Constructing contemporary artistic identities in Toronto neighbourhoods

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This paper examines the role of the neighbourhood in the construction of artistic identities. Drawing upon in-depth, semistructured interviews with Canadian visual artists from Toronto, I identify some of the common features of downtown Toronto neighbourhoods where artists congregate. I demonstrate that artists are drawn to neighbourhoods that have not been gentrified and do not directly reflect current dominant values in society. I focus, in particular, on the importance of marginal niches of improvisational space within the urban fabric. Marginal spaces, often neglected and overlooked, weakly classified and in a state of becoming, I argue, are essential to the development and sustenance of an artistic identity.

Cette dissertation examine le rôle du voisinage dans la construction d'identités artistiques. En me basant sur des entretiens en profondeur semi-structurés avec des visualistes canadiens de Toronto, je dégage certaines des caractéristiques communes des voisinages du centre-ville de Toronto où les artistes se concentrent. Je démontre l'attirance des artistes pour les voisinages qui n'ont pas été embourgeoisés et ne sont pas un reflet direct des valeurs dominantes actuelles de la société. J'insiste en particulier sur l'importance d'îlots marginaux d'espace « improvisationnel » au sein du tissu urbain. Les espaces marginaux, souvent négligés et ignorés, de classification incertaine et dans un état fluctuant sont, je l'insiste, essentiels au développement et à la subsistance d'une identité artistique.

Introduction

In the mind's eye, the work culture of visual artists is 'placed' in the urban landscape in particular neighbourhoods. These imagined geographies provide a spatial frame of reference that imparts coherence, shape and substance to artistic identities. In this paper, I draw on research that explores how downtown Toronto neighbourhoods associated with artistic activity, creativity and experimentation are recalled by contemporary Canadian visual artists who work or have worked there, in order to isolate some of the features these neighbourhoods have in common as places where artists congregate. In so doing, I seek to extend scholarly understandings of the spatial experiences of artists, a socioeconomic group that deserves greater recognition by geographers.

In my examination of the intersection of place and identity in the experience of urban artists, I begin by considering the more recent geographical and sociological research on urban arts communities. A brief discussion of methodology concludes with an overview of the research sample; this introduces those artists whose views are presented through this paper and addresses the issue of selective representation. I then justify my selection of Toronto, Canada as my singular research locale before moving into a discussion of the appeal of Toronto's downtown neighbourhoods. In these substantive sections, I demonstrate that artists seek out neighbourhoods in which to live and work that have not been gentrified and do not present a homogenous reflection of the current dominant values in society. I illustrate that artists often gravitate towards marginal niches in the urban fabric that reveal the potential to sustain improvisational creative and spatial practices. These marginal spaces at the neighbourhood level, I argue, are essential to the development and sustenance of an artistic identity.

Placing Visual Artists in an Urban Context

Geographers have often sought inspiration for their research from other disciplines. Yet despite working within a visually oriented discipline, until quite recently they appeared reluctant to engage with the provocative blend of thoughts and ideas generated within the realm of visual art. Over the last two decades, however, geographers have gradually become engaged with the study of art (Wallach 1997). Evidence of a developing interest in art is particularly apparent within the writings of cultural geographers, but this interest has tended to focus mainly on reflections on paintings and painters (Cosgrove 1984; Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Daniels 1993; Norcliffe 1996; Gandy 1997; Crouch and Toogood 1999) and photography and photographers (Kinsman 1995). There is significant scope within geography for a more substantial engagement with art—an engagement that perhaps could be less oriented toward representations and more toward practices.[1] For, as Susan Smith (1997, 502) has argued, 'Art matters for the subject of geography because the production, performance and consumption of art are so often mediated by spatial strategies and metaphors'.

Where geographers have rather tentatively begun to investigate the world of art, sociologists have forged ahead with studies of the social and spatial structure of the art world (e.g., Adler 1979; Simpson 1981; Becker 1982; Zukin 1982; Duncan 1993; Klein 1994). Many of these sociological accounts focused on the renowned occupational concentration of artists living in New York City's SoHo district who were granted legal and spatial recognition. The research path established by sociologists into what might initially be considered the territory of art historians sparked the interest of geographers when it overlapped with debates on urban change. In particular, Sharon Zukin's (1982) frequently cited detailed political-economic interpretation of the New York loft-conversion process has had a profound affect on the direction and content of geographical debate surrounding the relationship between artists and urban space. In *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (1982) Zukin—a sociologist by training—describes how the cheap rents, unobstructed, open-space floorplan, oversized windows and raw, unfinished quality of the lofts in the SoHo district of New York City appealed to artists in the 1960s. Over the next two decades, artists proceeded to lay claim to these often noisy and grimy industrial spaces and to convert them

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1 Take, for example, the articles by Rose (1997a, b) and Gregson and Rose (2000) on community arts workers in Edinburgh, and the work by Bunting and Mitchell (2001) on art communities in rural Canada.

into live-in studios for both work and residence. The unique residential concentration of artists in SoHo was disrupted in the 1980s, when increased rents made lofts unaffordable for many artists. This important case study illustrates that '[A]rt production…is an uneconomical and therefore weak competitor for urban space' (Simpson 1981, 126). Consequently, artists' attempts to lay claim to space in the city are frequently thwarted by dominant groups intending higher-profit, higher-value uses of urban space. What began as a very practical activity—to obtain an inexpensive, large workspace with generous amounts of natural light—established the fashion for urban residential 'loft living'.

