

Thanks to the extraordinary Artexte team, especially to Sarah Watson who supported this project from its inception, to Zoë Tousignant for her guidance in preparing the exhibition, to Hélène Brousseau and Jessica Hébert for supporting my research in the collection, and to Joana Joachim for her many communications skills. Thanks also to Charles-Antoine Blais-Métivier for his assistance with video editing, to David Martineau Lachance for help with my website, and to Kesso-Line Saulnier for her bibliographic research on the subject of retrospective exhibitions. Thanks to the PAFARC program at UQAM for funding my research and the production of the video interviews.

- Anne Ramsden

On behalf of everyone at Artexte, I would like to thank Anne Ramsden for her vision as a co-founder of Artexte in 1980, and on the occasion of her exhibition at present, as an artist committed to questioning modes of display and the nature and value of exhibition documentation. I thank Anne for delving enthusiastically into the collection here and for bringing together interviews with artists and curators from across the country to question and share ideas on the monographic exhibition and its multiple meanings.

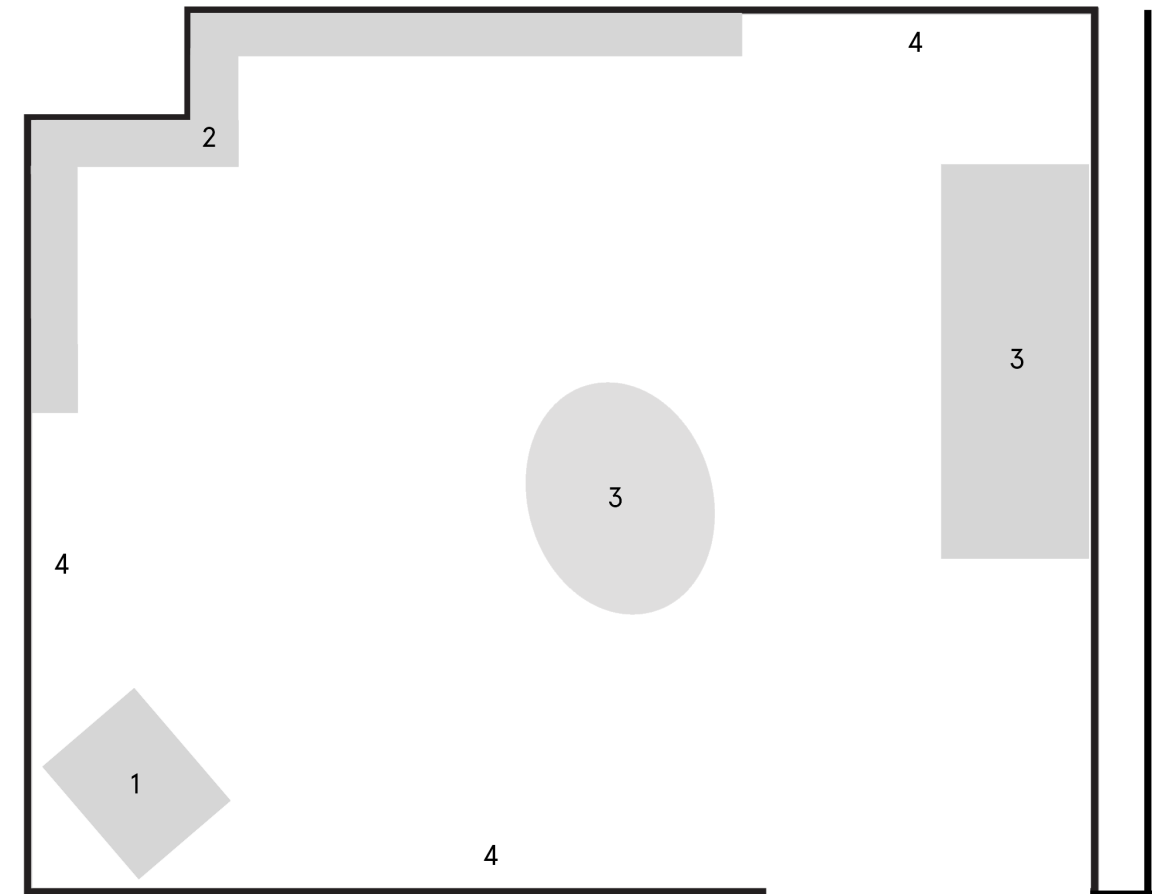
Everyone at Artexte worked together on Anne's residency and exhibition, I thank Zoë, Jessica, Hélène, Joana, Marie-Claire and Frédérique for their commitment to Anne's work.

