

I think it would be a good idea for any curator to research the original intent of a gallery if he or she is to pursue running it according to an aesthetic politic or purpose.

As the instigator of the OR, I am not surprised by the lack of source research to find out OR's original intent, as the ignorance allows the perpetuation of its mythification (which includes its "marginalization", "aloofness", self-absorption"...self-inflicted or not.) That its origins may not be heroic or romantic may be a disappointment for some.

The OR was one of the first studios to open as a gallery that survived. The name came from the awning out on 1729 Franklin Street which said "Food For Thought", I painted over all the letters except "or" in "for". And, no, the name did not originate from Kierkegaard's "Either/Or". It was important that the curator be in residence in order to understand the discourse that occurred between the gallery and the industrial environment. It opened as a gallery to subsidise my rent as I lived in the back. It also did so to visualize the works of my friends, many of them unrecognized women whose work wasn't in mainstream or the alternative galleries due to the structure of those galleries or other reasons. These works included performance, poetics, music, exhibitions at rotating hours or at midnight during the first year. The exhibition fee for two weeks was thirty dollars. The location wasn't prime, but the energy was exciting. My original purpose was for artists, especially women, to take exhibition spaces into their own hands and find locations for themselves, without the need for a board of directors, or stifling bureaucracy and hierarchy, without any need of patriarchal acceptance.

I had enquired about funding in my first year and was informed that funding could be procured from the [Canada] Council after 2 years of continued exhibition (this has since been changed to one year). It would have been up to the curators after me to follow up on Council funding, as in the second year an exhibitions grant was procured but not followed through thus leaving OR with an open file at Council. Now under the OR Gallery Society the OR is supposedly able to get the funding (recognition) it supposedly wasn't able to get under its independent format. Well, this reminds me of my days growing up in the colonies when the colonialists would appropriate and bureaucratise in the guise of being more "civilized" and acceptable.

The OR as it is now is not the OR as it was. Gone are the possibilities of flexibility or even anarchy as it has become precious about itself and its seriousness. Some injustices have been done to past curators and the OR and its Society should rectify that. As a woman and a visible minority I am no longer surprised in all respects at the rhetoric connected to "self-inflicted marginalisation". It exemplifies how self-absorbed and "heroic" the patriarchal art world and Western society is (in that anything outside or foreign to itself is marginal). The appalling lack of race, class and even sexual analysis in Vancouver's high art hierarchy has struck me as archaic and supremacist and it's about time for it to be criticized.

Profile of the Or Gallery

From: Artery

Spring 1988

What spurred me to finally write this was Philip McCrum's statement (Artery, Vol 2 Iss. 1):

"The original intent, (as I interpret it, because I don't have the authority to really state it categorically) was primarily to give artists, working, as I said before, with cultural problems of representation and language a way to show, to solve problems and to experiment. It was, in a way, against what it had become. But this is a big problem, the making of art is extremely problematic and the running of the gallery is too."

I really don't understand what: "It was, in a way, against what it had become" means. I don't believe the making of art is "extremely problematic" or that "the running of the gallery is too". I believe this statement is mythologizing a generality. My intent was to dispel all myths about the impossibility of starting and running a gallery. Anyone can do it, including women, and the starting of OR proves this.

The origin of the OR was based on an extremely simple principle, one based on feminist theory of autonomy to fight patriarchal authority, one that thus needs no "authority to state" anything "categorically". Autonomy was one curator/artist in residence to run the gallery for a year and then pass it on to a person of their choice for the following year. Any art that interested the aesthetic or politic of that curator would be shown (and that included work which was left, feminist, gay, etc.). Thus the OR would describe itself without preconceived gallery guidelines. The conceptual bend gravitated towards the OR because there was a need for a space that catered to the work. The joy in working without hierarchy encouraged independence and adventure.

Well, for me, the OR Gallery as it is now with its directors and society, is what it is. I wish them luck. It should not be mistaken in any respect for what it was and what it should've been in terms of keeping things pedestrian, accessible and non-bureaucratized (without hierarchy). It now no longer holds its original politics nor feminist work. Like other institutions it has accumulated dirty laundry.

Too often the work of women and minorities becomes marginalised and invisible and I will not allow my work to be rewritten for some other intention. The OR has become the same old story of the myth of how to be successful.

Yours in "self-inflicted marginalisation"!

Laiwan

P.S. To give credit where credit is due, I thank Madeleine Schenkel for her invaluable work during the first year of the OR, and to Ellen Ramsey, curator at the OR during 1986-87, for her hard work and feminist analysis, and give my regrets for all she had to deal with.