Inspired by the work of Zukin, studies by Peter Jackson (1985), David Cole (1987) and David Ley (1996a) provide a useful illustration of a tendency among geographers to assume that their key point of intervention into discussions of visual artists is from the perspective of urban issues of gentrification, redevelopment and regeneration. Granted, this might be considered a useful analytical starting point, but if artists are to be understood as anything other than urban pioneers and initiators of urban revitalisation efforts, they need to be appreciated more fully in their own right, as a social group with a distinctive occupational identity and a heightened awareness of the availability, regulation and character of urban space.

Following Zukin's lead, Jackson (1985) attempts to extend her analysis theoretically and empirically through a consideration of the pivotal role performed by the mass media and the agency of artists themselves in the transformation of the New York residential loft market by the real-estate industry. A further consideration of the role of artists in urban redevelopment is provided by Cole's (1987) study of three New Jersey cities adjacent to Manhattan that have become popular studio locations for artists displaced from New York City. From his examination of the relationship between artists, galleries and neighbourhoods in these three cities, Cole concludes that the location of artists' living and working space has the most profound effect on land-use change. Cole (1987, 391) demonstrates how, as urban pioneers, artists are both 'romanticized because of their willingness to live in run-down areas with old factories and warehouses or to break racial and ethnic barriers, and politicized because they displace low-income

groups and initiate gentrification that benefits land speculators, developers, realtors and ultimately the upper middle class'. The tension inherent in this role, he suggests, prevents the development of authentic and sustainable alliances and interactions between artist newcomers and working-class long-term residents, both of whom are ultimately displaced by the redevelopment process. From Cole's perspective, artists become willing participants in a complex process of urban change that plays out slightly differently from city to city.

Drawing examples from Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa, Ley (1996a) examines the spatial involvement of urban artists in the gentrification of the Canadian inner city. For Ley (1996a, 188), artists are 'the quintessential resistance fighter[s] to straight society' who establish, through their distance from mass culture and their innovative searches for expressive meaning and for creative rewards that transcend the material, new frontiers of middle-class taste. He goes on to demonstrate, through the correlation of census data from Statistics Canada,[2] that in 1971 artists had similar locational characteristics to middle-class households. In addition to 'being bound to the new middle class', Ley (1996a, 191) concludes, '[T]he urban artist is commonly the expeditionary force for inner-city gentrifiers, pacifying new frontiers ahead of the settlement of more mainstream residents'. Having confirmed the relationship between artists and gentrification that Zukin (1982) observed in New York City holds true for Canadian cities as well, Ley goes on to briefly question why it is that artists value downtown locations. From interviews with a handful of Vancouver artists, Ley (1996a, 194) suggests that above and beyond 'functional advantages, including cheap studio space and linkages with customers, suppliers and the downtown art scene',[3] artists associate creativity with the energy and intensity of the central city. Where 'the suburbs are too standardized, too homogeneous, too

2 Ley (1996a) is careful to note that these census data were collected using an occupational classification scheme that covers a broad social spectrum and inadequately represents the existence of poor artists.

3 Ley (1996a) seems to miss the point that in the wake of gentrification, downtown studio space is no longer cheap and no longer attracts artists. Instead, many artists have been forced to move to the suburbs or to leave the city altogether in search of more affordable workspace.

bland, too conformist, too hierarchical, too conservative, too patriarchal, too straight', Ley (1996a, 206) asserts, artists favour 'authentic places' in the central city that are '*marginal* to conventional middle-class definitions'.

Although Ley (1996a) presents a useful general overview of the involvement of urban artists in the gentrification of four Canadian cities, his data are drawn primarily from the 1970s. In the case of Toronto, he discusses only the one gentrified neighbourhood of Yorkville, where artists no longer reside. In my doctoral research on Toronto's artistic population, from which this paper is drawn, I examine in greater detail more recent involvements of artists in downtown neighbourhoods in various stages of development into gentrified art districts. On the basis of postal-survey questionnaires with 120 professional visual artists, 80 (40 men and 40 women) of which were followed up with in-depth, semistructured interviews, I consider the nature of the appeal of these Toronto neighbourhoods to those artists who live and work there.

