Agonistic Possibilities in Ontario's Regional Galleries, A Proposition

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the relevance of the regional public art institution in Ontario as it relates to the contemporary global populist moment. Communities in sparsely populated regions are frequently less exposed to cultural, racial, and class differences, making them potentially more susceptible to the rhetoric of right-wing populism. The regional gallery has an opportunity to introduce affective and agonistic presentations of difference that question and complicate existing hegemonic forces. Drawing on theories of public space from Rosalyn Deutsch, antagonism in relational practice from Claire Bishop, and the educational turn from Janna Graham, this paper finds that public art galleries have the capacity to produce agonistic civic spaces. These agonistic tensions, as articulated by political theorist Chantal Mouffe, put into question current hegemonic forms, encouraging the formation of new counter-subjectivities among audiences. These findings are supported by two case studies: Peterborough's artist-run centre, Artspace, and Oshawa's Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Interviews were conducted with the curators of each institution, and several exhibitions and programs were analyzed based on the merits of their agonistic potential.

Keywords: agonism, Ontario, regional gallery, public, affect, populism, parrhēsia

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Jonathan Lockyer, Curator of Artspace Artist-run Centre, Peterborough, Ontario; and

Leila Timmins, Curator and Manager of Exhibitions and Collections, of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario.

DEDICATION

This research project is dedicated to the Chatham-Kent arts community and the Thames Art

Gallery. Thank you for all you taught me.

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FOREWORD

This major research paper considers the regional art gallery in Ontario as a site for the challenging and dismantling of right-wing populist rhetoric. It emerges out of my childhood growing up in the agro-industrial region of Chatham-Kent, where access to, or even knowledge of, an arts community felt limited at best. The completion of an out-of-province Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a reluctant return home provided me with a renewed perspective around the significance of arts hubs in diffusely populated regions. In Chatham, a modest but eager group of artists, crafters, and art enthusiasts congregate routinely for openings and talks at both the small local gallery, called ARTspace, to view the work of peers; and at the larger public art gallery, the Thames Art Gallery (TAG), whose scope extended to the provincial and national levels. [1]

It was only after I began working in these spaces that I learned the history of TAG. The building it is housed in, known now as the Chatham Cultural Centre, was built in 1879 as a home for one of the first mayors of the township of Chatham. The building later became a spa and hotel when a mineral spring was discovered around the turn of the century. Once the spring dried up, it served as an extension of the Chatham Vocational School from the mid 1920s to the 1960s. In the late 60s the building underwent renovations to assume its current use as a multi-purpose cultural space, housing a theatre, a handful of studio spaces, collections storage, and the school gymnasium-cum-gallery. [2] The multi-purpose arts building was made possible through the willfulness of a group of women artists and arts supporters who argued for the need for this hub,

[1] Not to be confused with one of my case studies of the same name based in Peterborough, Ontario; it is entirely possible the name for the Chatham gallery, established in 2008 was inspired by Peterborough's Artspace.

[2] This kind of excavation of the social history of a museum or gallery has been explored by artists such as Andrea Fraser, in particular her work Museum Highlights (1989) where, performing as a docent for The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Fraser recounts many of the city's inequalities that made the municipal museum possible, and continue to haunt its present.

purchasing it for \$37,500 in 1963.3 The smaller, quasi-artist-run gallery called ARTspace was

established in 2008, in the then-economically depressed downtown core of Chatham, a five-

minute walk from TAG. ARTspace was founded with a few mighty voices—approximately 40

local artists who demanded a place where they could exhibit, experiment, and engage with the

broader community. These kinds of origin stories that begin with a committed collective are

essential for the longevity of an institution and are often the result of a lack identified by a

community. They fulfill a need for an alternative space for those who feel like outsiders in their

community due to their interests or identity. Specifically, in a socially conservative town,

ARTspace became a welcome respite for the LGBTQ+ community and exhibited or employed a

number of queer artists and cultural workers.

In my three years working between these two spaces, visiting artists and curators

frequently remarked on the warmth and hospitality of the local arts community—a reception they

were not necessarily guaranteed when working with larger arts institutions in urban centres.

During this period of my early professional life, I witnessed a generosity and willingness towards

creative forms of exchange between myself and the core group of arts supporters. My

contemporary art training had closed me off from seeing the validity of more traditional forms of

expression such as landscape painting, which continues to be a meaningful way for many local

artists, viewers, and amateur enthusiasts to express their connection to the local landscape and

notions of home.4 Local artists drew inspiration from, or had the opportunity to be critical of,

3 "Gallery Information and History," Municipality of Chatham-Kent, October 26, 2017,
https://www.chatham-kent.ca/tourism-culture/thames-art-gallery/gallery-information-history
4 For instance, in working with the gallery's permanent collection (its contents' predominantly
works by regionally-recognized 19th century landscape painters) local artist Scott Livingstone
and I put together a show that juxtaposed several historic paintings with a series of his drawings
that took the logic of the traditional landscape (the impulse to capture the beauty or majesty of
nature) and updated it to subtly demonstrate human interventions from ditches and culverts to

exhibitions at the TAG, by participating in peer critiques and professional development opportunities with visiting artists. Through the reciprocation of generative critique—both informally through conversation at gallery openings, and formally at advisory board meetings—the relationship among local artists and arts workers was incredibly fluid, permitting dialogical forms of collective identity formation and fostering a relationship of care among what was (aside from an interest in art) a very heterogenous group of people.

Alternatively, for the uninitiated, gallery spaces can feel exclusive and needlessly intellectual or overwrought: from the agoraphobia-inducing high ceilings typical of contemporary art venues, to the occasionally abstruse installations accompanied by equally opaque press releases, art spaces often shut out meaningful interactions with art rather than foster them. TAG's high school art show, hung on the upper mezzanine level, is likely the single-most attended event each year (something I can attest to as both a high school artist, and through my experience working at the opening as a curator). The exhibition is paired with a professional artist or group exhibition on the main level, as a means of acquainting new audiences with contemporary art practices in Canada.

This is the curatorial balance my colleagues and I often tried to strike—presenting a range of local practices alongside work with an expanded scope with the intention of moving viewers out of their comfort zones. Here, we enlisted populist tactics to garner interest and support. This was a delicate line to tread, however, as any perception of the space as the frivolous overspending of tax dollars posed a risk to the gallery's survival. The majority municipally-funded budget was, and still is, up for debate each year by city council. Support

wind turbine farms—imagery far more indicative of the contemporary Chatham landscape and identity.

from the local public, both fiscally and in terms of attendance, could be difficult to muster for a variety of reasons. Even knowledge of the existence of the space posed a challenge despite its 50-year history within the community. The struggle to build and maintain broader support from community members is a common thread for many "regional" galleries.

Community support is not the only obstacle, however. Dependence on municipal funding means adhering to the expectations of a municipal administration; in the case of Chatham, this is an administration determined to transform the gallery into a profit generator by threatening fiscal penalties in the case of the gallery's failure to do so. This kind of environment not only damages employee morale but is detrimental to exhibitions and programming by forcing a neoliberal model onto the public art institution: allowing attendance statistics for paid programming to take precedence over the integrity of work being shown. Zainub Verjee, curator, arts writer, and executive director of Ontario Association of Art Galleries (OAAG), articulated the kinds of problems facing municipal galleries in an article for *Canadian Art* magazine in 2018:

> In Ontario, arts policy tends to be rooted in the economic—as opposed to the cultural—contributions of cultural industries. The province places significant value on cultural tourism and the entertainment and creative industries as economic engines. This neoliberal underpinning is the legacy of the Progressive Conservatives' 1995 platform ("The Common Sense Revolution") and it continues to be the leitmotif for cultural expenditures in the province to this day.[5]

5 Zainub Verjee, "Are Canada's Municipal Art Galleries in Crisis?" Canadian Art (Canadian Art Foundation, April 23, 2018) https://canadianart.ca/features/are-canadas-municipal-art-galleries-in-crisis/

And through this model of culture as economic engine, there is an expectation that user fees or a "pay-for-play" model must be enforced by the gallery onto its audience, akin to box office ticketing for theatres, while also encouraging an "opening up" of the space to be more of a community centre by offering mindfulness classes, paint nights, and other such "accessible" events within the gallery walls. This neoliberalization of the gallery or museum turns the public art gallery into a market-driven enterprise, while also putting up economic barriers—in the form of ticket costs—for the very public it is meant to serve.[6] Looking to cultural tourism as a profit-generator in times of economic hardship is a common strategy for smaller communities—and is often embraced by arts institutions on the lookout for additional financial support. But the expectation that a community's overstretched cultural sector should act as an economic engine for its community in troubled times places a burden on local public arts institutions to continually churn out more entertaining presentations of art.

