

UNCOVERING HAMILTON'S ART HISTORY [1950-2000]

An Open Space discussion on collecting and preserving Hamilton's art history since 1950

Summary of Open Space Discussion

The publication of *Climbing the Cold White Peaks: A survey of artists in and from Hamilton 1910-1950* by Stuart MacCuaig in 1986 began the important work of preserving the history of Hamilton's visual arts community. However, Hamilton's art history from 1950 onwards exists only in partial records and the memories of artists from this era, some of whom have already died without passing on their stories of this pivotal time.

The Hamilton Arts Council's Visual Arts Committee invited interested stakeholders in Hamilton's visual arts community to join an open forum on Tuesday April 15, 2014 to discuss to collect and preserve Hamilton's art history from 1950-2000 to ensure these stories survive for future generations. Stephanie Vegh (Hamilton Arts Council; panel moderator) and Andrea Carvalho (Hamilton Artists Inc. and HAC Visual Arts Committee member) took extensive notes during the conversation to create the following summary of the discussion.

Panelist Introductions – Panel moderator Stephanie Vegh invited each of the five panelists to introduce themselves:

Colina Maxwell (Centre3 for Print and Media Arts): Colina relocated to Hamilton 2004 and founded The Print Studio (now Centre3) on James Street North in 2005. Her interest in this process is in documenting Hamilton's art history through an open, democratic process.

Jim Riley (HAC Visual Arts Committee): Jim was active in Hamilton's art scene when *Climbing the Cold White Peaks* was developed and published. In preparation for this meeting, he interviewed Bryce Kanbara (who was unable to attend due to medical reasons) and shared a number of Bryce's insights and memories of the project with the group.

Victoria Long-Wincza (Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts): Victoria's interest in the project is in tribute to the recent passing of Graham Todd, who taught sculpture at McMaster University for 25 years and mentored many Hamilton artists. She noted McMaster's role in creating a network of artists who eventually transition into Hamilton's art scene and would like to see that influence mapped. She credits Bryce Kanbara with introducing her to *CCWP* and would like this project continue to honour past artists, including those who have been involved with the HCA.

Laura Lukasik (Hamilton Public Library): Laura spoke to the library's role in preserving local history in Hamilton. The City of Hamilton itself doesn't have its own archives so the HPL has been the local leader in making civic archives available to the public.

Tobi Bruce (Art Gallery of Hamilton): As Senior Curator of Canadian Art for the AGH, Tobi works regularly with archives as both a user and a builder, and notes that a strong archive provides an adrenaline rush and a trigger to tell a story. Primary source materials on artists is a key element in accessing an art history archive as a user, while artist interviews are an important means of building archival material – both would be needed to develop an archive of Hamilton’s recent art history.

Legacy and Expectations of *Climbing the Cold White Peaks*

Climbing the Cold White Peaks was initiated in 1984 by artists who wanted to know more about their predecessors and felt disconnected from Hamilton’s artistic past. Hamilton Artists Inc. and the Art Gallery of Hamilton collaborated on the project and facilitated access to the AGH’s archives, while Stuart MacCuaig took charge of interviewing individual artists and seeking out additional documentation. *CCWP* was accompanied by exhibitions at the AGH and Hamilton Artists Inc. as well as the unjuried salon-style Now Show, which took place in the former location of the Hamilton Public Library shortly after its closure and was accompanied by poetry readings and other artistic activity.

While indispensable as a record of Hamilton art history from 1900-1950, some also noted that the book is heavily factual and “dry”, with hopes expressed that a version covering 1950-2000 would aim for something “juicier.” Victoria agreed that the larger context of the era in which these past artists worked is important to the work.

Tobi acknowledged a shared responsibility to continue the work started by *CCWP* but believes it shouldn’t necessarily take the same form as a book. More institutions should be gathered to partner on its development and collect the information across multiple platforms. Tobi cited the AGH’s work on the Women’s Art Association of Hamilton’s 100th anniversary and the need for a reliable go-to resource on this era that contains researched, verified information (as opposed to Google).

Sam Robinson spoke of the good impression generated by *CCWP* but acknowledges that he isn’t aware of the critical reception to the project was at its time or since its publication. Ivan Jurakic noted that distribution of the book was minimal at the time, with copies vanishing quickly and very few left in circulation today. Access will be vital for future art history projects, with consideration given to how people purchase or access the finished product. With the availability of digital publication today, we don’t necessarily need to create another book to follow *CCWP*.

Sam added the importance of including architecture and craft as related art forms in the development of this art history; both were also included in *CCWP*. Gerten Basom noted that heritage would also have a role to play in this work and suggested Workers Arts & Heritage Centre as another potential participant.

Existing Resources for Developing an Archive

Many of the stories of 1950-2000 are preserved in the anecdotal memories of artists who were active in this era but are now aging and, in some cases, dying. Bob Mason passed away before he could be interviewed about his experiences as a Hamilton artist. Artist interviews played an important role in Stuart MacCuaig's research for *CCWP* and would serve the same purpose now to begin creating an archive of artist stories in advance of any effort to write a history of this time period.