Methodology

The research for this study was undertaken during ten months of fieldwork from July 1999 to April 2000. I relied on informal interviews, which resembled guided conversations, as the dominant research tool, because they allowed me the flexibility to elicit information on a wide range of relevant issues and to explore emergent topics in particular detail (Unruh 1983). The interviews had seven main foci: relationship to city and neighbourhood; sense of community; social networks; work day; exhibition space; work space; and artistic identity. Within these topics, artists reflected on issues such as the attraction of the neighbourhoods in which they live and work, the nature of their involvement in the Toronto art scene, the development of their friendships with other artists, the negotiation of boundaries between their work and their home, the character of their studio space and the maintenance of their artistic identity. My decision to encourage artists to speak freely meant that the interviews varied considerably in length, from 45 to 180 minutes, with all of the information recorded on audiocassette and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts, along with the background demographic and biographic

information collected in the questionnaire survey, represented the raw data I used for subsequent analysis. I coded the transcribed interviews using an open coding approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), placing a word that captured the meaning within a section of the text in the margin of the transcript. The codes that emerged from early interviews helped me to develop a coding taxonomy that I used to analyse subsequent interviews. These codes permitted me to make horizontal comparisons of similar categories between interviews and to draw out themes for discussion that were shared by artists in the sample.

The primary criterion for inclusion in this study was a serious commitment to fine art, both as a central life activity and as a publicly proclaimed profession, regardless of whether or not it was the main source of income. All of the participants considered themselves to be professional visual artists. For the artists interviewed, the number of years of professional practice ranged from 1 to 56, with a median of 15 for men and 17 for women. All of them had exhibited professionally in solo or group shows, and 74 percent had a fine art degree from an art college or university. The range of art forms practiced by this sample includes sculpting, printmaking, photography, painting, mixed media, installation, and drawing. Although many of the artists interviewed indicated that they worked in more than one visual medium, 58 percent selected painting as their primary art form. Regardless of what art form they specialised in, artists in this sample spent, on average, 35 hours per week on artistic labour.

In addition to different art forms, the artists in this study represent a diversity of ethnicities, ages, lifestyles and studio arrangements. Canadian nationals formed the majority, but 24 of the artists carried dual citizenship in a variety of European, African, Caribbean, Latin American and Asian countries. Within this ethnically diverse sample, the artists ranged in age from 24 to 80, with a median age for males of 42 and for females of 48. Within this age span, 33 artists were parents; this provides one possible explanation for why 70 percent of the sample had a studio in the home (other factors might include habit, convenience and economic necessity). These residential studios (be they rooms, a portion of a room or a surface used for the production of art) included attics of Victorian row houses, renovated garages, base-
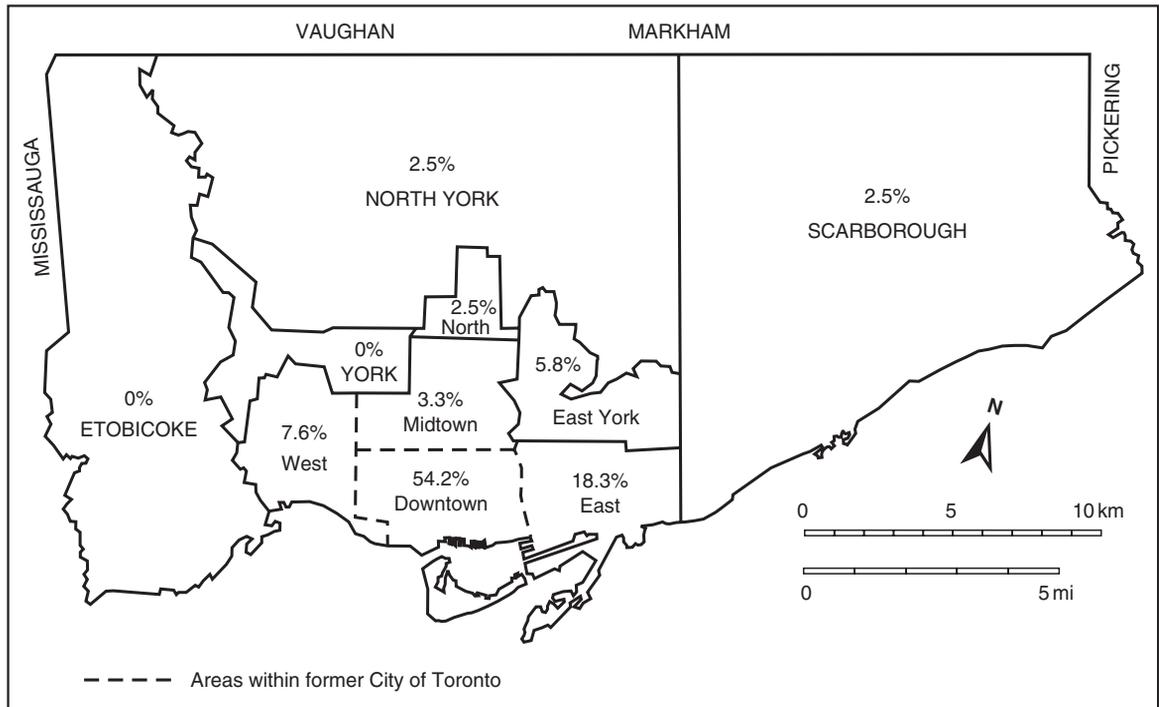
Figure 1 Toronto: studio locations by area as percentage of total sample*
*3.3% unknown