Chatham, like many smaller cities and towns across southwestern Ontario, was economically tied to the automotive and manufacturing industries from the post-war era until the late 90s. Labour unions emerging from these industries helped to bolster socialist values along the lines of class struggle (as opposed to today's more intersectional approach to socialism). However, with the closing of these factories, so too went the optimism of working-class collectivity. High unemployment rates among the working class altered local voting trends from the union-supported New Democratic Party, toward fiscal and social conservatism: a move emboldened by misplaced xenophobic narratives of jobs being taken by "foreigners" in the

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6 Andrea Fraser, in her collected writings, Museum Highlights (2005), Claire Bishop in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" (2004), and Janna Graham in "The Educational Turn in Art" (2016) have all analysed this turn towards neoliberalism in the public art gallery.

Global South, rather than an acknowledgement of market shifts due to corporate greed and

neoliberal globalization.[7]

      Economic downturns and mass job loss are associated with the surfacing of latent right-

wing populist attitudes, according to a study by the Canadian Press.[8] Currently, the Chatham-

Kent Leamington riding is a PC majority government at the provincial level, with 52% of the

population helping to vote in the current Ford government.[9] As such, the question at the heart of

this paper considers whether the regional gallery can counter the rhetoric of right-wing populism,

despite challenges around under funding, audience perceptions of elitism, and the legacy of

colonialism inherent within all display institutions in Canada. [10] In her book *Agonistics: Thinking*

the World Politically (2013), Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe writes of the political

potential that can be recuperated from the traditional arts institution:

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7 Evidenced through strong New Democratic Party (NDP) provincial representation in the 1990 Ontario General Election, to a steady incline in Progressive-Conservative (PC) support up until the 2018 election. Re-drawing of electoral districts may also contribute to this. "Elections Ontario Data Explorer" 2020. (https://results.elections.on.ca/en/data-explorer?fromYear=1867&toYear=2019&edIds=2_18&edIds=-17_12&edIds=-16_7&electionType=GE&levelOfDetail=district)
8 Frank Graves. Open Versus Ordered: Cultural Expressions of the New Outlook. EKOS Politics, 2017. Accessed June 27, 2019. (http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/open_vs_ordered_october_10_2017b.pdf)
9 "Elections Results Map," Graphics & Charts (Elections Canada, 2020) https://results.elections.on.ca/en/graphics-charts
10 The earliest public art venues, according to art historian Carol Duncan, were "princely" (literal private aristocratic collections made available to the public for the promotion of a national identity) in England and France. This language of display continues on—Canada, as a colony of England is no exception. The state-wide museum practice of displaying the "artifacts" of surviving Indigenous people served to historicize and ultimately disappear them in the psyche of the viewer. This is a legacy that haunts display culture in Canada and the US, as articulated by the work of contemporary Indigenous artists and curators from Robert Houle, Richard William Hill, Rebecca Belmore, Carl Beam, James Luna, and many more. Carol Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: inside Public Art Museums. "From the Princely Gallery to the Public Art Museum." (London: Routledge, 2001) 21-37.

in the present conditions, with the art world almost totally colonized by the market, museums can become privileged places for escaping from the dominance of the market. As Boris Groys has pointed out, the museum […] could be seen as a privileged place for artworks to be presented in a context that allows them to be distinguished from commercial products. Envisaged in such a way, the museum would offer spaces for resisting the effects of the growing commercialization of art.[11]

I would extend this line of inquiry one step further, noting that the dearth of an art market in smaller cities has allowed regional galleries to operate adjacent to the kinds of commercialization and art market pressures that metropolitan public art galleries are subject to. Meaning, in spite of the aforementioned pressure to generate revenue for its community, there is at the same time a freedom for the regional public gallery to take greater risks, to experiment, and to exhibit the practices of emerging curators and artists when they operate outside of the precarious art market as predominately publicly-funded spaces. As such, public art galleries in regional spaces may be uniquely positioned to do the work of unravelling conservative narratives that permeate smaller communities and perpetuate harmful stereotypes and ideologies.

11 Chantal Mouffe, "Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practice," in Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically (London: Verso, 2013) 85-107.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several years, the catch-all designation "populist" has become a common epithet for various nationalist governments and a hot topic in both popular conversation and scholarship. Since Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, a relentless series of think pieces and published books on the amorphous so-called movement have emerged. Popular discourse around the "populist moment" typically focuses on the right-wing variant seen to the south of us in Make America Great Again (MAGA) country—or more globally through movements like Brexit in the United Kingdom or the Yellow Vests in France. The term is also criticized in leftist circles as being a pejorative yet polite catch-all for more pointed labels like authoritarian, nationalist, and/or fascist.[12]

Within the Canadian context, conservative (not necessarily populist) provincial governments have been the recent electoral trend. The "Wexit" movement in Alberta, modeled on the UK's Brexit movement and emerging swiftly after the 2019 re-election of Prime Minster Justin Trudeau, was propelled by a perceived indifference on the part of the Liberal government towards the economic anxieties of Canada's crude-rich western provinces, providing a rallying cry for far-right fringe groups such as the Christian Heritage Party.[13] Meanwhile Ontario's Ford government, elected in 2018 on promises of cheap beer and repealed sex education curriculum, has an insidious stranglehold on publicly-funded institutions—reducing them with a thousand

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12 Nima Shirazi and Adam Johnson. 2019. "Populism: The Media's Favourite Catch-All Smear for the Left." Podcast audio. Citations Needed.
13 Leyland Cecco and David Agren, "Wexit: Alberta's Frustration Fuels Push for Independence from Canada," (The Guardian, November 25, 2019) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/25/wexit-alberta-canada-independence-separatism

cuts,14 including through the Ministry of Culture's arms-length Ontario Arts Council.15 Currently

the Ontario Arts Council funds more than 1,400 arts institutions, including 2,200 artists in 228

communities province-wide16: a significant fiscal influence on the province's arts and culture

industry, with the overall budget ultimately determined by whichever provincial administration

holds office at that time.

The initial premise of this paper was that regions with rural, working-class, or

geographically marginal (as opposed to urban-central) identities are better positioned for the

internalization of populist rhetoric, whether that rhetoric was leftist or right-wing in its politics.17

Most definitions of populism rely on the hostility between "the people" and an "elite"—

archetypal binaries that can take any number of forms depending on the circumstances, but are

essentially bound to specific geographies.18 An example of this is the "905" area-code ring of

support for conservative governments in the Greater Toronto Area. A parallel in American right-

wing discourse is the use of terms like the "coastal elite" aimed at Democratic voters in

California and the maritime states, including New York. Thus, the "elite" becomes metonymic of

14 "Here's a List of Cuts and Program Changes the Ford Government Has Backtracked On,"
(CBC, October 3, 2019) https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/doug-ford-ontario-cuts-
backtrack-1.5308060
15 David Shum, "Ford Government Cuts Funding to Ontario Arts Council, Impacting Indigenous
Culture Fund," (Global News, December 14, 2018) https://globalnews.ca/news/4762100/ontario-
arts-council-cuts/
16 "OAC Grant Statistics," Ontario Arts Council (2018) https://www.arts.on.ca/research-
impact/oac-grant-statistics)
17 For Ernesto Laclau, the left-right distinctions of populism are not understood as "a type of
movement—identifiable with either a special social base or a particular ideological orientation—
but a political logic.... The language of a populist discourse—whether left or right—is always
going to be imprecise and fluctuating. The fully-fledged notion of populism which we have now
developed amounts not to the determination of a rigid concept to which we could unequivocally
assign certain objects, but to the establishment of an area of variations within which a plurality of
phenomena could be inscribed." Ernesto Laclau, On Populist Reason (London: Verso, 2018) 94.
18 Bhaskar Sunkara, ed., "The Geography of Resentment," Jacobin, November 2019, 71-74.

the professional urbanite and, by extension of this imaginary, the rural or small-town represents "the people," an amorphous term used to heroize and homogenize any number of conceptions of collectivity in the political imaginary.

Another connection between populist politics and place can be found in the general consensus among scholars that the earliest populist movement evolved in agrarian communities in pre-revolutionary Russia, with a group self-identified as the *Narodnikis* (from the Russian "people" or "folk") who idolized the peasantry and the rural village.[19] While I have not encountered a definition connecting pastoralism with the populist movements of today, I can attest, anecdotally at least, to the survival of a kind of anti-urban attitude in towns and smaller cities: an antagonistic duality that feeds into populist narratives. Furthermore, the 2018 Ontario election results demonstrate clear voting trends towards the left in city-centres[20] and a preference for Progressive-Conservative leadership in townships and small cities in Southern Ontario.[21] As the Foreword describes, this has not always been the case, with many of the now-PC communities once electing labour parties like the NDP.

I used each of the above three considerations—linguistic ties to certain geographies, proto-populism as a movement idolizing the peasantry, and election results by geographic region from Ontario's 2018 election—to explain the easy adoption of populist rhetoric in non-urban settings. However, each consideration contains complex and distinct class dynamics that resist the pinning down of decisive correlations between place and political orientation. I have found it helpful to think of populism (at large) as a political tactic, which leverages in-group/out-group

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19 Guy Hermet. "Populist Movements." in International Encyclopedia of Political Science. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2011) doi: 10.4135/9781412959636.n471.
20 In the case of the 2018 election, this meant the election of mostly NDP representation.
21 Interestingly, Northern Ontario continues to be an NDP stronghold both provincially and federally, perhaps because of a continued labour union presence in mining regions.

logics, as a means of mobilizing or rallying support for a specific cause rather than as a discrete

ideology or movement. As such, it might be beneficial to instead argue that those with less

exposure to cultural, racial, and class difference (and this is often—but not always—the case in

smaller towns and rural areas) are more susceptible to in-group/out-group dynamics which in

turn makes the dualism of right-wing populism a seductive political option.

