the exhibition however they wish” and that such programs were successful because they offered “participants the opportunity to speak throughout the course of the visit” (J. Davies, personal communication, August 19, 2009). Another respondent pointed to workshops and hands-on courses as among the most successful in his institution. He gave the example of a studio art class with modest attendance, but a consistent following of participants who regularly expressed satisfaction with the program. Another respondent to the survey cited affective response as an indication of success that, he believes, suggests a larger role for art galleries. Referring to the reactions of the audience at the culminating event for community project, he said:

“When you participate in the events, they are very moving and we realize how much we are helping the community. It makes us aware of the importance of the role of a contemporary art gallery… and who the gallery should service… We are starting to understand that a contemporary art gallery can have a social function” (P. Monk, personal communication, August 4, 2009).

Unsuccessful Programs and Perceived Reasons for Failures

Participants in this study were not specifically asked to describe programs that had been unsuccessful. And, this is another inherent limitation of the study. In retrospect, it’s clear that the survey would offer a more comprehensive assessment of the state of public and community programming through consideration of initiatives that had failed in their objectives. Despite this oversight in the survey, respondents deemed it important to discuss programs that, in their opinion, had failed.

Curators and programmers described two types of programs as being particularly problematic: film series and social events, and this was the case regardless of the type or size of institution. Location appears to be a key factor in determining whether the art gallery, or related theatre facility, were seen as a destinations for such activities. One respondent from a major contemporary art gallery in an urban area noted that his institution is not recognized as a venue for screenings and that his constituency is more likely to attend a talk than a film. Another respondent, who curates an extensive series of art documentaries, observed that attendance to screenings was high only when the subject of a film was well known. This suggests that the popularity of subject matter is another factor affecting film programming. Still another respondent maintained that screenings were successful only if the subject of the film was closely related to the exhibition. Together these observations indicate that the success or failure of film programming is linked to specific interest groups. Supporting this conclusion, several programmers observed that the highest
attendance to screenings at their galleries occurred during film festivals sponsored by outside organizations. The respondents concluded that this was the case because festivals had built-in audiences. A case in point is the very successful film series run by Cinemateque at the Jackman Theatre in the Art Gallery of Ontario. The series is hosted by the AGO, and screenings often reflect the gallery’s exhibitions, but the films are programmed by Cinemateque/the Toronto International Film Festival. Respondents claim to have had great success with joint screenings with The Inside-Out Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festivals and the Images Festivals. So successful were these collaborations that the galleries are now looking to future collaborations with film festival groups as central elements of film programming.

Another area where respondents are having difficulty is in staging social events for younger audiences (18-25). For reasons unknown to even the programmers, larger institutions have seen highly variable results in their efforts to attract younger demographic groups. Attempts to target specific community interest groups have also produced unpredictable results. Like the film series, the failure of such programs appears to hinge on audience perceptions of art galleries. Museums may not be seen as social spaces, and art galleries in particular may continue to be associated with elite aesthetics. A number of the galleries in this study have struggled to bring new, non-art audiences to their institutions, and many have succeeded, but more evaluative research is required in this area.

**Conclusions**

Programs are shaped by a number of factors, including missions, resources, audience, community, personnel and issues pertaining to exhibitions and collections. This study has sought to identify current programming practices and to organize the strategies along the themes of: contemporary and world culture; local culture; artist practices; social environments; community service; education, and professional development. The categories are somewhat arbitrary in that programming initiatives can combine any number of these strategies. The categories merely serve to demonstrate the range of programs and strategies currently being adopted in the programming practice of the contemporary art galleries in this study. And, the galleries represented here have adopted such a wide range of strategies as to render generalization impossible. Yet, as survey respondents discussed their strategies, one issue arose consistently as a determining factor in programming: the nature of physical space. The geographical locations of institutions, the proximity of services and communities, and the physical layout of exhibition spaces and facilities largely determine the types of public programming possible. And, audience perceptions of the suitability of gallery spaces for specific activities can decide the success or failure of public programs.

MOCCA is a case in point. Curator David Liss maintains that part of the gallery’s programming mission is linked to the physical location and layout of the gallery. Originally situated in the corner of a house on a small suburban street in Toronto, Liss deemed the space unsuitable for the gallery’s national museum
Moving to the Queen Street West neighbourhood of the downtown, within proximity of several smaller and larger galleries, MOCCA began its interface with the local community. Liss worked with an architect to design a tall vertical window, which faces onto the gallery’s courtyard and the main street. He interprets the window as “a point of permeability between the white cube, and expected museological practice, and the wider world” (D. Liss, personal communication, August 14, 2009). In practice, the window serves to link the exhibition space with the courtyard and the street, and the environments merge during special events staged in the central courtyard. The courtyard at MOCCA adds an extra space to the facility during the summer months, while the interior space poses restrictions to indoor programming initiatives, as the gallery does not have a dedicated education space. In response to the physical challenges of the interior layout, Liss and local personality, the late Lupe Rodriguez developed the Inside-Out Program (now called Access MOCCA). Beginning in the gallery, then moving to community spaces and to partner institutions, the program format takes advantage of the gallery’s location and the local environment to insert itself within the network of cultural services in the city.

Availability and allocation of space are fundamental factors in establishing the form of programs. The year-long student exhibition program at the University of Toronto Art Centre takes place in a dedicated gallery adjoining the main exhibition spaces. But, several respondents in the study indicated that their galleries do not have sufficient space to support such arrangements and, as a result, they have not pursued similar community exhibition practices. The lack of dedicated space in the new facility of the National Gallery has seen the curtailment of certain hands-on programs, while the McMichael Canadian Collection is in the initial phases for the development of a new educational facility. The Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario have the benefit of large classrooms and studios and well-equipped theatres in which to conduct a variety of programs.

Eschewing the boundaries of physical space in order to reach ever-larger audiences, a number of galleries have developed robust online platforms with informational services and educational programs directed at target interest groups. Typically featuring online exhibitions and interpretation, these digital spaces might be seen as extensions of the gallery space. Digital platforms such as social media would seem to fortify programming practice, offering different means for the direct participation and interaction that characterize so much of public and community programming today.

References