ments of semidetached houses, downtown apartments, factories converted into condominiums, art co-operatives and warehouse lofts. The assumption that the latter are the work locations of choice for serious professional artists was not supported by this study, which found that only 10 artists lived and worked in a warehouse loft and only 7 had a separate warehouse studio. Of the 24 artists who had a separate studio, their workspaces were located in a range of different commercial, industrial and mixed-use environments that included office buildings, store fronts, former factories, coach houses and historic buildings. Taken together, the studios of artists in the total sample were variously distributed across Toronto, with a particularly large concentration in the downtown and smaller clusters in the west and east ends of the city (Figure 1). These locations correspond to areas of the city with notably high levels of visual-arts activity. Taken together, these statistics provide a cursory profile of the research sample,

outlining the broad similarities and differences shared by a selection of artists whose voices, accumulated experiences and perceptions weave through the remainder of this paper.

The discussion that follows, then, should be seen as the product of particular encounters among particular people with particular agendas at a particular historical moment. It is not about 'contemporary Canadian visual artists', but about certain Toronto men and women currently involved in the fine arts. In documenting these artistic geographies, I am isolating the lived experiences of members of a visual culture and translating them into a static, monochrome image of black text on white paper. This black-and-white image, carefully constructed from select words and experiences, becomes an abstraction that 'seeks to impose order on a vast and fragmented reality' (Pulido 1997, 25), that accentuates dramatic contrasts and transforms the real world into another value and another tonality.

The Case of Toronto, Canada

As one of Canada's three major cities and an international financial and business centre (Rose 1996), Toronto is frequently referred to as the nation's wealthiest art market and its artistic and cultural centre (Bringhurst *et al.* 1983; AGO 1990; Toronto Arts Council 1997a). Furthermore, as the political capital of Ontario and a province in which half of Canada's visual artists live (Wall and Purdon 1987), Toronto contains a significant proportion of the country's arts-service agencies, arts consultants, art juries, art museums, art galleries, art schools, art audiences, associations of artists and individual artists. Within Toronto itself, 90 percent of this arts activity is clustered in neighbourhoods in and around the downtown area (Toronto Arts Council 1997b).

In addition to characterisation as Canada's pre-eminent commercial centre for art, Toronto is often described as a city of neighbourhoods (Caulfield 1994). Not only, as Ley (1996a, 248) documents, have 'neighbourhood gains…been entrenched in successive five-year plans, the most recent in 1991, which declare[d] that "Toronto's long-standing reputation as a city of neighbourhoods will continue to be at the heart of the Plan's vision for the future"', but also, as he goes on to explain in detail, there is a much longer neighbourhood tradition. For a good deal of the twentieth century, Toronto was characterised by residential districts of working-class housing, constructed in close proximity to factories, in which strong ethnic communities developed and persisted. Away from the industries, residential pockets of distinctive middle- and upper-class areas developed. From urban renewal schemes to successful lobbying by neighbourhood movements to preserve the character of city neighbourhoods, the attitudes to neighbourhoods held by politicians, urban planners and local residents have varied throughout Toronto's history, and there is little consensus about how a neighbourhood should be defined. Ted Relph (1990, 51) supports the view that '[N]eighbourhoods are mostly defined from within, through the communities of people who live in them; only later do they become recognised by outsiders'. He goes on to explain that Toronto neighbourhoods can be distinctive for any number of social, economic, political or architectural reasons. Thus, some neighbourhoods are former

political territories that were annexed, others developed around old villages and still others have a particular ethnic identity. There are also in-between areas of the city that are not classified as neighbourhoods. Whether formally designated or commonly acknowledged, neighbourhoods are a fundamental component of Toronto's urban landscape and play a significant role in the construction of artistic identities.

The Artistic Urban Frontier: East versus West

In *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Neil Smith (1996) documents how gentrification was scripted using frontier language and imagery. Much of the appeal of the frontier myth is attributed to its celebration of the values of individualism, independence, self-sufficiency and freedom and to the firm belief that the attainment of material progress and prosperity is possible through sheer determination, hard work and self-sacrifice (Furniss 1999). Artists themselves are not immune to the highly resonant imagery of the frontier; they draw upon the frontier motif in their efforts to construct understandings of their occupational identities and their relationship to urban space.

The frontier, defined as the territorial margins of 'influence, jurisdiction and civility' (Titley 1999, viii), is an expression associated with the rationalization and legitimisation of the nineteenth-century conquest of the New World. However, as a powerful myth of imperial discourse, the 'frontier motif' (Smith 1996) transcends historical boundaries and has been productively applied by urban theorists to contemporary cities. In the context of suburbanisation, the inner city was interpreted as an abandoned 'urban wilderness', to be reclaimed through gentrification and the urban pioneering efforts of different social groups. Artists are one such social group.