John Judis' *The Populist Explosion* (2016) discerns leftist and right-wing variants of

populism as dyadic and triadic, respectively. Meaning that "left-wing populists champion the

people against an elite or establishment." 22 He continues:

> Theirs [left wing populists'] is a vertical politics of the bottom and middle arrayed against
> the top. Right-wing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of
> coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance, of immigrants, Islamist, or
> African American militants. Left-wing populism is dyadic. Right-wing populism is
> triadic. It looks upward, but also down on an out group.23

While presenting compelling psychological models, the reality of our contemporary global

political climate—and for this project, the relative microcosms of Ontario cities and towns—is

far more complex than the neat dyads and triads Judis proposes. But he does highlight an

interesting possibility in the slippage between right and left populisms, since both, at their cores,

harbour an anti-elite sentiment/rhetoric. Perhaps this rift is slipperiest in regions that have only

recently shifted to Progressive-Conservative majorities after a period of disenchantment with the

failures of the current liberal-democratic system—assuming conceptions of the elite are mutable

22 John B. Judis, The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and
European Politics (Columbia Global Reports, 2017) 15.
23 Ibid.

in the psyche of the right-wing populist. In accepting this premise, exposure to critical artistic practices can shape and shift the essentialist articulations of "us versus them" wielded by right-wing populism, or the very least, put the "us" and the "them" into question for new audiences—a line of inquiry the gallery or museum can activate by acting as a public forum that invites criticality from its audience-community by being a space of agonism. The agonistic principle is here borrowed from Chantal Mouffe, and is a central theme discussed in the following chapters.

The tendency of right-wing populist governments to enforce policies of austerity on cultural institutions may not be merely because they view them as frivolous overspending. Perhaps, while containing their own problematic histories, arts institutions are a threat to the very tenets of right-wing populism itself, as artistic practice operates on a similarly affective register to political identity formation, and has the ability to encourage critical thinking, forge new subjectivities, and thus contest current hegemonic forces. Chantal Mouffe, in her text *For A Left Populism* (2019) articulates the usefulness of critical art practices in the dismantling of hegemonic systems emboldened through right-wing populism:

> If artistic practices can play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity, it is because, in using resources that induce emotional responses, they are able to reach human beings at the affective level […] For that reason [art has] an important role to play in a left populist strategy.[24]

When the influence of capitalism seems to permeate all aspects of our daily lives, very few democratic public spaces with opportunities for dialogue remain in the ever-privatized public of

24 Chantal Mouffe, For a Left Populism, (London: Verso, 2018) 77.

our contemporary moment. Mouffe goes as far as describing our global political moment as

"post-democratic," meaning within a liberal democracy,

> The agonistic tension between the liberal and the democratic principles […] has been eliminated. With the demise of the democratic values of equality and popular sovereignty, the agonistic spaces where different projects of society could confront each other have disappeared and citizens have been deprived of the possibility of exercising their democratic rights.[25]

If we follow Mouffe's argument, the possibility of an agonistic space existing within the

institution of a public museum or gallery should be treated with a dose of skepticism, as all

publicly-funded institutions are the progeny of totalizing colonial and nationalistic projects. As

such, public art institutions can be inhospitable to audiences uninitiated into contemporary art

discourse, meaning those who lack the cultural or symbolic capital required to negotiate a place

within such institutions feel excluded from them. [26] However, in her chapter titled "Agonistic

Politics and Artistic Practice," from *Agonistics*, Mouffe writes of the museum that:

> far from being condemned to playing the role of conservative institutions dedicated to the maintenance and reproduction of the existing hegemony, museums and art institutions can contribute to subverting the ideological framework of consumer society. Indeed, they could be transformed into agonistic public spaces where this hegemony is openly contested. Since its beginning, the history of the museum has been linked to the construction of bourgeois hegemony, but this function can be altered. As [Ludwig]

25 Mouffe, For a Left Populism, 16.
26 Carol Duncan argues that the origin of public art galleries is the nationalizing of private aristocratic collections; the 19th century French public was permitted to experience the public art gallery, and while their ability to understand the work is not precluded, the sense of awe induced by the magnificence of the collection could be understood by all. Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: inside Public Art Museums. 24.

Wittgenstein has taught us, signification is always dependent on context, and it is use which determines meaning. 27

The two galleries I examine in this paper, Peterborough's artist-run centre, Artspace, and Oshawa's Robert McLaughlin Gallery, *use* the gallery space as a forum for discursivity and the contestation of ideas (as demonstrated in their own respective chapters) while welcoming non-arts-initiated audiences. In doing so, they foster agonistic public spaces by adhering to Mouffe's idea that "conflicting points of view [must be] confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation," as opposed to accepted views of public or civic space that falsely assume "public space is the terrain where one aims at creating consensus." 28 Understood within the context of contemporary art practice, art historian Claire Bishop suggests in her essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" (2004), that a more useful approach to relationality is the use of a model of subjectivity "that underpins their [the artists'] practice [as] not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux." 29 Art historian Rosalyn Deutsche is also suspicious of the Habermasian approach to public space which assumes common or universal subjectivities, noting that "public space requires […] a proliferation of social movements organized around irreducibly different political identities, a heterogeneity ungovernable by a predetermined norm."30 Each of these theorists demonstrates a proclivity for productive forms of conflict and tension within their understandings of the formation of a public or social body. Unlike our conventional understandings of a social body

27 Mouffe, "Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practice." 85-107.
28 Ibid.
29 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October 110 (2004): 79, https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379810)
30 Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy." Social Text 33 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) 51.

(one of wholeness and harmony) the descriptions above are akin to a real body, with its often-conflicted inner workings that require ongoing attention and maintenance for functionality. Negotiations are never teleological in this understanding of public space, but are instead the heartbeat of the social body, without which stagnation and decay set in.

A NOTE ON CASE STUDIES AND METHODS

The following section unpacks first-hand accounts of my interviews with curators and analyses of specific exhibitions and programming, accompanied by theories of agonistic politics, public space, and populist approaches to consensus building. Artspace, Peterborough's artist-run centre, and Oshawa's Robert McLaughlin Gallery feature as case studies for this project because of the complicated social histories they have inherited (which I will discuss shortly) and the ways in which they connect with these contexts through the presentation of critical art practices. The projects discussed do not aim for or assume consensus among audiences but rather encourage dissensus. The guiding question throughout this section is how the case studies, as "regional" spaces, respond either directly (through specific programs) or indirectly (through their positioning) to growing tides of right-wing populism. I understand positioning here to encompass a spectrum of deliberate and circumstantial factors, including mission and mandate, institutional configuration, and geopolitical location.

An autoethnographic approach is used in the conducting of interviews with the curators of each institution and in the analysis of their responses. Such an approach is useful because I was able to enlist my own experience working within a regional public gallery in formulating what questions to ask and in the assessment of my interview subjects' responses. The questions asked to both curators were identical, but the resulting responses reveal distinct observations from each respondent as well as compelling overlaps in their professional attitudes and approaches. Curators were chosen as interview subjects because they were able to speak to their institution's histories, as well as the socio-political climates of the regions in which they operate, identifying how their mandates and programming are informed by the communities in which they work.

This paper does not seek to reinscribe false binaries between urban/rural, centre/margin, but instead contend with the kinds of marginalities that are experienced as gradations, on various intersectional and overlapping levels, while also recognizing that the effects of these perceived binaries emerge continually as a result of systems of domination, such as neoliberal capitalism, that fail to be kept in check by the agencies of representative democracies. It does consider communities where xenophobic and/or anti-intellectual sentiments might be latent and could be catalyzed by a nationalistic and conservative rhetoric, which is by no means a condition exclusive to or all-encompassing of the two case studies presented in this paper. The case studies were not chosen exclusively on the basis of their regional designation, political leanings, or their population size. On the contrary, while all of these demographic particulars are significant factors, it would be reductive to frame each case study through clichéd notions of the "regional" and would do a disservice to the complexities of each space: something my conversations with the curatorial staff quickly revealed.

The term regional is a dubious qualifier. It can refer to galleries outside of larger urban centres; specific artistic or curatorial practices that reference the region; a public art gallery in Ontario that has a postal code that does not begin with the letter M[31]; or it can be a kind of ideology or frame of mind, as articulated by the London Regionalists, such as Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers. [32] My two case studies serve massive geographic regions, and are located centrally within them. Nonetheless, both of these curators find ways within their respective programs ways to exceed, their institutions' acknowledged position as regional spaces. Both curatorial staffs invoke the local, as it relates to the global, within many of the exhibitions that

[31] Lisa Wöhrle, telephone conversation, September 23, 2019.
[32] Christopher Regimbal, "Institutions of Regionalism: Artist Collectivism in London, Ontario." in Fillip no.19 (2014)

take place in each of their institutions. And it is through this curatorial methodology that the logic of populism—a global phenomenon that simultaneously relies on a folk understanding of "the people"—can be deconstructed through the lens of the regional gallery to produce agonistic public spaces.

