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Reviews | Recensions

Anne Dymond

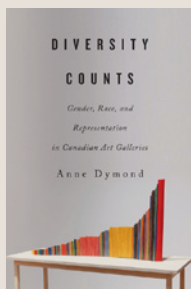
Diversity Counts: Gender, Race and Representation in Canadian Art Galleries

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In February 2018, controversy erupted at one of Canada's oldest artist-run centers (ARCs), Open Space, when its former Aboriginal Curator, France Trépanier, issued an open letter announcing her resignation, effective immediately. Trépanier applauded the gallery's journey towards decolonization, starting in 2011, when Open Space began working with the Canada Council for the Arts' Aboriginal-Curator-in-Residence Program toward establishing a permanent Aboriginal Curatorial appointment. However, the position had recently been dissolved, an action Trépanier attributed to systemic failures at Open Space. First, there was the hiring process for a new Executive Director in 2017: no Black or Indigenous candidates or applicants of colour were considered. Then, the new appointee, Kegan McFadden, decided Canada is "now a 'post-racial society,'" thus, "a curator position explicitly labelled 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal'" was no longer needed. Subsequently, Trépanier's attempts to constructively dialogue with McFadden and the board



of Open Space were met with obfuscation. The open letter precipitated sweeping institutional changes under the leadership of an ethnically diverse interim board. On March 13, 2018, they announced the reinstatement of an Aboriginal Curator and a new Executive Director was appointed in June. Open Space was recommitting itself to inclusivity and decolonization, both institutionally and curatorially.

The process unleashed at Open Space is indicative of the changes advocated in *Diversity Counts*. This is a remarkable inquiry into curatorial programming and systemic biases in publicly funded art galleries and museums. Is the exhibiting artist male or female, a person of colour, Black, Indigenous, or white? How do museums or galleries justify their choices and what discursive and/or institutional strategies do they deploy to promote or downplay critical awareness? These are some of the questions that enrich Dymond's comparative study.

Diversity Counts opens with a statistical overview of gender discrepancies

(in this case, male or female) regarding solo exhibitions of contemporary art during the first decade of the twenty-first Century. Referencing feminist art historian Linda Nochlin's challenge to the male-centric status quo of the early 1970s—"why have there been no great women artists"—Dymond argues that, contra perceptions voiced by many "artists, academics, curators and museum directors" that gender bias against women is a thing of the past, the issue is still with us (3). ARCs have the most positive record of equity, attributable in part to their founding role as a counter to prevailing trends at established institutions. Historically, ARCs have also selected potential exhibitors by committee from a pool of artist-applicants, and most have a mandate to encourage diversity. This collaborative, pro-active approach is decidedly lacking in university galleries and public museums, where curators make decisions and dependence on donors for acquisitions skews whose work gets exhibited in favour of male artists. Dymond rhetorically asks why curators are not taking action to address the issue. The inference? Money talks.

Chapter Two, "We're Only Interested in Excellence. We Don't Care Who Makes It": Thinking Through Diversity at the National Gallery of Canada," examines the NGC's cultural nation-building through the lens of diversity. Recent exhibition statistics present a marked bias towards male artists, which Dymond compares with the number of accomplished female artists, the ratio of female to male artists in Canadian programs of higher education as of 1979, and other historical markers. She also probes the NGC's repeated elision of gender as a factor in its curatorial programming ("We're Only Interested in Excellence"). Further statistical intersectionality with respect to racialized, Indigenous, and female artists demonstrates the white male combination was a definite "plus" when being considered for a solo exhibition at the

NGC over 2000–2009. Clearly, change requires a will to change. For example, hiring Kanyen'kehaka (Mohawk) curator Greg Hill in 2000; establishing galleries devoted to “Aboriginal Art” in 2003; and creating a permanent curatorial position for Indigenous Arts in 2007 are all impacting the NGC in positive ways. As Dymond observes, “it is clear that administrative and personal decisions can have a substantive effect” (68).