A crude sketch of the territorial extent of the Toronto art scene, for which Yonge Street functions as the great east-west divide, would place Queen Street West as it extends from Spadina Avenue to Dovercourt Road as the art-world metropolis, with frontier artistic outposts clustered in the east in the neighbourhoods of Riverdale and Leslieville and in the west in the neighbourhoods of Parkdale, Liberty and the Junction (Figure 2).
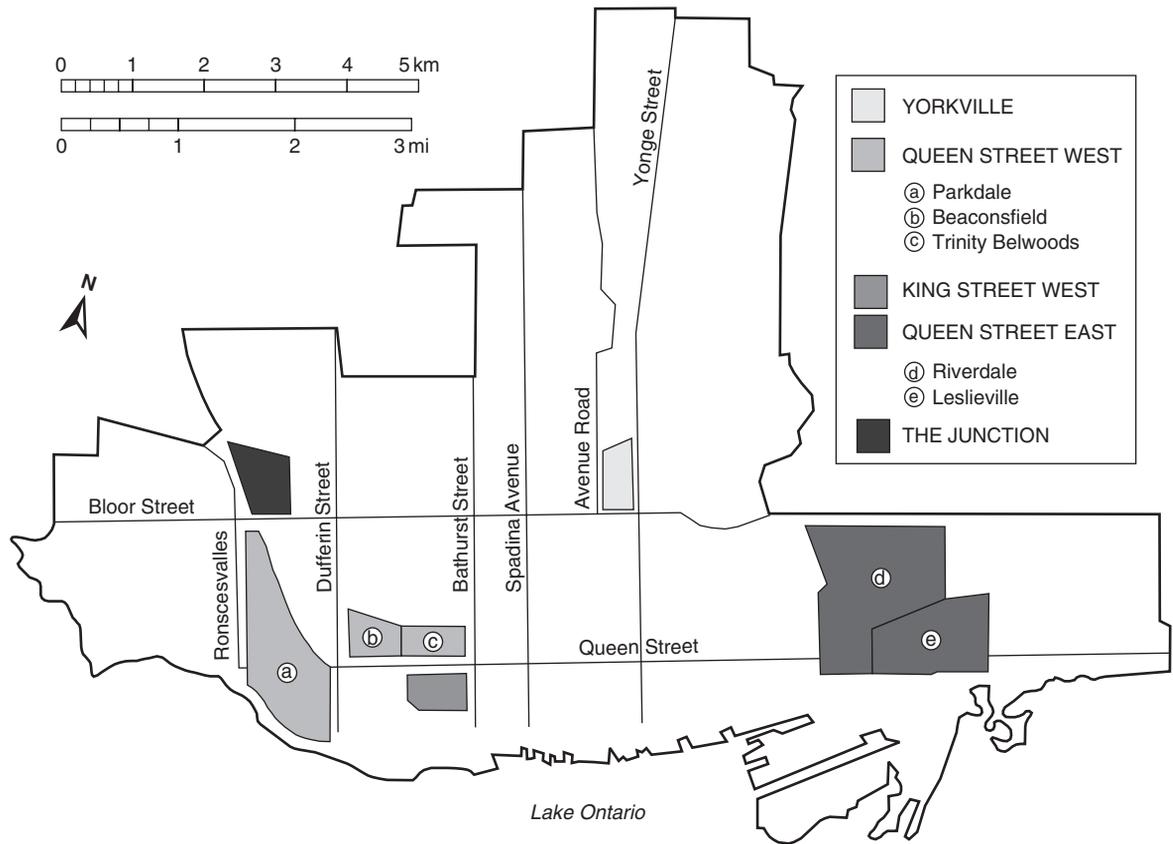
Figure 2 Artistic neighbourhoods in downtown Toronto. SOURCE: Modified from Dunkelman (1997)

The greatest rivalry, however, seems to occur between the burgeoning art community in the east end of the city and that which is well established in the west end. It is those artists living and working in the east end who tend to make the strongest use of frontier language and imagery.

Take, for example, Peter, a mid-career abstract painter, who in the last year chose to break away from the comfort and confines of the Queen Street West arts community and set up a studio on the east side of town. He perceived some risk in the move to an area with no gallery network and no cultural support system, but he also saw it as a statement of heroic individualism and self-reliance, qualities he values in other artists:

> Certain creative types gravitate to where there is a need and where there is a community. The artists that I've always admired, I admire for their individuality … I think artists like a challenge in their lifestyle as well. It fuels their art, if they're in an area of town that is less developed. (Peter, 21 February 2000)

Peter's decision to relocate to a neighbourhood that is virtually unknown in art-world circles was based on a belief shared by other artists desiring to emphasise their outsider status: had he continued to work within the embrace of a large and established arts community, other creative activities, interests and influences would have remained a constant distraction and might have nipped in the bud his own artistic developments and contributions. For, as Peter (21 February 2000) clearly articulates, 'I think the very lack of exposure of art here creates an opportunity for new development'. Thus, the opportunity to prove

able to withstand the hardship of artistic isolation in the east end is regarded as a positive experience, both creatively and in terms of the significant potential it presented for neighbourhood involvement.

