

# Report on FORUM: From the Ground Up 17 April 2010

## A biennial platform for international contemporary art in Toronto

### Organized by The Power Plant and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

As Richard Rhodes wrote in *Canadian Art* (online, 22 April 2010), the Forum was a “daylong exploration of the doubts and possibilities involved” in the notion of a biennale for Toronto, where the city’s “negligible profile is a persistent note of anxiety in an art scene once well known internationally for its leadership in artist-run culture and new media development.” For the audience counted in at 277, engagement was intense and the day ended on an optimistic note looking forward to future developments.

Over the course of the day there were numerous repeating comments. In summary:

#### **WHY a biennale here?**

Other biennales have a background in 1) response to trauma, and 2) desire for self-definition and the attention of others. While Toronto has no crisis to which it is responding, there were many questions about the city’s identity and self-awareness, its lack of familiarity with its own history. However, many feel we are “ready” to undertake this project and are eager to move into action.

#### **What is special about Toronto? What do we have to offer?**

*Who are we* was a common refrain. Indeed, “Who and What is Toronto?” was proposed as theme for a follow-up meeting.

The city’s cultural diversity was applauded, and the size of its arts community. It is considered a “safe” place where charged or political content might be presented. There is an important history of production and exhibition in media-related visual arts.

#### **Why now?**

Perhaps adding “one more” biennale to the many already taking place around the globe will make little difference to the outer world.

Some claim the Toronto plan is too end-of-the-line, that there are already hundreds of such events and that – typically – Toronto is too timid and too late. Others spoke to the contrary, that we can be different, gain something important, be a showcase, and make new friends. The majority substantially favours the project.

The visual arts do not receive the critical and financial support that they deserve in comparison with other arts forms (theatre, music) or sports and entertainment. Yet the growing audiences for such time-limited events or festivals as Nuit Blanche, Luminato and TIFF show that there is a large and diverse audience out there to be tapped.

#### **What will we gain from the event?**

Such an exhibition or project will present Toronto to the world. Artists here will be seen and acknowledged by others. Friends and connections can be made. At the same time, a biennale here would bring visitors and important work from abroad to Toronto’s attention. Comparative standards will be clear and individual works can be

experienced directly. Toronto would be a central focal point in Canada for the visual arts.

As Philip Monk stated, “If it’s for ourselves *and* we can articulate reasons why others might be interested, then a biennale could be important.”

### **Should the project be locally based, or emphasize international imports?**

The case was made for strong representation from across Canada, in that different regions know too little of each other, of artists and concerns.

Foreign visitors may be most interested in (hitherto unfamiliar) local art, while a Toronto public, contrarily, might find international work of special interest while also basking in seeing favourite sons and daughters well presented.

### **Curators:**

Local curatorial knowledge and experience were acknowledged, but the strategic advantage of co-curators from elsewhere (including those from other countries) was pointed out. Imported “star” curators were generally rejected.

Various models were mentioned, including a “curatorium” or team that could bring wide knowledge and contacts; the many possible audiences should be considered in the selection of curator or curatorial group.

The role of institutions in relation to curatorial responsibility remained contentious.

### **Planning:**

Different opinions were given about advance planning. Lisa Steele credits early identification of *aims* as crucial to 1) selection of programs and participants, and 2) the only way to generate an appropriate audience, that would 3) lead to future success and empowerment.

Planning “at least a decade in advance” was advocated by Julian Sleath of the City of Toronto Special Events.

Marc Glassman noted that the Images Festival had become stable simply “by continuing” despite the odds, but Janice Price stated that the slow-growth model for establishing the Stratford Festival or TIFF is no longer feasible.

### **Format:**

Varieties of timing were proposed, every 2 years, 3, or more sporadic.

The title or description “biennale” is just one possibility; name implies form and one should be conscious of unintended consequences. Barbara Fischer suggested “Ten Projects for Toronto” rather than “the packed art-fair ambiance that often occurs now.” Gerald McMaster pointed out that “Toronto is a post-colonial city, as is Sydney; maybe Europe is not the best model for our project.”