ARTSPACE

Context and History

I interviewed Jonathan Lockyer, the Curator and Director of Artspace, in the winter of December 2019. We met at Artspace on Aylmer Street in downtown Peterborough, where the ARC has been located since 2006—the longest-held address in its 45-year history. Windows lined the façade of the public-facing main exhibition space, while a room to the very back of the building was devoid of natural light, making it prime real estate for video installations. In between these two spaces and partitioned from the front gallery is an office space for the gallery's three full-time staff. It was almost unbearably chilly inside. Each staff-member either wore a coat or was draped with a blanket. Lockyer explained they had updated the heating system but were waiting for the gas company to connect it: in the meantime, they were using their depleted old baseboard system. Obligatory jokes about artist-run centres struggling to keep the heat on ensued.

When I looked around the office space, a small number of museum-grey archival boxes hovered on a shelf out of reach. The archive's modest size was indicative of a 2004 flood that happened at the previous location—much of the ARC's recorded history was destroyed. Desks were cluttered with paperwork, exhibition catalogues, and odds and ends from previous installations. Lockyer and I talked at opposite ends of the desk while Hannah Keating, Artspace's Assistant Curator, and Bec Groves, the Associate Director of Programming and Development, both typed away nearby. At the time of the interview, the three of them made up the entirety of Artspace's full time staff. A small number of university students also assist part-time on a rotating basis. Lockyer spoke casually and easily, leaning back in his chair, making it clear the subject matter was something he was well versed in. He was not however, blasé—Artspace and

the Peterborough arts scene were evidently dear to him as a curator and a member of the

community, even if he originally hails from Toronto.

Firstly, we discussed Artspace's origin story and the audience's demographic

information. Lockyer provided a well-rehearsed run-down, explaining that Artspace was

established in 1974 by a group of artists who resided in Peterborough and in the surrounding

rural communities.[33] From its inception, the space has been centrally located in downtown

Peterborough. It was incorporated in 1977, and since then, has held a number of physical

addresses in the downtown, some notable ones being 190 Hunter Street, The Market Hall, as well

as its current location at 378 Aylmer Street.[34] Currently, the gallery is funded by all three levels

of government (the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the city of

Peterborough) and a partnership with Delta Bingo and Gaming.

Artspace's 40th anniversary publication, titled *I will not grow old in peterborough

because old peterborough is a pain in the ass* (2014) presents the institution through the lens of

four alumni, each offering a vignette about their time working for the ARC. Toronto-based

curator Andrea Fatona, who spent several years early on in her career at the space, recounts that

Artspace "made it clear that it believed in the power and the necessity of taking risks, allowing

room for experimentation and even making mistakes."[35] Experimentation was at the core of

Artspace's ethos from the beginning: it was on the forefront of the first wave of artist-run

33 Dorothy Caldwell, in an interview with Jonathan Lockyer, recounts Artspace's early history, when a group of young American artists moved to Peterborough looking for an inexpensive place for a shared studio, to live and make work –from Dorothy Caldwell, Interview by Jonathan Lockyer, Artspace. Video Interview. Peterborough, 2019. https://vimeo.com/375724751
34 Jonathan Lockyer. Interview by Emily Cadotte. In-person recorded interview. Peterborough, December 3, 2019.
35 Artspace artist-run-center. I will not grow old in peterborough because old peterborough is a pain in the ass. Peterborough: Artspace, 2014.

movements in Canada, distinguishing itself from the vast majority of ARC gallery spaces, which were predominantly located in larger urban centers. This geographic position made Artspace a rarity at the time, and it remains so to this day. Lockyer was proud to report that Artspace is "now one of the oldest artist-run centers in continuous operation in Canada, which speaks to Peterborough as a community in terms of the quality and integrity of artists and arts workers in Peterborough."[36] He went on to say that "it's unique that an artist-run center can survive for this long in a community with a population under 100,000 people. It's also a community that demonstrates a dual personality."[37] This duality emerges out of Peterborough's identity as an industrial manufacturing community, where General Electric was the largest employer until the 1980s; while on the other hand, Peterborough's post-secondary institutions also play a significant role in the formation of its identity. Trent University was established in 1963, with Fleming College opening not long thereafter in 1967. This transformation to the region's academic and cultural output put it squarely in the "town and gown divide," a phrase Lockyer used with hesitation, explaining: "the town being a kind of de facto way of saying conservative, and then the gown being university students, faculty, and university employees. And I think you can very easily group the arts community into that [second group]."[38]

Susceptibility to right-wing Populism

What Lockyer articulates above echoes the kind of antagonistic dualities that are so integral to the functionality of right-wing populist tactics. While I previously discussed this

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36 Lockyer. 2019.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.

division as playing out between urban versus rural identities, within the region of Peterborough itself a perceived division exists between the "gown," or academics, scholars, and cultural workers, and the "town," or working class people, many of whom have been negatively impacted through the shift from industry and agriculture to information and service-based economies.39 This binary mentality may pose challenges for arts spaces ostensibly aligned with the "gown" half of the binary in soliciting the attention of those potential viewers who see themselves as oppositional (and it is often this group that is pandered to by populist governments or political parties such as Ford's). Opportunities for the disarticulation of these perceived divisions must be fostered in order to create the agonistic and pluralistic public spaces that have the potential to overcome right-wing populism as described by Chantal Mouffe: a disarticulation that could be set in motion through the audience's exposure to critical art practices. How the gown is able to forge a relationship with the town, if they have already been dismissed as such, is an ongoing question for the regional curator—allowing entry points for non-arts-initiated audiences might be one possibility.

Agonism in the gallery space

In order to broach the possibility of an agonistic relationship among audience members and in relation to the gallery space, pluralistic audience members with opposing and dissenting viewpoints must be captured, and can be done through curatorial (and public programming)

39 The ease with which the arts community fits into the second group, or "gown" might be best understood through Bourdieu's social and cultural capitals, whereby, in the context of Peterborough, shifts in local industries allow for the accumulation of economic capital for those who possess cultural and social capital via highly specific skillsets and qualifications. –from Nick Crossley, "Capital," in Pierre Bourdieu, Key Concepts. Second ed. (London: Routledge, 2014.) 86-87.

means, with the recognition that audiences are not discrete and static "communities," but instead

dynamic relational actors whose identities are varied and textural. It is vital that non-arts-initiated

audiences are able to attend these spaces without being objectified by the institution, either

through tokenization or by enforcing a civilizing mission under the guise of arts education.

Miwon Kwon, in her study of site-specific and community-based practices, looks at several

critiques of these practices (from the likes of Hal Foster and Grant Kester) which are skeptical of

the artist's institutionally-sanctioned role as ethnographer or missionary, and adds to this critique

the argument that a successful approach might instead acknowledge that:

> the interaction between an artist and a given community group is not based on a direct, unmediated relationship. It is circumscribed within a more complex network of motivations, expectations, and projections among all involved. Moreover, all these identities—artist, curator, institution, and community group—are in the process of continuous negotiation. At the very least, their respective roles and actions need to be understood in relation to one another.[40]

An understanding of the relation between these actors is central to Artspace's

programming, with their mandate stating that "we change in response to the needs of artists."[41]

As Lockyer explains, one way the gallery manages to avoid the objectification of audiences

typically marginalized from contemporary art is through targeted programming, exhibitions, and

outreach to make space for artists and individuals who have been historically excluded from

formally practicing and exhibiting contemporary art. This means taking risks in diversifying

gallery programming by, for example, supporting experimental performance-based practices,

40 Miwon Kwon, "The (Un)Sitings of Community," in One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.) 142.
41 "Mandate/History," Artspace, accessed April 9, 2020. (https://artspace-arc.org/about/mandate-history)

exhibiting non-formally trained artists, or generally challenging the practices that are normalized or ossified within the institution. A long-term commitment to such programming seems to be equally as significant. Over a year's worth of exhibitions during a period from 2018-2019 were solo shows from emerging to established indigenous artists. The ongoing commitment to work produced by historically excluded artists and curators (who, among this roster, each have distinct and diverse practices) resists the possibility of tokenization.