The third chapter, “Let’s Hear It for the Boys! Vancouver and Diversity,” takes its cue from references to “the so-called Vancouver school” (89). The city’s arts community has a history of self-promotion keyed to place: hence the “school.” However, the gap between location-bound rhetoric and selective reality is thrown into high relief when reviewing solo shows by contemporary artists at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), University of British Columbia’s Belkin Art Gallery, Presentational House Gallery, and Museum of Anthropology (Vancouver’s Indigenous-focused ethnographic/anthropological museum). The ethnic make-up of the general population in Vancouver and British Columbia (2006 census) as compared with the ethnicity of those exhibiting in art galleries is informative, as is the proportion of male to female solo exhibitions. Dymond’s discussion is very subtle; she goes into detail concerning her statistical sources and classifying systems, their relative veracity, and other factors. Her discussion of donor-board-director-curator dynamics and VAG’s pivot toward the “Pacific Rim” art scene throws light on just how important international recognition is. The aura of success has also impacted Vancouver’s ARCS. Dymond summarizes: “The overriding explanation for Vancouver’s gender inequality is ‘the boys.’ Virtually every curator or museum professional I spoke to mentioned the all-pervasive importance of ‘the boys.’ Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum,

Roy Arden, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas were cited repeatedly” (106). Conversely, she characterizes Vancouver’s VIVA Awards (founded in 1988 by artist Jack Shadbolt and curator Doris Shadbolt) as the city’s most laudable diversifying force. Dymond suggests Vancouver’s art galleries would do well to follow VIVA’s lead.

“Toronto the Not-So-Good” begins with an apologia regarding the sheer scale and dynamism of Toronto’s art scene, which Dymond is nonetheless determined to assess. ARCS and university galleries have equitable (male to female) exhibition records, but the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA, now MOCA Toronto) and Power Plant are falling short. Dymond examines why, illustrating the challenges diversity poses for curators subject to bureaucratic pressures while also chasing after “visitor experience” ticket sales (120). Her discussion of the AGO is peppered with stark “reveals” concerning decision-making under Matthew Teitelbaum’s directorship (1998–2015). MOCCA is the junior institution in the triumvirate, still struggling to live up to the gravitas of its brand. Commitment to showcasing emerging artists in Canada’s most diverse city is bluntly contradicted by the white male-centric exhibition statistics over 2001–2010, a situation Dymond attributes to the solo curating of its director. Things did not get much better when MOCCA and the NGC collaborated for a series of group exhibitions over 2010–2013. The appointment of a new diversity-aware CEO in 2015 had promise, but her abrupt departure within the year left MOCCA somewhat rudderless (more recent developments, including a name change and move to a new location in 2018, only amplify this impression). As for the Power Plant, it replicates MOCCA’s record in terms of ethnicity bias, though its male-to-female ratios are better. Given its mandate to engage “diverse audiences” with the work of “diverse living artists,” Dymond rightly suggests

the gallery needs to retool (133), but administrative subservience to Toronto’s Harbourfront Center cultural consortium makes change complicated. “One of the central themes” shaping Toronto’s leading art institutions, she concludes, is “how disempowered curators feel” because “gate-value” is paramount (135–6). Notwithstanding the imperious example of MOCCA, Dymond suggests curatorial freedom might rectify the diversity deficit.

Chapter 5, “Hard Facts and Soft Power: Rhetoric, Reality, and Influence in Montreal,” focuses on curatorial and programming policies at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), building in part on the scholarship of Anne Whitelaw. Changes in directorship and their interrelationship with curatorial decisions and institutional mandates take us into the realm of influence, patronage, cultural politics, and interventionist manoeuvring on the part of interested parties in the arts: board members, corporations, cultural luminaries, and Quebec government functionaries. This makes for compelling reading as Dymond tracks the jockeying and its impact on the “hard facts” vis-à-vis diversity. The abbreviated tenure of Paullette Gagnon’s directorship at the MACM (2009–13), for example, is a case study in how infighting can sidetrack important initiatives to right an abysmal diversity track record, Gagnon being the most equity-minded of the MACM’s directors over the period under examination (2000–2017). French-born Chief Curator and Director (2007–2020) Nathalie Bondil’s controversial leadership at the MMFA, on the other hand, is a study in how rhetorical inclusion can facilitate erasure. In 2016, Bondil proclaimed a new commitment to “humanist and inclusive values” and touted “diversity” as a priority for the MMFA (157). The “humanist museum” (Bondil’s wording) also unveiled expansive new galleries—the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion

for Peace and Stéphan Crétier and Stéphanie Maillery Wing for the Arts of One World—to complement its vision (155). However, as Dymond demonstrates in winning reviews of post–2016 exhibitions showcasing work by Indigenous and Black artists, the MMFA’s hegemonic humanism appears to be tone-deaf to systemic power imbalances, the history of colonialism, critiques of Eurocentrism, and much else besides.

