

“Why are we saving All these artist publications + Other Galleries stuffs?” The Emergence of Artist-Run Culture in Halifax. DALHOUSIE ART GALLERY, HALIFAX. 22 January–17 April 2016. Curated by CREIGHTON BARRETT and PETER DYKHUIS.

The importance of artist-run centres (ARCs) and their impact on Canadian contemporary art have been well surveyed.¹ To date, the influence of ARCs east of Montreal has not always been given the same scholarly or curatorial attention as that of centres in central and western Canada, which could be because the archives of ARCs from the eastern part of the country are not as visible. The acquisition by Dalhousie University Archives of the archives of Eyelevel Gallery and the Centre for Art Tapes, two significant ARCs in Halifax, facilitates research in this area and also removes these archival records from the artist-run culture that created them. The potential for activation of these archives in their new institutional setting is demonstrated by the Dalhousie Art Gallery exhibition “*Why are we saving All these artist publications + Other Galleries stuffs?*” *The Emergence of Artist-Run Culture in Halifax*. This intriguing title is lifted from a list handwritten at an early Eyelevel Gallery board meeting.²

In Halifax, the emergence of artist-run culture in the 1970s occurred in tandem with other efforts in Canada as artists established what were first known as “parallel galleries” and later given the designation “artist-run centres.” Records of the early activities of the board of the Eyelevel Gallery show that at its inception the gallery was already experiencing the kind of contradictory tension that typifies artist-run culture. What began as a counter-cultural shift away from the bureaucracy of traditional art galleries and institutions paradoxically became bogged down with all of the associated trappings. That trajectory is illustrated by the rich archive that has been generated by the institution’s activities. Eyelevel Gallery is Halifax’s longest-running ARC, and its archive represents its history of exhibition, performance, and events while reflecting its interrelatedness with similar organizations in the region and nationally.

- 1 See Robert Labossiere, ed., *Decentre: Concerning Artist-Run Culture/À propos de centres d’artistes* (Toronto: YYZBooks, 2008); Vincent Bonin and Michèle Thériault, eds., *Documentary Protocols = Protocoles documentaires (1967–1975)* (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, 2010); Marilyn Burgess and Maria De Rosa, *The Distinct Role of Artist-Run Centres in the Canadian Visual Arts Ecology* (Ottawa, ON: Canada Council for the Arts, 2011), accessed 31 August 2016, <http://canadacouncil.ca/council/research/find-research/2012/artist-run-centres>.
- 2 Dalhousie Art Gallery, Programming: Exhibitions – Past Year, ““*Why are we saving All these artist publications + Other Galleries stuffs?*” *The Emergence of Artist-Run Culture in Halifax*,” accessed 31 August 2016, <http://artgallery.dal.ca/%E2%80%9Cwhy-are-we-saving-all-these-artist-publications-other-galleries-stuffs%E2%80%9D-emergence-artist-run>.



Archive Reading Room. Photograph by Rebecca Young, 2016.

The Eyelevel Gallery's archives are housed at Dalhousie University by an arrangement established over a decade ago. Soon after the acquisition of Eyelevel's collection, the Dalhousie University Archives acquired the fonds of the Centre for Art Tapes, another significant artist-run organization in Halifax. The Centre for Art Tapes was formed as the demand for access to video and electronic media production equipment grew in the 1980s, again reflecting the relationship between developments in contemporary art production and the expansion of the artist-run culture network.

Dalhousie University's digital archivist Creighton Barrett came up with the idea to show selected items from the archives of Eyelevel Gallery and the Centre for Art Tapes, and he worked with Dalhousie Gallery curator Peter Dykhuis to coordinate the exhibition. It consists entirely of documents and items from the archives of Eyelevel Gallery and the Centre for Art Tapes, including correspondence, images, posters, invitations, and photographs. A significant aspect of the exhibition is that the entire Eyelevel Gallery and Centre for Art Tapes fonds were moved into the gallery for the duration, and anyone interested was invited to conduct research under supervision at appointed hours. There were multiple visits to the fonds by researchers and artists, and in two cases the archives were used in the process of creating

new works of art.³ In her installation *Revolution or Reinventing the Wheel*, artist Becky Welter-Nolan utilized the archives to create an immersive work that invited viewers to listen to audio recordings of Eyelevel board members discussing the gallery's moves to various locations during its existence.⁴ Welter-Nolan also organized a five-kilometre run that included stops at each of Eyelevel's previous locations throughout the city, in chronological order.