The Inc. has begun conducting artist video interviews and posting edited versions on [YouTube](#) – the unedited versions would be a valuable addition to the archive. Ivan also suggested collecting audio interviews as an easier short-term start to the archive. Robert Ezergailis has also been creating video and photo documentation of exhibition openings from the 1990s to the present that could provide additional archival material. [Mohawk College Radio's Art Waves](#) program was also suggested as a resource, with many of their episodes now available as podcasts.

Jim has begun work on developing a timeline of key events in Hamilton art history from 1950-2000 that was distributed at this meeting; participants recommended that the timeline be shared online as an invitation to community members to contribute additional events from this time period – for example, V. Jane Gordon's 'Defining Site' exhibition was noted for addition to the list.

Participants suggested existing archival sources that could be drawn upon to support building an archive of this era: The Hamilton Spectator, the index pages of *CCWP* as well as Stuart's research notes (Tobi believes that the AGH has some copies of his work in their archives), McMaster's School of the Arts and the McMaster Museum of Art's library, the WAAH archive, and the Inc.'s archives, which are being organized in anticipation of their 40th anniversary in 2016. Resources on the 1950s appear to be scarce; some wondered if the Dundas Valley School of Art would have anything to contribute from this decade.

Gerten noted that Dr. Alison McQueen (Art History professor at McMaster) has been assembling exhibitions from privately held corporate collections featuring Hamilton-area artists and suggested that these collections would offer another valuable resource for archive development. In particular, she noted the collections of Val Ramsay, the City of Hamilton and Carnegie Gallery. Tobi added that she maintains a confidential file of private collections to support her curatorial work at the AGH and would be willing to facilitate the inclusion of relevant information in the archive. The AGH also has a public (though unstaffed) library with extensive artist files that would be available for use in creating the archive. The Hamilton Public Library also has a permanent collection and is currently seeking an MA student to inventory the works and facilitate more exhibitions of the collection in their branches.

Next Steps

With the understanding that an archive would first need to be assembled from many disparate sources, the group wondered how best to coordinate access to these resources and assemble them as something of use to researchers. Colina suggested writing a grant to hire an archivist who would work with the guidance of a volunteer committee, emphasizing the need for paid skill and researchers at the helm. The issue of securing funding for the project was discussed at length, with Gerten noting that Stuart MacCuaig was paid very little for his work on *CCWP* but rather took it on as a labour of love.

HPL has partnered with McMaster and the City of Hamilton on an ongoing storytelling project to record the stories of Hamiltonians and layer these personal memories with existing historical archives as a growing multimedia project to begin in summer 2014. The fourth floor of the Central branch is being developed as an open digital studio with recording equipment, a 3D printer and a media lab capable of converting and digitizing archival material in older formats.

Laura explained the model that was adopted for HPL's storytelling project, which began with 3-5 founding groups who collectively draw the interest and participation of additional partners. At the onset, a smaller steering committee is needed as a foundation to develop terms of reference. Participants suggested that even with multiple partners, there needs to be a lead organization to provide direction and pursue funding. Laura also suggested [NPR's StoryCorps](#) as a model for recording oral histories.

Because the precise form to be taken by the project is not yet determined – it may or may not be a book, and may or may not take the form of a written history – the first priority identified was creating a general archive and identifying data to be included, with the interpretation of that data by a researcher or writer to be determined from the raw material available. Interviewers taking on the task of collecting artist stories could ask their subjects about events of greatest importance as a first step towards interpreting content.

Laura suggested that there are two organizational models to consider for this project: one that is fully funded and able to hire people to take on the work involved, and one with no funding that improvises with the resources available. Because we are presently in the latter position, assembling a steering committee was seen as the best and fastest approach to get the project underway.

Establishing a Steering Committee

This steering committee would include a mix of individuals and organizations, including those with organizational experience with archives and senior artists active during this era. As the project develops, sub-committees or working groups

could be assembled consisting of artists, organizations and researchers to take on focused tasks: for example, conducting artist interviews and negotiating online copyright clearances. This model would require a project lead to ensure the Steering Committee remains on track. Sam suggested that organizations active on the Steering Committee could pursue grants from multiple funders on behalf of the committee; one agency is highly unlikely to provide full funding so support would need to be sought from multiple streams, and partnerships are generally looked on favourably by funders.

Tobi noted that the first priority would be to make the available information accessible, and cited the [Art Canada Institute](#) at the University of Toronto as an example. She explained that there is an increasing degree of democratization in research as information is more readily crowd-sourced from individuals of all walks of life. This has made information more widely available while creating challenges around the verification of anecdotal accounts as well as their increasing relevance as valid sources of knowledge. Andrea suggested that a questionnaire could be sent out to ask for feedback on the project as well as invite additional stories for the archive.

Stephanie suggested that the discussion so far has indicated three key tasks that need to be addressed:

- gathering existing material
- creating new material where data is lacking
- collecting both existing and new material as a functional archive

The following people expressed interest in joining the Steering Committee to continue pursuing this project:

- Tobi Bruce
- Sam Robinson
- Andrea Carvalho
- Gerten Basom
- Laura Lukasik
- Victoria Long-Wincza
- Jim Riley
- Colina Maxwell
- Stephanie Vegh

Laura offered to share the project charter from the HPL's storytelling project as a starting point to developing terms of reference for this committee. Stephanie will transcribe the minutes of this meeting, post to the Hamilton Arts Council website and provide an email update to all registered participants about the status of the project and plans for convening the first meeting of the Steering Committee.