

Once A Total Art Happening: Revisiting “artario 72”

Curated by Noor Bhangu

November 24 - December 20, 2018

Curator's Tours: December 8, 1 P.M.; December 14, 11:30 A.M.



Kim Ondaatje, *dom-tar with train*, 1972. Photolitho/Serigraph in colour. Collection of the School of Art.

“I’ve always felt that art has had too much mystique attached to it. It shouldn’t be something hidden away in art galleries. It should be a natural part of our everyday experience. Makes no difference who you are – whether you’re a Toronto art snob or a pulp worker in Kapuskasing – you should be able to go out and look at it and buy it if you like it. Cheaply. Just like books or records.”¹

So began Peeter Sepp’s experiment of democratizing the arts in Canada. Using the model of the *Multikonst*, a Swedish travelling exhibition, *artario 72* was designed as an “exhibition in a box” to be toured across Canada. Situated in an era of economic prosperity and cultural democratization, the exhibition focused on industrial means of production and dissemination, which promised to bring art cheaply and effectively to the Canadian people. On the evening of October 12, 1972, *artario 72* opened simultaneously at nearly 500 different locations across Canada, including the School of Art at the University of Manitoba.² At its core, the project aimed to generate a pan-Canadian, visually-literate public that would learn to appreciate and support the Canadian arts in due time.

Once an Art Happening prompts us to return to this historical exhibition and unpack the social life of visual arts in Canadian society of the late 60s and early 70s. The works from the exhibition in a box may still be resting in permanent collections and private homes across the country (and perhaps the world), but *Once an Art Happening* marks the first official return to the exhibition, which according to Sepp and his team, was set to change the landscape of Canadian art forever. Of course, no major change occurred and *artario* was not awarded funding past its inaugural year. However, it is important to note that the project’s model of the “traveling exhibition” stimulated an emergence of alternative spaces, similarly situated on the margins of hegemonic museums and metropolitan centres, that have, in turn, been credited with re-configuring Canadian visual arts culture.³

Because of the introductory nature of this exhibition, my focus has been on the disparate and speculative elements of *artario 72*. This essay seeks to provide a brief history of the exhibition by looking at the inspiration behind the democratizing project, governmental support, production, selection process, dissemination of the packaged exhibition, and the lack of public response. The sparse afterlife of the project, once referred to as a “total art happening,” is intriguing enough for a retrospect.⁴

artario 72 was conceived by the Slovenian-born, Toronto-based architect and artist Sepp during his tenure as the Visual Arts Officer at Ontario Arts Council (OAC) as a way to bring contemporary Canadian art to people that he felt had previously been marginalized from viewing or collecting it.⁵ Influenced by artists and thinkers as varied as John Cage, Marshall McLuhan and Alfred Korzybski, Sepp's democratization project centered heavily on the medium of production and dissemination, as opposed to supporting the creation of content that was accessible to wider audiences or possibly making art accessible to artists of diversity.⁶

Sepp was first introduced to the concept of "exhibition in a box" when reading a Swedish art magazine in which he encountered Sweden's *Multikonst*, first held in 1967 and then again in 1969.⁷ *Multikonst* employed the medium of television, itself a type of travelling box, to create an exhibition that could potentially be viewed by all Swedes simultaneously.⁸ It was accompanied by educational programs that sought to educate the mass audience on themes of modern art. The organizers intended the national, multi-venue exhibition to function as a "cultivation of the people," whose economic post-war prosperity they felt was not adequately matched by cultural sophistication.⁹ In the mid-50s, Swedish art educators had come to realize that bad art, or "inferior art," was not itself a product of cultural degeneration but a consequence of the problem of accessibility.¹⁰ Thus, no longer in a position to explicitly instruct the public on the differences between "good art" and "bad art," the organizers used *Multikonst* to educate people on the intricacies of (good) modern art and ways of enjoying it. The exhibition featured 68 Swedish artists whose work best embodied "the arts of the day."¹¹