Dymond’s concluding “Calls to Action” suggest a host of avenues for reforming our exhibiting institutions and the agencies that fund them to realize societal commitments to inclusivity. As she underlines, *Diversity Counts* is a contribution toward this effort, but not the last word. On that score, one could envisage follow-up studies of transgender representation; noteworthy galleries in the Prairies and Maritimes addressing Indigeneity; or a critical examination of the Sobey Awards. Analysing how the art market and commercial galleries interface with collectors, curators, and museum boards to structure what art ‘counts’ and what art doesn’t is another angle. The history of non-commercial ARCS and artist-run journals might also yield lessons in how horizontal decision-making and structures of accountability can further diversity. Additionally, exploring degrees of political radicality in the arts could surely nuance any study’s intersectional dimensions. Which is to say, *Diversity Counts* got me thinking. This is a path-breaking study and an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the contemporary art scene in Canada. ¶

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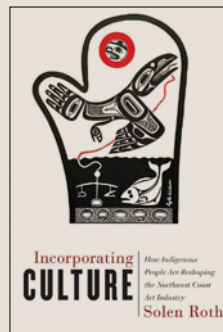
1. “Letter from Victoria” (March 10, 2018), *Runggh Magazine* (April 2018): <https://rungh.org/samachar/letter-from-victoria/>

2. “Statement from the Interim Board of Directors” (March 13 2018), *Runggh Magazine* (March 13, 2018): <https://rungh.org/samachar/open-space-forms-new-interim-board-of-directors-former-board-resigns/>

Solen Roth
Incorporating Culture: How Indigenous People are Reshaping the Northwest Coast Art Industry

Vancouver/Toronto: UBC Press, 2018
240 pp. 7 b/w photographs
\$ 90.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780774837385
\$ 32.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780774837392
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Carolyn Butler-Palmer



Incorporating Culture: How Indigenous People are Reshaping the Northwest Coast Art Industry takes a fresh look at Northwest Coast art through the exploration of economic, legal, and social issues. This is an innovative approach, although there have been books on the conventional potlatch economy and the development of the capitalist souvenir industry in the Northwest Coast, as exemplified by Kate Duncan’s landmark text *1001 Curious Things: Ye Olde Curiosity Shop and Native American Art* (2001) and later work such as Daina Augaitis, Jim Hart, and Robin K. Wright’s *Charles Edenshaw* (2013) and Ronald W. Hawker’s *Yakuglas’ Legacy: The Art and Time of Charlie James* (2016). Roth’s book forges a new path, however, as she pieces together a complex picture of how these ecologies intersect in the twenty-first century with issues of authenticity, appropriation, globalization, contracts, and identity.

Incorporating Culture is also an important complement to another vein of scholarly research, exemplified by Robert J. Miller’s *Reservation Capitalism: Economic Development in Indian Country* (2012), which examines the role of capitalism within Indigenous communities yet overlooks the importance of the art market as a part of the economy. By contrast, Roth focuses on the intersections between art and capitalism. Throughout the book, she asserts that these politically charged junctions provide clues to the continuity of the potlatch values that still operation within a capitalist economy, generating what she refers

to as a “culturally modified capitalism”—an evocative expression that draws from the ethnological term “culturally modified tree,” which describes a cedar tree harvested using Indigenous practices that allow the tree to still continue to grow and thrive across centuries).

The book’s first chapter provides a general overview of both the historical and current Indigenous “artware” market, charting out the complex dynamics between Indigenous artists and the owners of artware companies, who are usually white settlers. Artware company owners forge various sorts of relationships with different artists, ranging from one-off commissions to long-term friendships. Roth deploys Anna L. Tsing’s concept of “friction” as a means of mapping, within these dynamics. The frictions Tsing describes are the points of contact necessary to create cultural movement or change, necessary catalysts for the indigenization of the artware industry. Over the next five chapters, Roth charts out varying ways the concept of friction plays out across case studies featured in the following five chapters.

In the second chapter, Roth traces the history of the industrial artware market from the early 1900s, while the potlatch ban was in effect, to its present-day “frictions,” more than fifty years after the ban was quietly erased. She begins in 1905 on the Northwest Coast with a Skagway manufacturer of Tlingit objects, and then delves into the ideas of settler Canadians such as Harlan Smith,