

# Young artists learn to exhibit themselves

**T**oronto's art galleries aren't what they used to be. Blame the Great Recession, the Nasty Ninties, the neocon hordes, or modern art itself... the fact is, more than ever, artists must create their own opportunities as well as their own work.

There just aren't enough dealers to go around.

The result is a new spirit of collectivism, and patterns of group behaviour in which guerrilla art cells pop up and disappear with the speed of a short-term lease.

The trickle that started with the Group of Seven in the early decades of this century then picked up speed in the '50s with Painters Eleven is now a raging torrent.

Though the traditional gallery system remains in place, especially in Yorkville, it can no longer claim to be representative, or even, perhaps, in touch.

In the new world order artists function as curators as well as dealers. They handle everything from renting

space to printing invitations to scrounging funds and raising publicity. More than ever, an artist's work is never done.

"It's almost impossible now to break into the gallery system," explains Sheila Gregory of Canadian Shield, a 15-member outfit whose show is on display in the labyrinthine confines of 87 Wade Ave.

"Collectives are the alternative. We are the renegades. We challenge what's out there."

The list of art groups that have lit up the Toronto firmament, no matter how briefly, reads like a Saturday night line-up at The Rivoli: Republic, Mud, Spontaneous Combustion, Nether Mind, Public Access, Symbiosis, Pleasure Dome, Farrago and Impure are just some of the names that spring to mind.

Canadian Shield's current effort seems less like a revolution than an exhibition in a private museum. The setting is somewhat less formal than one would expect from an official location, but maybe not so much given our institutions' new-found grittiness.

Besides, the city already has at least one warehouse remade into a gallery (the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation) and another (Power Plant Contemporary Art Centre) carved out of an old generating station.

Is it any wonder one of the artist's main roles is that of urban pioneer, reclaiming vast tracts of the city in advance of the middle class? It happened in Yorkville in the '60s and on Queen Street West in the '80s. Now the phenomenon is more dispersed. Mostly, however, it's restricted to the west end, particularly Parkdale.

The building at 87 Wade Ave. is not pretty, but it's big and engaging. Once you're inside, it leads you on, down corridors, through galleries, up stairwells and past doors.

The group has taken full advantage of the building's opportunities, occupying two floors and fitting artwork neatly into its often awkward spaces.

The theme, the Canadian Shield, has been interpreted extremely loosely. The participants are all over the map artistically and have almost nothing in common. Perhaps it's best to see it as a group show conceived in response to the idea of the Canadian Shield.

That and 87 Wade, which is, possibly, a more concrete inspiration.

Shelly Adler's paintings, for example, depict a series of women thinking about the Shield, whatever that means.

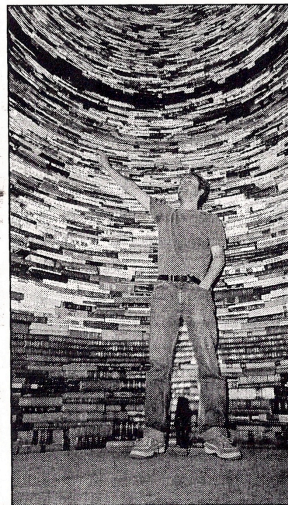
## Guerrilla art cells pop up and disappear with the speed of a short-term lease

A little farther on, there's Marie de Sousa's wall of 52 sky paintings, all the same but different. Rendered in a highly realist manner, her cloudscape could be photographs.

Beyond that, and hard to appreciate until you're right inside it, is Tom Bendtsen's quite marvellous book room. Titled *Argument #4*, it is literally a room made of books.

The amazing circular structure rises like an elongated igloo twice the height of a man. Like the geological Shield, it breaks down into layers. In this case, they are intellectual as well as physical.

The contrast between Bendtsen's uncannily contemplative volumes and the startling abstract by Gregory couldn't be greater. The latter's large triptych, *Miner's Churchyard*, looks like a series of explosions in a paint factory. Gregory associates the Shield



**ARGUMENT #4:** Tom Bendtsen is surrounded by his book work.

with mining, and mining with disaster.

Painter Eugene Knapik has contributed a large abstract, *The Source*, that verges on graffiti, and a series of five thickly textured landscapes, *The Earth Paintings*, that verge on abstraction. Hanging by themselves on a basement

wall — the last place one would normally expect to encounter artworks — these exquisite oil sketches take on added poignancy. Though their presence can be seen as the triumph of the creative will, they seem terribly vulnerable in this urban wasteland.

But perhaps that's the point. Civilization may have been evicted from the smarter addresses downtown, but it refuses to disappear.

"These shows are just as important and valuable as anything you see in the AGO or the Power Plant," Gregory declares. "They're more grassroots, looser and closer to what's really happening. The collectives challenge the institutional curators to rethink what they do."

"All the work was made specifically for this show. Each one of us also put in an equal amount of money to cover the basic costs."

"We take great pride in what we've done here, whether it's cleaning up or paying for the insurance in case anyone has a heart attack here."

So far, touch wood, no one has.

The work on display ranges widely but, assembled under one leaky roof, it exceeds itself. The aura of *ex nihilo* optimism lifts it above its weakest parts.

Indeed, Canadian Shield's weaknesses are part of its charm.

Any enterprise that insists on the necessity of art's existence under any circumstances deserves respect. And best wishes.