Star Song, a solo exhibition by local artist Alice Olsen Williams during January 2019, was particularly successful in inviting new audiences into the gallery (see Figure 1). The show presented a number of quilted works that feature animals and birds significant to the lives of the Anishinaabeg, as well as traditional floral motifs that Anishinaabe-Kwewag continue to use in their beadwork, quillwork, embroidery and other creative media. According to Lockyer and the Artspace staff, the exhibition attracted a change in audience demographics, from a surge in attendance to the age and background of viewers: normally serving the young adult to adult demographic, seniors and members of the quilting guild were "given a refresher that Artspace is there for them too."[42] Not only did this shift in audience take place for Olsen Williams' exhibition, but many of these new audience members continued to visit, influencing audience demographics for future exhibitions[43]

The textile-based exhibition was accompanied by a text by artist, curator, and professor Caroline Langill that explained Olsen Williams' artistic trajectory—first using the blankets as a means of representing Indigenous epistemologies through iconographic motifs, then in the early 1990s "the artist increasingly adopted political subjects, which, in time, included contemporary

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42 Lockyer. 2019.
43 Lockyer. 2019.

concerns of Indigenous Land Rights, and cultural genocide in the blankets."[44] Each quilt radiates with vivid colour, heightened by shadows cast from stitched-in textures. And each has a discrete but centrally placed medicine wheel sewn amongst the other blocks.

Quilts do not immediately evoke a radical politics or activist stance. Rather the inclusion of craft-based practices by an Indigenous elder artist is an act of radical inclusion. This is not to say the value of the work is only activated through its display, but that its introduction into the historically colonial space of the contemporary art gallery constitutes an agonistic act, where distinct ways of making and displaying enter into a discursive plane. Furthermore, the introduction of new audiences to the space offers the possibility of agonistic discursivity between the conventional audiences associated with textile and craft practices and the gallery's typical audience—in this instance playing out as intergenerational dialogues between the younger, student audience and senior crafters and indigenous elders. The close quarters of an intimate artist-run centre also serve to amplify these interactions by imposing literal proximity among viewers.

Benefits of a small space

The physical size of Artspace also speaks to the kinds of engagements available to the institution. In curator Anthony Huberman's *Take Care*, a love letter to small "alternative" arts institutions, he writes "this intimacy [arising out of smaller arts organizations] will also favour a face-to-face encounter and demand a more active and immediate engagement."[45] Further to this

44 Langill, Caroline Seck. "Stitching A Land-Based Story: Alice Olsen Williams' Blankets." Star Song. (Peteroborough: Artspace, 2019) 6.
45 Anthony Huberman. "Take Care," in Mai Abu ElDahab, et al. (eds), Circular Facts, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011) 9.

idea of closeness, the exhibitions at Artspace engage closely with the particularities of Peterborough and the surrounding region. Smaller institutions, as art historian Kirsty Robertson argues, may have an advantage in how they are able to respond to their audiences, both in terms of timeliness and in relation to local concerns.[46] Robertson argues for the micromuseum, which she describes as typically one-room institutions that do not receive public or private funding but still contain "certain recognizable aspects of museum culture."[47]

Artspace, as an ARC, does not operate under the auspices of a municipality or parent organization, which often comes with one-size-fits-all policies and procedures that are not equipped for the specific needs of arts organizations. Its small size and proportionally smaller bureaucratic demands give it the capacity to be more agile and adaptable in relating to the questions and concerns of its public. If the micromuseum can "enliven objects specifically through connecting them to the needs of the present," Robertson's argument can be scaled to the proportional adaptability of a regional artist-run centre.[48] This speaks to Huberman's idea of alternative arts institutions having the ability to "behave" differently: "small organizations around the world have been formulating different answers to that question [of how to behave.] They are taking risks not just with what art to show but also with how to work and how to behave as an institution."[49]

46 Helen Gregory and Kirsty Robertson. "No Small Matter: Micromuseums as Critical Institutions." in RACAR: Canadian Art Review 43, no. 2 (2018) 89-101.
47 As an example of the micromuseum, Gregory and Robertson reference Toronto's Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), a retrofitted coach house that hosts experimental art practices, poetry readings, and craftivist workshops co-founded by artists Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue in 2010. Gregory, 90.
48 Gregory, 101.
49 Huberman, "Take Care" 9.

Patterns of "behaviour" for Huberman include slowing down, distancing the institution from the Sisyphean exhibition cycle. One of the ways this manifests at Artspace is by closing during high summer months as a time for the institution to reflect on the previous year and regroup for the next one. This yearly ritual also speaks to the audience that is prioritized by the gallery, as they are closed for peak cottager/tourist season, affirming their conception of audience as serving the local public. Being small also allows for freedom and experimentation with gallery programming. For example, what was billed as an artist talk between interdisciplinary artists Olivia Whetung (a member of nearby Curve Lake First Nation) and Jeneen Frei Njootli was given the space to transform into a performative conversation. Instead of a conventional question and answer, the two friends organically began collecting seed beads from the gallery floor that had been left behind after a performance by Njootli months earlier. In this instance, the institution embodies Huberman's suggestion that galleries might "step onto the smaller and more vulnerable roads [that] allow learning to replace teaching, camaraderie to replace competition."[50]

Local-global dialectic

A measure of success for Artspace is how their programming is able to speak to the region and also introduce new concepts from outside of it, forming a kind of dialectic between the local and the global.[51] Sheena Hoszko's *Central East Correctional Centre,* shown in winter 2016, epitomized this approach to programming (see Figure 2). The exhibition was an installation of security fencing equal to the perimeter of the jail of the same name. Colloquially

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50 Huberman, 14.
51 Global here meaning encompassing a whole, but at times also meaning world-wide.

known as the Lindsay Superjail, the Canadian Border Services Agency detention centre is also located within the jail where "hundreds of undocumented migrants are detained – most without charges laid against them—awaiting deportation."[52] Various printed materials accompanied the exhibition, outlining the injustices perpetuated at this particular facility, as well as Canada's laws around detaining migrants, specifically the lack of term limits for individuals in holding, awaiting deportation.[53] Texts written by detainees were included in the exhibition, allowing for the display and circulation of first-hand testimonials. A writing station was also set up allowing for gallery-goers to send messages to detainees (see Figure 3). A public artist talk drew the disparate audiences of both Corrections Officers (active and retired) and family members of detainees and prisoners.[54] Participants were permitted the possibility of engaging in dialogue with one another, however the meeting of two oppositional groups does not in and of itself constitute agonism. One of the main tenets of the agonistic act, according to Mouffe, is the conceptual impossibility of rational consensus. An interview with the artist, conducted by *Canadian Art* magazine's Leah Sandals, reveals "Hoszko's ultimate goal with all this artwork? To prompt viewers to consider what it might be like to abolish all prisons."[55] This itself is a veritable conceptual impossibility for those whose livelihoods depend on the continued incarceration of migrants (e.g. prison employees).

52 Sheena Hoszko, Central East Correctional Centre, (Peterborough: Artspace, 2016)
53 "On June 11, 2015, Abdurahman Ibrahim Hassan, detained for over four years at the Central East Correctional Centre, died after being "restrained" inside the super jail without being given proper medical care for his diabetes. He is the third person to have died in immigration detention in Canada since 2013." – from Sheena Hoszko, Central East Correctional Centre (Peterborough: Artspace, 2016)
54 Lockyer, 2019.
55 Leah Sandals, "Building Prisons In Order to Destroy Them," Canadian Art (Canadian Art Foundation, January 25, 2017) https://canadianart.ca/interviews/sheena-hoszko/.

By contrast, Olivia Whetung's *tibewh* takes a less explicit approach to her politics without conceding the affective potency of her work (see Figure 4.). Shown in the spring of 2017, *tibewh* is a 42-part series of beaded works on cloth depicting digitally-abstracted versions of each of the lock stations (as seen through Google Maps imaging) of Ontario's Trent-Severn waterway.[56] One of the most distinctive locks, known as the Peterborough Lift Lock and located in the heart of Peterborough, is an important monument to the city's history. The work is subtle and diminutive as a means of playing with scale, but still contains a deeply political through line that examines colonial infrastructures, highlighting the ways in which they reshape massive ecological systems. As Lockyer noted, "Whetung does subtlety very well and wasn't interested in just interrogating the Peterborough lift lock. She said, 'look at this. This is across this province. It's not just here,'"[57] demonstrating an invocation of the regional in order to exceed it. The project thus extends the political imaginary from the local to the global by playing with interpretations of the regional; an extension that might be useful in forging new collective subjectivities to counter the current neoliberal hegemonies that have precipitated shifts towards right-wing populisms.