> I'm searching for degrees of success or acknowledgment. But at the same time that is less important than nurturing the area we live in and getting feedback…I have a very selfish interest in the community in that I want to benefit from any exposure that art gets and that I get; and I want to be known as an artist around here…You almost have to be very vigilant about what you want as an artist. (Peter, 21 February 2000)

This quotation betrays a conflict between Peter's desire to become involved in the neighbourhood and the necessity of furthering his career prospects. Peter recognises that he must accept the responsibility for his own success or failure; self-interest ultimately wins. This neighbourhood, where art is underexplored and where there are visible signs of decay and poverty, is precisely the urban cultural frontier where he, an aspiring self-made artist, intends to make his future. This frontier is a 'border between a world of possibilities and one of actualities, a world theoretically unlimited and one defined by its limitations' (Slotkin 1985, 45).

For the rugged and adventurous artists, low-income areas of the city become uncharted, untamed cultural territory to be staked out and claimed. These neighbourhoods are the new artistic frontier, where affordable studio space and opportunities for the establishment of grassroots creative ventures are mixed with 'an edge of daily danger on the streets' (Smith 1996, 8).

> It's always been a working-class neighbourhood. It was the toughest part of town and people wouldn't dare come here a hundred years ago. So there's this kind of cowboy, Wild West feeling about the east end. (Peter, 21 February 2000)

Peter draws liberally upon the frontier motif to describe, in almost romantic terms, his neighbourhood as a place where manual labour is valued over mental labour, and as a place that is both dangerous and ruthless. The romance of danger is equally appealing to other male artists:

> Drunken street fights down on Broadview were common to see. Murders. There are hookers in the parking lot every night and there are condoms all over the goddamn place when you walk out in the morning. As an artist you put up with that kind of stuff. (Andrew, 17 November 1999)

The backdrop to everyday life for this artist consists of violence, immorality and deprivation. Describing his neighbourhood as a place where few others would consider living, he projects an image of the artist as a fearless urban pioneer with the courage, tenacity and practicality to venture into a danger-filled battleground to carve out a spacious studio. This image conforms quite neatly to Titley's (1999, viii) description of Western Canadian frontiersmen and women as 'intrepid adventurers who brave physical hardship to tame the new land and whose labours pave the way for a material Nirvana to be enjoyed by themselves and their descendants'. Although Titley makes clear reference to male and female settlers, the dangers inherent in inhabiting the marginal spaces of the urban frontier can potentially render them more physically accessible to men than to women.

> I think this building would be harder to access at night if you were a woman. There are some women who live in here. I don't think they have any problems, but you have to have a little bit of toughness or a sense of confidence to be down here because it is a little bit eerie and I'm sure it's easy to let your imagination run away. I know when my girlfriend came down she felt a little bit uncomfortable unless I was around. (Brian, 27 September 1999)

It could be argued that safety concerns can turn marginal space, such as this warehouse studio building in Toronto's industrial wasteland, into places of male privilege where women artists might fear to venture alone.

Although artists seldom directly use the term 'frontier' to describe their inner-city neighbourhoods, the way in which they relate to the urban spaces around them can be interpreted as a contemporary expression of a frontier mentality. In particular, there is an emphasis upon what could be interpreted as pioneer qualities of individualism, independence, self-sufficiency, thrift and courage (Furniss 1999). Furthermore, artists tend to gravitate towards areas with unexploited cheap

and abundant spatial resources that offer relative freedom from external constraints. Once settled, artists often display a remarkable willingness to defend their personal and local interests from outsiders. For the most part, this process of spatial expansion and the progressive taming of underused urban space 'involves internal differentiation of already developed spaces' (Smith 1996, xvi) on the periphery of the arts community, where there is a disproportionately smaller percentage of cultural services and programs.

The 'margins' continue to be celebrated as mythical spaces of acceptance, where difference and diversity can be effectively expressed. They are seen to represent something of a free and open space, where 'the power of government, capital and urban elites is unevenly felt and resisted' (Merriman 1991, 5) and where conventional cultural dictates can be challenged. 'Out of the ferment of the fringe comes enormous energy' (Hume 1997, G3). It is here, then, as Judith Butler (1990) suggests, that all social systems are at their most vulnerable. Thus, 'all margins are accordingly considered dangerous' (Butler 1990, 132).

For artists, these dangerous margins are the 'pockets of contradiction and fringe areas worth fighting for' (Duncan 1993, 187). Neglected and overlooked, marginal space holds out to artists the promise of a greater degree of personal freedom precisely because it retains the possibility of redefinition. The relocation of artists to low-income, working-class neighbourhoods that are still in a formative state can be seen as a tactical necessity (Parker and Pollock 1987) to nurture and sustain artists' occupational identities. Away from the pressure cooker of high-profile art districts, artists can find the physical and psychological space to explore and discover their personal creative potential.

