

Can we exploit new technologies for online exhibitions, film programs, and forums to shift into other audiences, other publics, other spaces, other times, to engage new or unexpected audiences? Can we embrace the new while not losing the spirit of our past? I hope we are able to answer these questions in the next thirty years of YYZ.

As long as there are practicing artists, there will be an ever evolving need for the artist-run centre—to feature the work of artists, emerging and established in an risk-taking environment where the artist is trusted with the freedom to follow their work to something meaningful and engaging—where purpose is made.

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NOTES:

1. Orr, Gregory. *How Beautiful the Beloved*. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2009).
2. Fischer, Barbara, *Decalogue*. (Toronto, ON: YYZ Books, 1983), 12.
3. Bronson, AA, «The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as *Museums by Artists*,» in *Museums by Artists*, Bronson, AA and Gale, Peggy, eds. (Toronto, ON. Art Metropole, 1983), 1-2.
4. Paterson, Andrew J. «Preface,» in *Money, Value, Art*, Paterson, Andrew J. and Sally McKay, eds. (Toronto, ON: YYZ Books, 2001) 13-18.
5. Bank, D. «Artist-Run,» *Curators in Context*, (March 2008, April 2009), <http://curatorsincontext.wikispaces.com/Artist-Run>

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ECCENTRIC PRACTIC-  
ES: THIRTY YEARS OF YYZ

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**BY SUSAN ROWE HARRISON**

No meaning but what we find here.  
No purpose but what we make...

«Untitled [This is what was bequeathed us]», an excerpt from *How Beautiful the Beloved*

by Gregory Orr. 1

Happy Birthday, YYZ. You are thirty. Thirty is a time for looking forward and back, assessing what we have learned, what we have achieved and, what we hope to achieve in the future.

Artists are forever hopeful. We look for opportunities, for the moment when our work will be recognized, knowing full well that only a few lucky and talented people fall under the current lens: the academics, critics, galleries, artist spaces, museums—the tastemakers. It is an ecosystem. As a species, artists are a freedom-loving bunch and seek the same for the work that they produce. It is with that spirit that a group of artists started YYZ Artists' Outlet in 1979. Their mandate though not always clearly focused was simple: small, lean, and local. The fulcrum of the collective was the mutual interest of its artist members and their needs as practicing artists in Toronto. YYZ's overriding mandate, then seemed to be to show work that the board thought was interesting and challenging, generally time-based and photo-based, though not limited to it. 2

YYZ opened its doors in a time when most commercial galleries in Canada focused on historical shows and the work of dead artists. Canadian artists wanted a uniquely Canadian art world that reflected the art that was being made in the centres, rather than one that was dominated by the American cultural media. 3

This search for a Canadian Identity began after the Second World War in 1945. Canada

did not want to remain a British colony nor did it want to be tied to the currency, industrial and cultural imports of the United States. As early as 1941, a group of Canadian artists at the Artists' Conference in Kingston, Ontario argued that culture was the best strategy for defending and advancing a uniquely Canadian cultural identity. In 1951, the Massey Report urged a centralized funding body to grow and sustain culture apart from the influence of the mass culture that was spilling across the border from the United States. Six years after the published recommendations of the Massey Report, the Canada Council Act was passed by the St. Laurent government and along with it, a generous endowment, used strategically for cultural funding and higher education. Soon grants to artists and arts organizations were made by peer assessment and review rather than by the funding bodies themselves. This funding was aimed to protect artists from the commercial pressures of the market. 4 It worked. This de-facto protectionism, with the support of Canada Council combined with the punk DIY spirit of the late 70's, bred a parallel system of alternative galleries and viewing spaces. And, because the support given to these galleries and spaces was not solely linked to output, artists and artist-run centres were able to take risks without the pressures of the market and government mandated «good practice» requirements.

Artists wanted, and some would argue needed, a public sphere in which to circulate and disseminate the work of interesting and innovative artists who fell outside of the scope of the commercial galleries and museums. They wanted a place that would value their work on its own terms, unconstrained by the demands of the art market that placed pressures to create and sell on individual artists. In this new parallel system, artists determined and controlled the dissemination of their

own work. They established initiatives to tackle critical writing, curatorial work, and publishing in addition to ambitious exhibition and public programs. These publications and conversations (in a public context) were designed to provide a forum for artists, critics, writers and curators to express and discuss their views in Toronto and to the international art community as a whole. The artist-run centre in Canada has made a tremendous contribution to preserving and disseminating innovative art in Canada. They have tackled and exhibited work that would not have made its way into the public view. And, for better or for worse, artist-run centres have succeeded in launching the artistic and cultural careers of artists and curators who have honed their skills at long hours in a low-budget but creative environment.

Many criticize the successes of the parallel system claiming that artist-run centres are often «seen as sort of finishing schools for curators and artists, as opposed to places where real and experimental discourses happen.» 5 As alternative sites have evolved, they have become institutionalized and are not unlike the public and commercial galleries that they originally set out to challenge. But now, as YYZ approaches its thirtieth year, how can we regenerate the original spirit of the artist-run centre—without trading in our hard won successes?

The artist-run centre is still a revolutionary idea—perhaps even more so since the spirit of the art world has changed. Artists embrace the market and swiftly by-pass the Canadian system to create international networks of colleagues and friends and become international artists in their own right. So much about art today is about the market—a system defined by a set of tastemakers that beget the artists and tastemakers that continue to define the market and so on. That said, there seems

to be even more reason to support the work of interesting young artists, outsider artists, mid and late career artists and to involve them in the process. Artist-run centres are still well suited to reach artists outside of the commercial network and provide an almost sacred place where eccentric practices are respected and rewarded (artists are paid exhibition and often materials fees). The artist-run centre is still a place where an artist can take a risk on new practices at any stage in their career. They also provide opportunities for curators and cultural workers to take risks on new work and new practices outside of the bureaucratic constraints of a museum or public gallery.

The focus of the artist-run centre has historically been on the artist and the production of work and YYZ has chosen to continue this mandate to focus each artist's practice and process rather than on a specific exhibition proposal. In this way, YYZ trusts the artist to make the work that needs to be made. The venue invigorates in its own quirky way, presenting often under-represented art and curatorial approaches. Interesting is not always successful or visually beautiful but has merit by the way that it hits you on the head or silently prods you to a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing. Or, at least, that is the hope.

YYZ has always had a loose agenda. It can remain so, and still retain its identity. While time and success has institutionalized some parts of the artist-run space, its continued interest in the artist and the kind of work that artists want to make give a kind of preciousness to the place. Not in a derogatory sense but in the sense that this quality is rare and unique and should be treated with care.

But how can we renew the spirit of bringing innovative and engaging work to more audiences? Is art just for the converted?