Lockyer challenged the notion of regionalism, acknowledging that Artspace identifies as such, but stating that in terms of the work that is presented, "all it really comes down to is—are they [the artists and their work] challenging institutional spaces? And if they're doing that, it doesn't matter what their background is. I think it matters the kinds of conversations they're

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56 A lock is a piece of infrastructure used to raise and lower watercraft between stretches of water of different levels on river and canal waterways. The Trent–Severn Waterway is a 386-kilometre-long canal route (240 miles) connecting Lake Ontario at Trenton to Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, at Port Severn. Its major natural waterways include the Trent River, Otonabee River, Kawartha Lakes, Lake Simcoe, Lake Couchiching and Severn River.
57 Lockyer, 2019.

creating. And if they work in our community."[58] "Institutional spaces" here may also extend to the institutions of neoliberalism that must be challenged to overcome the tides of right-wing populism, by first engaging at this level of local communities. As stated in their institutional mandate, "programming, though national in scope, is regional in spirit."[59]

Parrhēsia as Curatorial Practice

When I asked about pushback from Peterbourians regarding the work that has been shown by Artspace, Lockyer was cautious but generous in his response:

> What we've tried to do in the last five years is sort of deconstruct the way that we do our programming by opening the space up to folks who've been historically excluded from [contemporary art] spaces. […] Even if it's not an artist from the community, we've tried to bring in a community context. […] if there are people who feel threatened or confronted by what we're doing here, then I guess we're doing our job and we're fine with that.[60]

This statement contains an invitation for contestation, confrontation, and adversarial relationality that does not assume consensus-making among audiences, or between communities and the institution's curatorial staff. It is this approach to curating and to civic spaces more generally, one of *parrhēsia,* that form the foundation of agonistic possibility. To return to Huberman's *Take Care,* he describes parrhēsia (an ancient Greek term excavated by Foucault) as "fearless speech" and contrasts it with rhetoric:

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58 Ibid.
59 "Mandate/History," Artspace.
60 Ibid.

An alternative and affective curatorial behavior involves the biting quip and critical edge of parrhēsia […] To practice parrhēsia is to have the courage to speak frankly from a position of exposed vulnerability. […] parrhēsia involves a willingness to stand for irreverent or critical values from the perspective of a less powerful member of the community, and is certainly relevant to those smaller and more vulnerable institutions.[61]

Artspace enacts this kind of philosophy when they show craft-based practices as critical practices in a contemporary art setting; by presenting works that critique colonial infrastructures and the tourist/cottager industrial complex; and again, by planting seeds of prison abolition in a town situated next to a superjail. There is a provocation within each of these projects that speaks "truth to power" in distinct ways. As Lockyer alluded to in our conversation: "the way you imagine politically active work is different from artist to artist."[62] And certainly each of these practices are all deeply political, not in spite of their divergence in artistic approach and political aim, but thanks to these presentation of difference.

61 Huberman, 13.
62 Lockyer, 2019.

ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY

Context and History

Leila Timmins and I met at her apartment on the east side of Toronto on a snowy December afternoon. In 2018, she took on the position of Curator and Manager of Exhibitions and Collections at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery (RMG) in Oshawa, having previously held the position as curator of Toronto's photography-focused artist-run centre, Gallery 44. We had already begun talking about this project before I had hit record, but Timmins generously started back from the top, this time referencing the RMG website to make sure she was hitting all the correct historical notes.

She explained that the gallery (which through its significant collection and several exhibition spaces would more aptly be called a museum—in terms of regional spaces, this one is mammoth) was formed through the collective efforts of local Oshawians, stressing the significance of support from a number of women artists. In 1967, a designer named William Caldwell organized an exhibition by local artists in a commercial space on Simcoe Street. From this, Ewart McLaughlin and his wife Margaret (Alexandra Luke), heirs to the McLaughlin Carriage Company, offered major financial support and works from their own private collection, later evolving into a public art gallery for the City of Oshawa. Isabel McLaughlin, founding member of the notable Canadian modernist group Painters Eleven and cousin to Ewart, also became a lifelong patron of the gallery.[63] To this day the RMG boasts the largest collection of works by the Painters Eleven in the country.

63 "About." The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2018. http://rmg.on.ca/about/.

The gallery is incorporated as a non-profit charity, and functions at arms-length from the city of Oshawa. Timmins noted that this is somewhat rare for a regional context in that the staff are not employees of the city of Oshawa even though approximately half of their funding comes from the city and the city leases the building to the gallery. The institution is governed by an independent board and receives operational funding through the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The RMG also has a modest endowment, with the remainder of revenues coming through fundraising and earned revenue streams such as programming and rentals.[64]

In terms of the gallery's audience, approximately 40,000 people come through the doors annually, not accounting for the audience that sees their extensive touring exhibition program at other host venues provincially and nationally. A robust school program brings a number of school-age children into the gallery on a regular basis, and the RMG Fridays, held the first Friday of each month, draw anywhere between 200 to 500 people a night.[65] Timmins attests that they are generally very local audiences: "Anecdotally, the majority of the people visiting the gallery are from the Durham region. But we do attract an international audience and definitely audiences from Southern Ontario."[66]

Susceptibility to right-wing populism

The way local audiences are targeted is not necessarily through conventional marketing or communication, but through the fostering and maintenance of community partnerships with organizations that support underserved communities. For example, the gallery programmed work

64 Ibid.
65 Leila Timmins. Interview by Emily Cadotte. In-person recorded interview. Toronto, December 18, 2019.
66 Timmins, 2019.

in response to the closure of the General Motors factory (Oshawa Car Assembly) which employed over 4000 workers in 2008 and closed its doors in January of 2020 with a dwindled staff of 200. The closure left a hole in Oshawa's economy, along with a group of unemployed or underemployed working-class people who may have experienced a sense of disenfranchisement or dissatisfaction with current forms of liberal democracy. Without having the language to articulate or direct these frustrations the reductive narratives perpetuated by right-wing populism that purport to remedy economic issues for the middle class become exceedingly seductive. If they are to be extinguished, counter narratives must be made readily available and visible, and could be produced through the presentation of critical art practices, as taken up by the RMG.

A Canadian Press polling of more than 12,000 Canadians measured "people's perceptions of their economic outlook, class mobility, ethnic fluency and tolerance."[67] The findings demonstrated that Oshawa was an anomalous sample group. While on paper Oshawa is prospering, the city represents the highest number of survey respondents in Canada with a pessimistic view of the world, or what the study refers to as an "ordered" outlook that corresponds with the affects of right-wing populism.[68] In the 2018 election, the region opted towards the left, electing NDP representation provincially. The provincial electoral district, which was established in 1955, has never elected Liberal (centrist) representation, wavering between PC and NDP, demonstrating an "us versus them" duality within the community ideologically or economically, which is again an underpinning of populist frameworks. How

67 Stephanie Levitz, "Ordered Oshawa: Why This City Is Ranked Canada's Most Insecure," (CTV News, January 26, 2018) https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/ordered-oshawa-why-this-city-is-ranked-canada-s-most-insecure-1.3776830.
68 Ordered Canadians perceive their own economic outlook and prospects for the next generation's negatively, despite statistical evidence to the contrary. They also hold more conservative positions on immigration and have a shared sense of being unable to "get ahead." Levitz.

these dualities are taken up politically depends on their rhetorical framing and might be enlisted for either rightist or leftist positioning.

Agonism in the gallery space

A timely retrospective of Toronto-based artist-activist duo Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge titled *An Oshawa history of local 222*, opened in autumn of 2019 during the time of the Oshawa Car Assembly's closure (see Figure 5). The exhibition used as its foundation an historic series of documentary photographs of the same name produced by the artists in the 1980s and only recently acquired by the RMG. To produce this body of work, the artists underwent a two-year rigorous research process and collaborated with members of the autoworkers' union to illustrate the problems facing women in the unionized workforce, including the right to work for married women. A contemporary addition to the series was commissioned by the RMG for the exhibition. The new work uses a different lens: one of grievance. The resulting work looks "back over the past 35 years [which has seen] the reversal of many hard-won rights, the slow erosion of jobs and the waning strength of the union."[69]

The exhibition highlights the importance of "working collaboratively with current members of the union, [to open] up new possibilities for cooperation, solidarity and artistic production, blurring the distinction between art and work, and aesthetics and politics."[70] Condé and Beveridge as labour organizers in their own right (they are founding members of Canadian Artists Representation, better known as CARFAC) were able to have productive exchange with

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69 "Oshawa: A History of Local 222," The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, accessed January 20, 2020, http://rmg.on.ca/exhibitions/oshawa-a-history-of-local-222/.
70 Ibid.

Unifor's labour organizers and union members to produce an exhibition that honoured the subjective experience of its subjects. To return to Kwon and Foster's critiques of artist as ethnographer or missionary, Kwon offers that a "vigilant reflexivity" is required on the part of the artist(s) for productive collaboration to take place between a "community group" and visiting artist. [71] Condé and Beveridge are able to produce a productive collaboration that avoids tokenization through an investment of time: both through their research process and by their cultivation of a decades-long relationship with Unifor Local 222, and many other collective labour organizations.[72]

Condé and Beveridge's new addition to the *Oshawa* series, titled *Burial at Oshawa, Oshawa (Part 6)* (2019) played with and on several registers: historically, politically and symbolically (see Figure 6.). Its art historical referent, *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–1850) by famed French Realist, Gustave Courbet, adds significant textural elements to the meaning of the work, but does not prohibit it from being enjoyed by a non-arts-initiated audience in its narrativization of a strike. Courbet famously idealized life in the country and the peasantry or working-class, demonstrated in notable works like the *Stone Breakers* (1849). In the Oshawa version, Condé and Beveridge's burial represents the death of the unionized auto worker as a heroized character of the left avant-garde. And just like Courbet's painting, which depicts a frequent occurrence in the lives of the French peasantry at the time, this banal ritual is elevated to the rank of history painting through its adherence to certain academic art conventions (such as approaches to lighting and scale) which are hacked using digitally manipulated photographic collage. Its

71 Kwon, One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity, 138.
72 The retirees committee at Local 222 was how Condé and Beveridge were able to connect with union members to participate in the new photo mural project, many of whom were the same members they worked with to create the original series in the 1980s.

massive size feels appropriate in the cavernous interiors of the RMG's galleries. While Courbet's mourners look mostly complacent, shuffling around the grave site, the Condé and Beveridge burial welcomes the addition of antagonism amongst its subjects, where union leaders confront corporate executives in a strike (or in Courbet's native tongue, *la grève*) over the staged grave.