In the late 60s and early 70s Canada, like Sweden, wanted to cultivate a visually-literate public by making art more accessible. Although close to celebrating its tenth anniversary in 1971, the OAC was still struggling to combat public hostility towards funding such "frills" as the arts.¹² One of the ways the Council felt it could endear itself to the Ontarian public, and covertly "whet a permanent appetite for... all of the professional arts," was by touring major exhibitions to smaller cities and rural areas.¹³ In 1966-67, it supported the "travelling art gallery concept," to help large exhibitions tour to eighty Ontarian communities as small as Moose Factory. In this way, it was fulfilling its mandate of recognizing and meeting the demands of its publics – both urban and rural–while inserting itself prominently into the cultural lives of all Ontarians.¹⁴ The 1971-76 period saw a drastic increase in the funding for the arts, especially to projects that continued to fill the gap between urban art centres and rural communities. Peeter Sepp was granted \$25,000 to launch *artario 72*, with additional funds coming retroactively from the sales of the exhibition packages and individual art works.¹⁵

While there are a number of ways of approaching the weighty project of democratizing the arts, for Sepp it was deeply entwined with the material process of production itself. From the beginning, his project was based on principles that pertained more to the medium of the artworks and their exhibition rather than their content. This strategy of democratization was common in this period with a number of other artists and cultural workers who were using mass production and uniform exhibition to challenge traditional notions of artworks as unique and rarified entities. Like the *Multikonst* organizers, the Canadian team took a McLuhanian approach, named after the Canadian cultural theorist, Marshall McLuhan.¹⁶ Following his mantra, "the medium is the message," they asked artists to produce low-cost multiples of new original works to deconstruct—as much as they could within the space of a single exhibition—the hierarchical position of art as an object to be enjoyed by an elite few.¹⁷ The medium of the multiple was presented as a happy "marriage" between traditional and commercial arts. Produced through industrial means, each work was priced anywhere between \$2 to \$17.¹⁸ With these economical prices, Sepp demonstrated that *artario 72* was not a money-making apparatus for either the OAC or the artists, whose work, he argued, normally sold for hundreds of dollars at fair market value.

Such economy was achieved through the involvement of William Poole, a Toronto-based industrial designer.¹⁹ While *artario 72* may be remembered as the brainchild of Peeter Sepp, it was Poole's co-ordination between the artists and manufacturers that ultimately made it possible for the artists' multiples to be produced in great quantity at low prices. Together Poole and Sepp invited fifty artists to submit proposals for works that best exemplified the ethos of modern art and accessibility.²⁰ Of the fifty invited artists, approximately forty-five submitted proposals, which were then voted on through secret ballot by the artists themselves.²¹ Before Vera Frenkel withdrew her work (owing to OAC's "inability to meet it's deadline"), she said of *artario 72*: "What turned me on about this project... was the fact that I could design something I couldn't otherwise afford, a work that would be at home in any environment – stacked on grass or tables, floating in bathtubs or pools." The democratizing backbone of *artario 72* appealed to a number of artists, such as Frenkel, who were interested in (but often struggling) making their work more accessible to the Canadian public.

According to Catherine Anderson-Dolcini, the 500 exhibition trunks sold out immediately upon becoming available.²² Each set enclosed artworks, fold-up display materials, catalogues, mail-order forms, educational programs, a sample press release, and artist biographies. *artario 72* contained 11 sculptures and 9 prints from 20 contemporary artists from Ontario or then based in Ontario. Some of the more prominent artists included were: Rita Letendre, Michael Snow, Kim Ondaatje, Arthur Handy, Ted Bieler, Tony Urquhart, and John Boyle.

Michael Snow, or “Mike Snow” as he was affectionately referred to in his artist biography, had just returned from a decade-long stint in New York the year prior. His piece, *Scene*, marked at \$2.00, proposed an alternative way of looking at and through painting. Snow suggested that the so-called painting could be taped to any window to incorporate “fortuitous, unpredictable activity as one of its elements.” Alongside its cheap medium, the plastic painting attempted to open up common understandings of the medium of painting.