- Sarah Watson
General and Artistic Director

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear

ANNE RAMSDEN

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EXHIBITION GUIDE

ARTEXTE

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EXHIBITION GUIDE

By Anne Ramsden

A few years ago when I was thinking about some of my early work I had the idea of developing an exhibition centered around the concept of the retrospective or survey exhibition. My research indicated that there was a need to examine this topic further, particularly in regard to Canadian art practices. I conceived various approaches to show how this exhibition trope has typically been treated in recent years.

Some of the questions that drove my research were: Is the retrospective exhibition inextricably attached to the modernist notion of artistic practice as one of linear development? Does our postmodern era render problematic the mounting of this kind of exhibition when many artists are no longer interested in conceiving of their practice in those terms? Do retrospectives now only serve the needs of the art market and private collectors, or can they still maintain a public educative function? In an era when group exhibitions – biennales, art fairs and the like – take up so much of our attention, what purpose can this kind of monographic exhibition still fulfill and for whom?

I could think of no better place to present the results of my research than at Artexte, a centre devoted to the collection of documents pertaining to contemporary art. As this was also the occasion for a reflection on the history of my own practice, it seemed appropriate as one of the founders of Artexte to use this site as the stage for presenting this exhibition.

1. Interviews

Putting on the sociologist's hat, I conducted a series of video interviews with curators and artists who responded to questions about their experience organizing or being the subject of a retrospective or survey exhibition. The questions are general in nature and were designed to illicit responses based on the interviewee's personal experience with one specific exhibition rather than a wider discussion of the politics of exhibitions. The interviews are raw, barely edited, because no one knows what might be interesting to a researcher thirty years from now.

Rather than trying to develop some kind of representative sampling, I chose to interview people with whom I had some prior contact, either directly or indirectly. Listening to their responses to my questions, I concluded that there is a wealth of useful material contained in these interviews, information that could allow one to identify commonalities, similar modes of approaching making an exhibition, and working together as artist and curator.

My thanks to everyone who so generously gave their time to contribute to this project: Grant Arnold, Daina Augaitis, Mathieu Beauséjour, Barbara Clausen, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, Sarindar Dhaliwal, Lesley Johnstone, Sylvie Lacerte, Marian Penner Bancroft, Andréanne Roy and Ian Wallace.

The interviews can be viewed online at artexte.ca

2. Exhibition catalogues from Artexte's collection

I have made a selection of catalogues from retrospective and survey exhibitions of Canadian artists presented in Canada. Once an exhibition is dismantled, what remains is the exhibition catalogue. The catalogue is a document that testifies to the vast amount of work performed by so many to create the exhibition. More importantly, it is a space of memory that allows the reader to partially reconstruct the exhibition.

By means of reproductions and lists, the exhibition catalogue shows us which artworks were considered significant and/or representative of an artist's overall production as seen from the perspective of a curator working in a specific historical moment. It demonstrates how the artist's work was physically presented in the gallery space and conceptually framed by the institution via the writing of the curator and/or other specialists. From the point of view of the artist's practice, it is a snapshot of a moment in time.