Possibilities in Non-public Programming

In my interview with Timmins, she stressed how the exhibition was activated using exclusively "not public" programming, strategic language that is careful not to deem the programming private, which carries connotations of invite-only art auctions and cocktail hours. While traditional public programming typically casts its net as wide as possible, the kinds of non-public programming organized for this project made space for the audiences who were the subjects of the work. Only unpublicized informal tours conducted by the artists, for either the union retirees' committee or union members, supported the exhibition as programming.

This approach to programming could be beneficial in the production of agonistic spaces. While Timmins does not use the language of agonism specifically, she contends that the gallery is ideally a civic space "where we can have conversations about the things that are most meaningful and important to people."[73] Could such a civic space not also be a place where meaning and importance can be produced discursively? Here it might be useful to consider the location of the agonism produced by Condé and Beveridge's exhibition. With projects such as Olsen Williams's in Peterborough, agonism could be located between the work and broader gallery conventions, and perhaps among attendees at the opening. With the Condé and Beveridge

73 Timmins, 2019.

exhibition, the agonism takes place between the collision of supposed low and high cultures (or

the labourer and the museum in this case), but the audience functions differently. While the

exhibition is open to the public, the decision to not include any public programming mitigates the

risk of spurious or performative forms of community engagement by shifting the gaze inward.

As Janna Graham explains in her essay "The Educational Turn in Art" (2016), which

critiques some of the less sincere elements of the post-democratic turn towards pedagogical

structures in contemporary curatorial practice,

> Staged discursive events produced in the name of the public take on this feeling of a
> hollow shell today. The shell is the space that produces and maintains a distance from an
> elite who permit the practices of 'alternative' political debate, while structurally disabling
> their passage into meaningful consequences.[74]

Here, Graham suggests that placing political debates within the context of an elitist space serves

to neutralize their potency or practical application. But perhaps through the approach to non-

public programming, meaningful opportunities for discursivity are actually fortified when the

proverbial stage of the community arts "performance" becomes much less a spectacle, opening

up space for informal (and hopefully more honest) discussions as the divisions between viewer,

artist, and gallery worker become blurred. There is also something to be said for a group of

subjects who are quite oriented towards meaningful consequences (through arbitration and

collective organizing) given a less consequential environment through the gallery space to

explore new configurations and subject positions. Informing this environment is the longevity of

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[74] Janna Graham, Valeria Graziano, and Susan Kelly, "The Educational Turn in Art,"
Performance Research 21, no. 6 (2016): pp. 29-35,
https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2016.1239912, 32.

the 35-year relationship between the artists and local 222, as well as the artists' own experience

of collective organizing. The common critique of community art projects, whereby community

collaborators' contributions are reduced to the role of unpaid "consultants," is here bypassed

through the artists' commitment to meaningful consequences. The possibilities of identity

formation for viewers/subjects are opened up through the collaborative art process, giving

agency to the subjects of the work to consider their local positions reflexively within a broader

context or movement.

Local-global dialectic

Condé and Beveridge's project might have been deeply embedded within Oshawa-

specific histories, but the issues being addressed certainly transcend this particular region—a

dynamic that Timmins intentionally cultivated, and tries to emphasize in all of her curatorial

endeavors:

> One of the strategies for showing contemporary art in this [regional] context is to make
> sure that the art or programming speaks meaningfully to local issues. There is an
> interesting thing that happens with issues on a local level, when they are also happening
> on a broader level. There is always a specific local context and flavor that is important for
> you [as a curator] to draw out and think about directly. Issues that are happening within a
> civic context are usually also happening either nationally or globally, or in different
> places. There is always a play between a larger conversation within a more specific local
> conversation.[75]

An exhibition by Germaine Koh, titled *Home Made Home: Patch Work* (2019) employs

this approach by bringing into conversation the housing crisis in Oshawa as a result of commuter

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75 Timmins, 2019.

culture and housing insufficiencies in nearby Toronto, (an issue that the EKOS and Canadian Press study emphasized as contributing to "ordered" views in the community) while also connecting to broader housing crises such as those caused by gentrification and environmental catastrophe (see Figure 7). As a Vancouver-based artist, Koh is embedded in conversations around gentrification, and has shown *Home Made Home* in several iterations as site-specific installations with various surplus building materials.

The Oshawa version of this project presents two models of ad-hoc emergency housing "much like a patchwork quilt or old-fashioned barn-raising, draw[ing] on the skills within the community and provid[ing] a structure for individuals to contribute to communal needs."[76] One of the structures is far more provisional, like a tent if its poles were made from a human-sized slinky. The other structure uses unfinished plywood and other wood-based composite products that produce a small shack with two mismatched windows. Blueprints of previous versions were hung unframed with a similarly impromptu aesthetic. The exhibition, through its material approaches, aims to be solutions-based while pointing out the inequities caused by the financialization of housing through systems of neoliberal capitalism, connecting the extremely local and even personal matter of home to globalized housing crises.

The local-global dialectic employed here can be enlisted for the imagining and forging of new and alternative collectivized forms by harnessing the affective power of critical art practices. As Mouffe argues,

> The construction of a "people" apt to build a different hegemony requires cultivating a multiplicity of discursive/affective practices that would erode the common affects that sustain the neoliberal hegemony and create the conditions for a radicalization of

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[76] "Home Made Home: Patch Work," The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, accessed February 28, 2020, http://rmg.on.ca/exhibitions/germaine-koh/.

democracy. It is essential for a left populist strategy to acknowledge the importance of fostering common affects because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed.[77]

Koh's practice identifies an effect of neoliberalism, and also proposes solutions (however micro they may be) while connecting local issues to broader ones—an affective practice that assists in new constructions of a "people," reoriented in opposition to the aforementioned hegemonic forms of exploitation. The production of these affective practices requires a sense of duty on the part of curator, artist, and audience.

Parrhēsia as Curatorial Practice

A sense of dutifulness towards the work of curation and social commentary (a tenet of parrhēsia as outlined by Foucault) characterized my conversation with Timmins. She remarked of her work at the RMG that "we [cannot] please everyone all the time, because then you wouldn't be doing your job,"[78] framing curatorial work, or the work of an arts institution, as immanently controversial and not needing to be for everyone in its aims. In reference to the kinds of political stances the gallery has decided to take, Timmins pointed to the 2018-2020 strategic plan:[79]

> Something that came out of the last strategic plan was the gallery was going to take a stand on—or wasn't going to be afraid to take a stand on— political issues that are impacting the community. [For example] when GM announced the plant closure, there

77 Mouffe, For A Left Populism, 78.
78 Timmins, 2019.
79 "Forging Change through Connection and Creativity: A Strategic Plan for The Robert McLaughlin Gallery" (Openly, April 2018) http://rmg.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RMG_2018-20-Strategic-Plan.pdf.

was a message that day that came out on the gallery social media, standing in support of the workers. [80]

The parrhēsiast is "always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority […] the parrhēsiast is always less powerful than the one with whom he speaks,"[81] which is the case in this discursive act between the public art gallery, who have made the decision to align with the worker, rather than with a multinational corporation. Certainly, as an authoritative institution, the act of speaking fearlessly for the gallery could not function if directed to the people, but only to institutions more powerful than itself. Especially those institutions of power that are benefactors to the gallery, as in corporate sponsors for example.

Parrhēsia as a curatorial methodology could also mean supporting and taking responsibility for the fearless speech of artists, who speak out against broader hegemonic forces that produce income and housing disparities, as in the two exhibitions looked at. Parrhēsia in this proxy sense may emerge from the subversion of what audiences have come to expect from a regional public gallery— achievable through the encouragement of agonistic practices and viewership. For this notion of parrhēsia to occur, there must be an acknowledgement of institutional power on the part of the gallery: and as the RMG's mandate explicitly states, they are dedicated to sharing their authority with their communities.

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80 Timmins, 2019.
81 Michel Foucault, Fearless Speech (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001) 18.

CONCLUSION

As hubs for creative and agonistic expression, public art venues in rural areas or small cities are vital to the communities they are situated in. The spaces examined in this paper, and many others that fall under the regional designation, are unique in configuration, distinct in their approaches to curatorial practice, radical in their definitions of art, and are often critically overlooked by major art publications. Regional galleries frequently punch above their weight, producing critical exhibitions that are founded in the realities of their communities, while simultaneously inviting external discourse through their presentations of critical art practices.