Kim Ondaatje was another artist to join the all-star team of *artario 72*. Her work, *dom-tar with train*, depicts a quiet industrial scene in Southern Ontario that is bereft of much colour or human presence. Of the philosophy underpinning her work she remarked: “I am intrigued by that which is inchoate and can only be partially understood. Like many Canadians I prefer understatement to overstatement and am aware of the importance of silence.” Ondaatje’s grand gesture of situating her work within the so-called Canadian preference for silence points to the homogenizing impulse of the exhibition – the need for art to be experienced in unison and similarly transport the audience to a higher cultural/intellectual realm. Interestingly, Ondaatje’s statement also speaks to the desire of contemporary Canadian artists to connect with the broader public and make work that could have significance beyond their immediate art circles.

In its entirety, *artario 72* held works that ranged from a variety of mediums and moods. Some works were more playful than they were genre-defying or contemplative. For instance, John Boyle’s *Moose Brand Strike Everywhere Canadian Flag Matches*, constructed out of wood and colour printed paper was a functional matchbox, whose parts the audience could potentially construct to light a match. Amusingly (to the artist and myself), notices were mailed to each venue prior to the show’s opening, clarifying that the actual matches were to be withdrawn from the exhibition space as they violated public safety regulations. *Once an Art Happening* is perhaps the first time the object has been exhibited in its entirety, albeit behind glass.

The diverse works of the selected artists were then packaged and disseminated amongst the various subscribers across the country.²³ Sepp encouraged each host to activate as many aspects of the project as they saw fit. In an attached pamphlet, entitled “How to Prepare for the Grand Opening of *artario 72*,” he suggested that it was possible for host institutions to include art from students or community members to make the event more “meaningful.” In addition, the venue was allowed to host a series of demonstrations, talks, or films that could add to or illuminate the project.

The scarcity of documentation of *artario 72*—beyond the promotional packages authored by the *artario 72* team—makes it impossible to judge the atmosphere or the lasting impact of the exhibition. In the present, we cannot be certain about the presentation of the exhibition or the ways in which it was received by the broader public. All we can do now is rummage through the materials of the past. Curiously, the archival package I received at the initial stage of my research included a peculiar correspondence between Virgil Hammock (then Director of Exhibitions at the School of Art Gallery) and a certain Mr. and Mrs. Reed. The Winnipeg couple had recently returned from their trip to Ottawa, where during their visit to the National Gallery of Canada they had “unsuspectingly walked on” Carl Andre’s *144 Magnesium Square*. Upon returning home, they had personally written to Virgil Hammock of their incredulity and the government’s “squandering” of their tax dollars. Although, Hammock agreed with the couple’s distaste for the “new art,” suggesting he would never acquire it for the University of Manitoba’s Collection, he felt it was only fitting to show these works. It was by viewing the more experimental and subversive developments that local students could acquire an “overall picture of the current art world.”

In the years since Mr. and Mrs. Reed’s encounter with Carl Andre and the University of Manitoba’s own encounter with the exhibition in a box, Canada has become a little less uncomfortable with modern art. The once precarious and cheaply-produced multiples now sit pristinely atop shelves, plinths and behind glass. The audience is no longer invited to run their fingers through Michael Hayden’s *Meadow #3* or to re-arrange Ted Bieler’s *Uxmal*, because these objects have been absorbed back into the museums whose hegemonic structure they were trying to undermine. Owing to their inclusion in the significant, if not a little forgotten, *artario 72* the works have become objects of Canadian art history.

artario 72 promised to be the first exhibition in a long line of such projects aimed at making art accessible to Canadians. Yet, it was a singular event that left little or no trace. Thinking through this in retrospect, I find myself less interested in asking why this exhibition concept was not continued, or alternatively, if we can salvage any of its vigour to re-orient ourselves in the present? Instead, I ask, what have we, Canadian institutions of art and culture, completed in the last five decades to keep the spirit of democratization alive? Is art still accessible to the general public? Has it, somehow, moved out of the box and into our various communities – be they artist-run centres, commercial galleries or museums? Or, do the sentiments of democratizing the arts, as championed by *artario 72*, sit packaged in a vault – waiting to be activated?