3. Documentation from my personal archive and Artexte's collection

This exhibition is the result of a process of looking back at my own practice and attempting to find connections between artworks that

were often made years apart. By means of the magazines, journals, exhibition catalogues, websites and printed ephemera presented here, I am offering traces of a still ongoing creative and intellectual journey whose destination remains unknown. My research has led me to realize the extent to which this journey has been conducted in the company of many other artists. When confronted with my own artworks or, more often, their documentation, I have grappled with how to make sense of what is before me in relation to the memory of what motivated me to make it, as well as the memory of its fabrication. More importantly, as it turns out, I have tried to reconstruct for myself how my work has been exhibited and documented in the context of the work of other artists.

4. Some thoughts about retrospective and survey exhibitions

Monographic shows, which focus on one artist's work, generally take the form of mid-career or full retrospectives (after the death of the artist). Defining such shows requires a certain sensitivity from a curator when dealing with a living artist, as these sorts of exhibitions in museums usually mark a moment of career achievement. You would not want to imply that an artist is at the end of their career, even if they are quite old.

Adrian George, *The Curator's Handbook* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), p. 39.

Conventionally a retrospective exhibition is taken as an occasion for the artist to present his work to date as a reified, 'logical' whole, and as an opportunity to demonstrate that he has progressed. That one should be offered such an opportunity at all suggests the achievement of a certain currency in art world chit-chat, usually based upon the journalistic acceptance of 'early work' rather than upon the significance of current activities. Consenting artists sit Jack-Horner-ish in the corners of society, proudly exhibiting mouldy plums. ... We don't know what learning means, but we do know that at some point it must entail a sense of the need to transform the circumstances in which learning takes place. If there is a meaning to the concept of 'retrospective exhibition', it is surely to be found at the heart of this paradox. ... To survey one's own practice retrospectively is to survey that which one wishes to have transformed and to transform; the conditions which (have) constrain(ed) learning are exposed in the process of criticism of practice. ... There's no reified achievement to fall back on. We have to keep working because if we stop it will be as if we had never begun.

Art & Language, "Retrospective Exhibitions and Current Practice (A Recommendation for Optimistic Amnesia)," in *Art & Language*

1966–1975 (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1975), published as the September 1975 issue of *Art & Language*, p.1.

Without an artist's (or an agent's) consent, a retrospective is an impossible task; with consent, it can't be anything other than hagiographic. And yet, this issue aside, the retrospective offers the potential for deep, sustained, critical engagement with an oeuvre – a kind of engagement that is unmatched by any other exhibition typology. Is there any way around this obstacle?

Shelly Bancroft and Peter Nesbett, "The Unauthorized Retrospective," *The Exhibitionist* 3 (January 2011): p. 43.

A retrospective can be deadening to an artist. It implies evolution or progress, both of which are antithetical to the way artists think.

Marcia Tucker, quoted in Gail Gregg, "The Making of a Retrospective," *Art News* (April 1998): p. 146.

Approaching Ian Carr-Harris's production from 1971–1977, we could historically constitute that body of work in one of two ways. We could situate it in its historical context – a context presumed to be set and to have a determined meaning, from which we could derive Ian Carr-Harris's position, significance and historical influence. Alternatively, we can take the reception or, the same thing, the lack of reception of the work as the basis for its historical consideration, for the problem of its reception constitutes its historical actuality.

There is no context for the work that is not made in the present.

Philip Monk, *Ian Carr-Harris, 1971–1977* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987), p. 6.

In the hyper speed at which we today demand that artists produce crisp, finished works worthy of the retrospective, incompleteness seems less and less of a possibility. Yet it is to the impossible, the incomplete, that curators should look in the hopes of unearthing some small meaningful shard, a new perspective from which to look back.

Tina Kukielski, "Prolonged Exposure," *The Exhibitionist* 4 (June 2011): p. 86.

I think that, actually, in a retrospective, what can be shown, above all, is the continuity of a body of work.

Guido Molinari, in Sandra Grant Marchand, Guido Molinari, Roald Nasgaard et al, *Guido Molinari : Une rétrospective* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1995), p. 18.