Artspace and the RMG are institutions that understand that the impulse towards capturing the broadest audiences possible is inherently neoliberal, as measures of "success" are often based on quantitative instead of qualitative or experiential data. Both organizations have found growth in ways that are not necessarily out-put or volume-oriented (evaluated based on the number of exhibitions, square footage of the gallery, or annual fiscal reports), but that expand their ability to stay relevant and useful in the sense of opening up space for reflection, for identity-formation, and as social and discursive spaces for the communities they serve. When identity differences (ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, sexual, age, class-based, etc.) may not be as visible in regional spaces as they are in large urban centres, public art galleries outside of these centres have an opportunity—and, as seen with the curators interviewed for this project, a sense of duty—to offer presentations of difference through their programming choices that provide space for the contestation of partial and relational subjectivities.

The populist ethos of attempting to produce aesthetic or affective experiences for "everyone" is not only an exercise in futility but potentially harmful in its assumption of like-minded or even universal subjectivities. As Kwon notes, "the issue of difference is key to any

understanding of identity formation, collective and otherwise. It is also an important key to

understanding the possibilities and limitations of community-based art";[82] however,

understanding difference as a collection of discrete identities is not enough. Difference must be

contested and agonistic, or our notions of community and collectivity risk falling into, as

political theorist Marion Young articulated, "the same desire for social wholeness and

identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political

sectarianism on the other."[83] That being said, the production of common affects through artistic

presentations can be useful in supplanting the potentially harmful affective rhetoric of right-wing

populism, but shared affects do not presuppose shared subject positions.

Difference is a crucial element to identity formation, and consequently a requisite to

democracy, public space, and our understandings of the political. In order to combat right-wing

populism, this difference must be able to be expressed not simply as diversity—which

corresponds to centrist values of tolerance—but creatively, agonistically, dialectically, and

without a teleological end. Imagining what constitutes the political within the context of art

production is also different for everyone (artists, audience, curator, etc.) as both curators

reported. In art theorist and curator Irit Rogoff's essay "How to Dress for an Exhibition," Rogoff

considers how audiences inhabit their subject positions within the exhibition space, arguing that

political participation in the gallery might be reframed to:

> rethink issues of political participation and representation away from traditional Western
> parliamentary-based, electoral political institutions, and towards the unexpected and
> unconventional ways by which citizens come into alternative voice and representation
> […] [This involves] more than simply the rejection of totalizing state ideologies, it is the

82 Kwon, 148.
83 Kwon, 150.

realization that we live out complex, fragmented and incoherent subject positions [that] are all at odds with one another.[84]

Artspace and the RMG prioritize unconventional modes of exhibition programming that allow audiences to find their voice, whether through interpersonal interactions between viewers, intersubjective encounters between works and viewers, or institutional encounters between the gallery's expectations and the audiences that exceed them. Their curators do so without attempting to predetermine outcomes, and in so doing are engaging in a political act as much as an aesthetic or cultural one. To return briefly to Huberman, he concludes his essay, "Take Care," by endorsing the possibilities of being maladjusted—a word denoting the inability to cope with social norms. Maladjusted is a term borrowed from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and for him meant as a radical refusal of norms that promote or produce social inequities. Much in keeping with the spirit of being maladjusted, Artspace and the RMG look to artists as navigators in socially and politically fraught times, making space for artistic risk-taking and conceiving of audience in experimental ways.

Mouffe, in *Agonistics*, applies Gramsci's articulation of the organic intellectual onto the artist, meaning artists are a constitutive part of anti-oppressive struggles in less formalized ways than academic intellectuals.[85] She notes that artists have an "important role to play in the hegemonic struggle […] by constructing new practices and new subjectivities, they can help

84 Irit Rogoff. "How to Dress for an Exhibition." In Stopping the Process? Comtemporary views on art and exhibitions. (Rotterdam: Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 1998.) 139.
85 "Organic intellectuals are said to be a constitutive part of working-class struggles. They are said to be the thinking and organizing elements of the counter-hegemonic class and its allies. Given that [Antonio] Gramsci has an expansive notion of the organic intellectual, this role is not played only by those situated within the educational world but by trade unionists, writers, campaigners, community organizers, teachers and so forth." Chris Barker. "Intellectuals." In *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, 100. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004.

subvert the existing configuration of power."[86] By way of a conclusion, I propose the possibility

of the art institution as an arena for the enactment of organic politics, meaning a politics that

belongs to the counter-hegemonic struggle without its usual trappings—malleable enough to take

on the visual, auditory, and experimental forms employed by contemporary art. Rogoff argues

that "art allows us affective entry points into a political unconscious that does not yet have an

articulable discourse."[87] If we are to distill the political act into the act of representation, the

public art gallery, for audiences at least, can be an organic place of representation that does not

require an articulable discourse in the conventional way parliamentary or legislative politics do.

This opportunity is especially useful for "regional" areas as their remoteness from the places

where politicking actually occurs (Toronto or Ottawa) can make legislative decisions seem

distant and removed, regardless of the significant influence these decisions have on smaller

communities. By allowing for a local-global dialectic in presentations of art, and the antagonistic

space to contest these politics, regional issues are recontextualized and given greater

consequence for audiences, while broader issues are given local significance.

Many propositions explored in this paper—that populist rhetoric takes hold more easily

in regional areas, and that galleries are potential sites for dismantling such rhetoric and forming

new agonistic subjectivities—resist final resolution, in part because of the near impossibility of

empirically testing the political effects of aesthetic encounters. The effects of exhibitions and

gallery programming are too belated and diffuse to be measured, and any attempts to do so

would jeopardize the political and affective potential of these exhibitions in unsettling

subjectivities by defining audience demographics and instrumentalizing outcomes. Nevertheless,

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86 Mouffe, "Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practice." 85-107.
87 Rogoff, "How to Dress for an Exhibition." 144.

galleries under the regional designation are uniquely suited to make space for organic politics, including the production of local-global dialectics of politics/positions/subjectivities that exceed regionalisms, and the fostering of agonistic exhibitions that respond to latent right-wing populist tendencies as they may emerge in regional communities.

This unique positioning could be under threat, however. The many so-called "regional" galleries in smaller communities across Ontario are distinct, compositionally and structurally, and also differ in terms of their mandates. Many of them are chronically underfunded, as Verjee shows.[88] Both of my case study galleries have proven to be extremely resilient institutions throughout their long histories, but not all regionally-designated institutions are equipped with the same versatility and reflexivity in terms of their boards, staff, and budgets. As such, right-wing populism and its concomitant austerity measures against anything seen as potentially elitist poses a threat to public arts institutions. Ontario has recently witnessed massive and arbitrary cuts to publicly-funded institutions (arts and otherwise) in unprecedented ways. On the other hand, public arts institutions can also challenge right-wing populism in their ability to subvert the norms of current hegemonic forms and by enabling the production of new counter-subjectivities. If smaller communities sense that they are being ignored by traditional forms of liberal democracy, particularly those distanced from financial and political centres, the regional public gallery as an institution promoting agonistic discursivity becomes a refuge for gestures towards an organic politics of representation—even if those gestures seem small. Sometimes smaller is better.

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88 Verjee, "Are Canada's Municipal Art Galleries in Crisis?".

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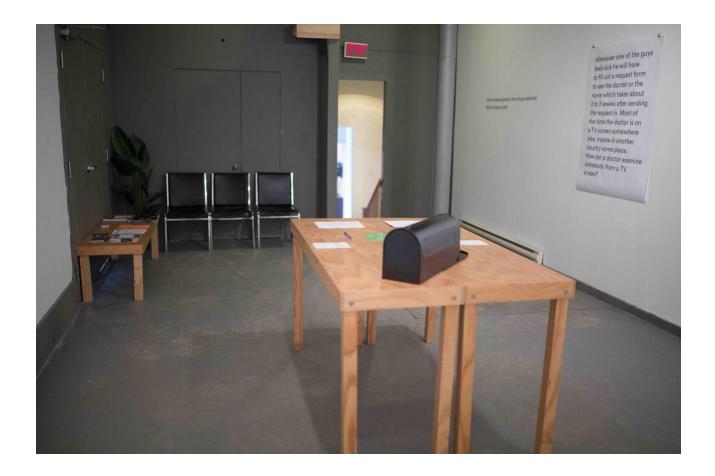
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Installation Image: Sheena Hoszko, *Central East Correctional Centre*, 2016. Image courtesy of Artspace. Image credit: Matthew Hayes.

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Installation Image: Olivia Whetung, *tibewh*, 2017. Image courtesy of Artspace. Image credit:

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Figure 5. Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Oshawa: A History of Local 222*, 2019.

Installation Image: Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Oshawa: A History of Local 222,* 2019.

Image courtesy of Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Image credit: Ingrid Forster

Figure 6. Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Oshawa: A History of Local 222*, 2019.

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Figure 7. Germaine Koh, *Home Made Home: Patch Work,* 2019.

Installation Image: Germaine Koh, *Home Made Home: Patch Work*, 2019. Image courtesy of

Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Image credit: Ingrid Forster