Endnotes

1. Tom Alderman. "We've Uncovered a Government Plot! These Men are Scheming to do Something Beautiful – and Cheap." *The Canadian Magazine*, June 10, 1972.
2. The School of Art Gallery, or Gallery One One One as it was known up until 2011, did not have the space to host *artario 72* due to previously-scheduled programming. Consequently, *artario 72* was held in the Jury Room of the John A. Russell Architecture Building for one week following the national opening.
3. Clive Robertson. *Policy Matters: Administrations of Art and Culture*. Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006. p. 2.
4. "Artario 72: Art Comes to the People." *Coven*, October 13, 1972.
5. Sepp was hired as a Visual Arts Officer by the Ontario Arts Council two years prior to *artario 72* to organize public art projects cheaply and effectively.
6. The push to bring art to the "people" was not derived from some peripheral optimism. Rather the 60s and 70s, owing to their post-war economies and ideologies, promoted ideas of national community and public accessibility.
7. In January of 1972, Sepp travelled to Sweden to find out more about *Multikonst* and its impact on society. See: Kritzwiser, Kay. "Artario: Instant Art for Schools." *The Globe and Mail*, March 22, 1972.
8. The exhibition was also held in multiple schools, museums, and other public centres. It is reputed to have drawn a first night audience of 750,000 people. See: Åhlén, David Rynell. "Modern Art as Media Event: Early Swedish Television and the Communication of Art Appreciation, the Case of "Multikonst" (1967)." *Journal of E-Media Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016).
9. David Rynell Åhlén. "Modern Art as Media Event: Early Swedish Television and the Communication of Art Appreciation, the Case of "Multikonst" (1967)." *Journal of E-Media Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Roy MacSkimming. *For Arts' Sake: A History of the Ontario Arts Council, 1963-1983*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Arts Council, 1983. p. 16.
13. Ibid., p. 23.
14. Marisol J. D'Andrea. "Symbolic Power: Impact of Government Priorities for Arts Funding in Canada." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 47, no. 4 (2017): 245-58. p. 252.
15. Catherine Anderson-Dolcini. *One Percent for Whom? Canada's Public Works Fine Art Programme, 1964-1978: Its Rise and Demise*. Master's thesis, Carleton University, 2000. p. 39.
16. Rynell Åhlén. "Modern Art as Media Event."
17. Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel. *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantan Books, 1967.
18. Despite some confusion at the outset, which in itself articulated the Canadian middle-class' inexperience with purchasing art, each object within a specific work was included in the price.
19. Merike Weiler. "Art Gallery 'in a box' a Unique Collection." *The Toronto Star*, March 21, 1972.
20. The artists were paid artist fees for sending in their proposals.
21. Weiler, "Art Gallery 'in a box'."
22. Anderson-Dolcini, *One Percent for Whom?* p. 39-40.
23. In popular news media, *artario 72* was championed as an "exhibition in a box." While there was ring to a phrase of such compactness, in reality it was more like an exhibition in multiple boxes, which were then shipped out to each venue. The subscription list included private homes, public schools, 2 Ontarian penitentiaries, the Canadian National Exhibition, and Winnipeg's own School of Art.

Bibliography

- "Artario 72: Art Comes to the People." *Coven*, October 13, 1972.
- Åhlén, David Rynell. "Modern Art as Media Event: Early Swedish Television and the Communication of Art Appreciation, the Case of "Multikonst" (1967)." *Journal of E-Media Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016).
- Alderman, Tom. "We've Uncovered a Government Plot! These Men are Scheming to do Something Beautiful – and Cheap." *The Canadian Magazine*, June 10, 1972.
- Anderson-Dolcini, Catherine. *One Percent for Whom? Canada's Public Works Fine Art Programme, 1964-1978: Its Rise and Demise*. Master's thesis, Carleton University, 2000.
- D'Andrea, Marisol J. "Symbolic Power: Impact of Government Priorities for Arts Funding in Canada." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 47, no. 4 (2017): 245-58.
- Kritzwiser, Kay. "Artario: Instant Art for Schools." *The Globe and Mail*, March 22, 1972.
- MacSkimming, Roy. *For Arts' Sake: A History of the Ontario Arts Council, 1963-1983*. Toronto, Ont.: Ontario Arts Council, 1983.
- McLuhan, Marshall, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel. *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantan Books, 1967.
- Robertson, Clive. *Policy Matters: Administrations of Art and Culture*. Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006.
- Weiler, Merike. "Art Gallery 'in a Box' a Unique Collection." *The Toronto Star*, March 21, 1972.