A sociospatial marginal position is also one that supports the 'continued fascination of artists with, and their increased exposure to, the image of the ultimate outsider' (Merriman 1991, 11). The equation of the artistic avant-garde with outsider status persists:

> I feel somewhat marginal and wanting to be marginal too. Not wanting to be a part of what is essentially a business-minded, bourgeois city. So you set up your own community of like-minded people. (Tim, 5 October 1999)

In deliberately choosing a socially marginal position on the fringe of what he regards as bourgeois society, Tim is drawing upon the long-established myth of the artist as outsider—a myth that has encouraged many artists to identify with a 'glamorised otherness'. By seeing themselves as marginalised and art, by extension, as a marginal activity, many artists have sought to build 'a sense of belonging out of that of rejection, of not belonging' (Merriman 1991, 28).

Searching for the appropriate context to inspire and sustain artistic practice, artists often look for lower rents and less congested areas in which to work. They gather where the urban fabric is wearing thin.

> I love decay. I like broken windows, crumbling stone and rust...I love this space because it's really old, the windows are cracked and the brick crumbles. It's got a lot of character and age. (Annette, 31 March 1999)

Artists can be drawn to ruggedness and decay because it is very real and immediate. It presents a tactile resource, the energy of which can be harnessed to stimulate creativity. It is a physical experience that artists might choose to react against or to embrace in their work.

> The building isn't in prime shape. The windows don't shut properly and are cracked. But I don't mind that. I like a certain roughness to the studio...a sense of the building having had a life itself. There is a certain organic comfort because of that. (Tim, 5 October 1999)

This artist is very aware of his studio building's age and history; signs of decay and physical disrepair make the place feel alive for him and suggest the possibility of creative freedom and liberation.

Urban grittiness, then, can be understood as a creative stimulus. Although it does not conform to traditional conceptions of beauty, it can be processed in an almost encyclopaedic way as a discovery of the world that can be transformed in and through art. It is precisely this transformative potential that appeals to artists. Quoting musician Jamie Muir in an interview in an issue of the now-discontinued magazine *Microphone*, Derek Bailey (1992, 96) writes:

> I much prefer junk shops to antique shops. There's nothing to find in an antique shop—it's all been found already, whereas in a junk shop it's only been collected. But a rubbish dump—a rubbish dump has been neither found nor collected—in fact it's been completely rejected—and that is the undiscovered/unidentified/unclaimed/unexplored territory—the future if only you can see it.

This rather eloquent, roundabout account of Muir's musical philosophy resonates particularly with the attitudes of visual artists to the physical experience of urban space. Artists tend not to want to live and work in a 'coiffed', homogenous area that has been regenerated and cleansed to cater to middle-class sensibilities and consumptive tendencies, because 'it softens their edge' (Kathryn, 14 November 1999) and it is that edge that gives their work—and, by extension, their artistic identity—both substance and life. Instead, artists tend to gravitate towards neighbourhoods that provide improvisational space in which diversity, flexibility, playfulness and even outrageousness are both encouraged and accepted. The opportunity for artists to explore, to look, to listen and to shift the boundaries with which they experience the world is integral to their creative practice. Accustomed to 'working with tricky tools and intractable materials, with their inherent quirks, resistances, inertias and irritations' (Nachmanovitch 1990, 80), artists must remain open to possibility and change and receptive to the immediate moment. In this precarious and unsettling creative state on the edge of discovery and uncertainty, a delicate balance is usually needed between freedom and order, play and structure within the urban spaces of artistic production.

Improvisational Space

Improvisation in the creative fields of visual art, music, drama and dance is an exploratory technique for developing new material and for presenting finished performances to the public that deal with the unforeseen, the unanticipated and the unexpected. 'Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description' (Bailey 1992, ix). Within the world of jazz, improvisation is often interpreted as the act of 'instantaneous creation' drawn from 'the spontaneous and intuitive promptings of the unconscious' (Nachmanovitch 1990, 9). However, as Karl Weick (1998) emphasises, it is important to recognise that intuition is learned. Thus, while improvisation, in its celebration of the moment, might appear on the surface to be a casual activity without preparation and consideration, it depends significantly upon great discipline, practice and experience. In all facets of life, Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay (1993, 46) suggest, 'We improvise the moment we cease to know what is going to happen'. This idea of engaging in an activity in which the future is largely unknown alludes to the potentially exhilarating and perilous nature of improvisation, as individuals attempt to break out of their traditional frames of reference in an effort to appreciate the full richness and complexity of their environment (Crossan 1998). For, as Frank Barrett (1998, 606) has described, 'Improvisation involves exploring, continually experimenting, tinkering with possibilities without knowing where one's queries will lead or how action will unfold'.

If improvisation is the act of exploring what lies at the edge of the unknown as it unfolds in real time without a scripted plan and without a certain outcome, then improvisational space can be understood to be an environment or context that respects and fosters that heightened spontaneous and intuitive activity. Improvisational space, then, would value versatility and support the practice of flexibility in learning, thinking and experimenting with new ways of doing things and in work arrangements. As artist Elizabeth (6 August 1999) explains:

> I'm not the kind of painter who can say, 'This is the corner of the room where I'm going to work all the time' or 'this wall is going to be my painting wall'. I use different parts of the room according to what I'm doing. I'm always moving my easel around. That makes it hard to come up with a spatial arrangement that's going to stay.