Corrado Paina (executive director of the Italian Chamber of Commerce of Toronto) noted that a *winter biennale* held at the CNE grounds, could capitalize on a place and ambiance unique to Toronto. His proposal seemed to resonate. Other sites were proposed with less response: Toronto Island, or the eastern Beach area that might take advantage of PanAm Games sites in 2015.

**Criticality** was a recurrent demand, though the term remained undefined.

There was insistence on the need for memory and the accumulation and maintenance of archival material as ground for public discourse.

A substantial catalogue must be published: to anchor the exhibition's serious content and its potential for continuing life, its historical role, and its potential for future research. The "public relations" and "collectors" aspects of a catalogue were not highlighted.

The nature and size of such a publication was not discussed, nor its potential audience or support structure.

**Cultural diversity** came up regularly, and the notion that the arts did not (yet) necessarily reflect that diversity. Aboriginal artists were acknowledged by several speakers. Sara Diamond insisted that the coming generation, now emerging, would give ample evidence of diversity reflected everywhere.

**The role of the "spectacle"** and the festivalization of biennales and contemporary art activity, along with comparisons of marketplace and art fairs, were seen as both positive and negative by different speakers; it was recognized that popular response and "entertainment" potential would be relevant to funding sources. A biennale, typically two months or more in duration, has a different mandate and audience than a short-term or one-night event.

As Gregory Burke pointed out, "The market is always implicated." Funding sources and audience are similarly intertwined.

#### **Funding and sustainability:**

There were warnings about a biennale's potential to drain funds from current organizations and institutions, artists and projects; effects of the recent Olympic Games in Vancouver were cited. It was suggested that the budget be "huge," a combination of public and private funds.

Long-term sustainability was seen as an issue in maintaining constructive energy and a responsive audience.

Jessica Bradley proposed that institutions *give over support* to this new project, not *direct* it or take it over even if providing the venue. A source of funds *outside* regular financial sources is required, to avoid draining current projects and spaces. But first we need answers to *why?* and *what?* we want and need, in order to "sell" the vision.

#### **Audience:**

It was stated often that the Toronto audience must be considered before all others.

Janice Price of Luminato noted that 3-5 years was a minimum base for cultural tourism.

#### **Dichotomies remained:**

A balance between Canadian and international content and input was a recurring issue, while the desire to present or feature local artists and curators remained strong.

The value of centralization of exhibition or events was compared with dispersal of sites and accommodation; both camps stated their point strongly. There was resistance to the “Torontocentric” just as there was rejection of spreading things around. Fundamentally the issue is political both for organizers and public, but practical facts (weather, transportation, infrastructure, toilets, staff, and support facilities) were also mentioned.

The comparative roles of “major” institutions and the also-important artist-run centres were queried both in the planning stages and in final presentation of a Toronto biennale. It was noted that ARC culture is taken for granted to some extent, perhaps under-valued, and that Toronto’s significance as a production centre for the media arts (film, video) should be addressed in planning a biennale.

### **Follow-up:**

Several individuals offered to take on research or background work in preparation for a biennale.

Numerous voices called for further meetings and for the wide publication online of information and discussion. Several audience members urged the early formation of planning committees, noting that institutions left to their own devices tended not to follow through *or* to work behind closed doors, without sufficient consultation. Canadian Art Foundation offered to support a next meeting, and the AGO offered its space for such an event.

Peggy Gale  
10 May 2010

### **Recommendation**

Based on the interest and enthusiasm of many participants at the Forum, we recommend that we move forward with developing options for staging a recurring international contemporary art event in Toronto and that options should:

1. consider the intricacies of the current funding situations in Toronto, Ontario and Canada, and questions of who the audiences are for such an event.
2. recognize both the specificity of Toronto and its specific communities, histories and cultural legacies.
3. recognize the leadership, capacity and diversity of the contemporary art infrastructure in Toronto and the role of artists and artist-run culture in creating Toronto’s rich cultural landscape and history.
4. reinforce that the event must be ideas driven and must put forward a distinctive argument on contemporary art production both in Canada and internationally.

The core leadership group will continue consulting with the art community and aims to present a number of options to an open meeting in Spring 2011 for response.

Gregory Burke, Jon Davies, Peggy Gale and David Liss

30 November 2010