The documents on display in the exhibition give context to what was happening 40 years ago that spurred the creation of artist-run galleries and production facilities across Canada. Art making shifted tactics, with less emphasis on the art market and its saleable objects and a new focus on installation as well as performance art and audiovisual media. Art objects moved off the gallery walls and in many cases to the floor. The visual arrangements of archival documents and posters on display in the exhibition illustrated the shifts in the aesthetic sensibilities of the 1970s through the 2000s, as tabletop graphic design gave way to digital production tools. Despite the visual richness of this material, on initial viewing I was unclear about the underlying didactic intent of the exhibition arrangement, in particular whether the materials were intended to create a visual chronology or whether they were arranged thematically. This was one shortcoming in the presentation of documents in the exhibition as viewers unfamiliar with both Eyelevel Gallery and the Centre for Art Tapes (or with ARCs in general) would not necessarily be aware of the differences in programming of the respective organizations. The arrangement of documents on display would have benefited from more description, whether by using labels or mapping, to create a more obvious structure.

The exhibition revealed the precarious circumstances of artist-run culture since the founding of Eyelevel Gallery in 1974 and continuing up to the present day: the ongoing struggle for financial support, the gap between the idealism and self-determination of artist-workers in the sector, and the scarcity and insecurity of employment. This backdrop is accentuated in a letter on display, written in 1984 by Marcel Masse, then the federal minister of communications, to David Craig, who was the president of the Association of National Non-Profit Artists Centres (ANNPAC)/Regroupement d'Artistes des Centres Alternatifs (RACA). In it, Masse advises Craig that in light of recent cultural funding cuts, the impact of the cuts could be lessened by reducing expenditures on administration and coordinating efforts with the private sector. Viewers need only look at the lists of exhibitions held in an average

3 Creighton Barrett, telephone conversation with author, 29 April 2016.

4 Eyelevel Gallery, Exhibitions – Archive, “Becky Welter-Nolan, *Revolution or Reinventing the Wheel*, 10 March–17 April 2016,” accessed 31 August 2016, <http://www.eyelevegallery.ca/exhibition/becky-welter-nolan-revolution-or-reinventing-wheel>.

year at Eyelevel Gallery to wonder at the speed and energy required to organize, mount, celebrate, and take down the huge number of shows with the bare minimum of staff and reliance on volunteers.

The exhibition occurred at the same time as the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's show *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art & Design 1968–1978*, the content of which dovetails with the earliest items of Eyelevel Gallery's archives. Together, these exhibitions reveal how much the social and political nature of art was changing at a fundamental level in the 1960s and '70s, both in the exhibition and gallery sector and in arts education.

The tenuous existence of many ARCs makes it challenging for them to manage their own archives, and relationships with repositories such as the Dalhousie University Archives can provide a measure of stability for the historical record of these organizations. In the case of Eyelevel, having a home for their archives has been crucial, as the gallery has moved 10 times in its lifespan and has been without a designated exhibition space since 2014.⁵ It would be beyond the usual scope of most ARCs to undertake the kind of labour involved in processing, digitizing, and describing archival materials to the level that Dalhousie has, which has served to make much of Eyelevel Gallery's documentation accessible online to a global audience. The exhibition demonstrates the efforts of Dalhousie's archives staff to mobilize and promote their collection to a wider audience. Through this activation of ARC archives, they have supported and perhaps even contributed to the legacy of remarkable energy and experimentation of Halifax's independent cultural spaces.

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5 Leah Sandals, "9 Thoughts on Running a Gallery – Without a Gallery Space," *Canadian Art*, 6 August 2014, <http://canadianart.ca/features/eyelevel-gallery>.

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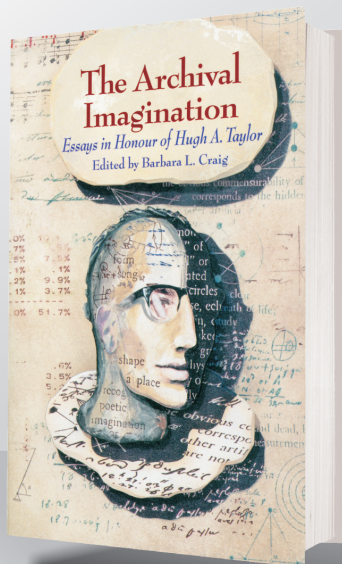
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