For this artist, it is essential to be able to play and manipulate the set-up of her studio in much the same way as she temporarily constructs a still life to paint. Her studio can be seen as improvisational space, because the basic components can be manipulated into different configurations as dictated by the particularities of the project with

which she is involved. Improvisational space, then, is not fixed; instead, it is changeable and malleable, deliberately open to creative appropriation and adaptation by artists to meet their individual work needs and to foster individual learning opportunities. Visual artists, like musicians who improvise, often desire the freedom to do anything at any time (Bailey 1992), and that freedom of open-ended possibility soon becomes an emotional, intellectual and creative necessity. In this liberating space of 'free play' (Nachmanovitch 1990), where regulations are relaxed and the artist is unencumbered by props and supports, there is the opportunity to cultivate and express individuality, but there is little security. To live and work in such a potentially chaotic and turbulent environment, where consistency, comfort and control are frequently removed, necessarily entails a degree of risk. For the artist who is in search of the 'undiscovered/unidentified/unclaimed/unexplored territory', that can be part of the attraction of neighbourhoods that supply an abundance of marginal improvisational urban space. Marginal space, often neglected and overlooked, becomes an interactive creative playground for artists because it is unfinished, weakly classified and in a state of becoming. In residual urban space that has not been clearly defined and has not completed a transition from one use to another, there is greater informality and flexibility: structures and materials can be manipulated, adjusted and transformed by artists to meet their individual needs. In officially designated arts environments that have been designed to meet the needs of artists, there are very few opportunities for creative adaptation: these environments tend to be ordered, unambiguous and complete. Consequently, many artists, out of both financial and creative necessity, prefer to live and work in low-income, working-class neighbourhoods that are not congested with formally designated arts infrastructure and where the boundaries between different social groups and different land-use activities remain relatively porous. The east end of Toronto is one such place, as the following two artists suggest:

> I will say that for an adventurous person, the east end is the best place to be because of the lack of institutions of art. It's all very willy-nilly and there is a lot of potential here. (Peter, 21 February 2000)

> I know a lot of people who compare South Riverdale to Brooklyn. It is really diverse, especially during the summer time when you've got everything and anything going on. Low-income families and everything else all seem to coexist somehow. If anything, it's inspiring. (Nik, 21 March 2000)

It is in neighbourhoods such as the one described by Peter and Nik that artists are most likely to find improvisational space—space that encourages spontaneous and intuitive activity, space that remains changeable and malleable and space that supports different work arrangements and work practices.

Understanding the Role of Neighbourhoods for Artists

Neighbourhoods are used by artists in the presentation of self and function as an influence in the construction of an artistic identity by structuring the artist's social network and social world (Steinfeld 1981). Where an artist lives 'will determine, to a certain extent, who one's neighbours are (or are not), the type, quantity and quality of social interaction available (or not available) and the identity ascribed by others to the resident' (Steinfeld 1981, 202). With their changing creative landscapes of people, objects, space, light, sound and the emotions, sensations, memories and impressions they evoke, neighbourhoods are the geographic terrain upon which visual artists begin to inscribe their identities. In particular, the 37 percent of the interview sample that did not own a vehicle and were therefore less geographically mobile tended to display a proportionately stronger interest in their immediate locality. Witness the experience of one artist:

> I always worked in one square mile of where I lived. I searched out places. I don't drive a car, so I would always walk or ride my bicycle. That's my world. I go up and down one street or back and forth down another. (Peter, 21 February 2000)

As this quotation suggests, walking or cycling can give a directness and intensity to an artist's interactions with and awareness of his or her local surroundings.

Younger, emerging artists, particularly those who work from home, seem to use their neighbourhoods

both as workplaces and as living spaces. By extending themselves into their local surroundings, they develop a street-level awareness of their neighbourhoods and the potential social spaces they shelter for meeting other artists and exhibiting artwork:

> Young people who hadn't really established themselves yet were drawn to a café called Eye of The Storm. It was the first kind of cool place to hang out that had regular art shows, and had Saturday night music and poetry. (Peter, 21 February 2000)

Perhaps it is sheer economic necessity that encourages creative use and awareness of local resources. Or perhaps it is a lack of acceptance on the part of the established art world that encourages artists to turn to their localities as a place to establish a micropresence.

For those artists teetering on the cusp of recognition, developing a neighbourhood presence can be a useful starting point for developing a reputation:

> You can start in the community. It is a good practice ground, especially if you're starting out. Then it just sort of spreads from there to your city, to wherever. (Elizabeth, 5 August 1999)

For this artist, developing a neighbourhood presence began with exhibiting her paintings in her father's storefront window. These temporary displays generated an instant neighbourhood profile and an immediate street presence that she attempted to augment through involvement in a local open studio tour:

> The studio tour was sort of an extension of the community 'Hello, how are you?', but it did make sales and it was also a way of getting to know your market. But I think it's nice, in a neighbourhood where there are artists, for people to say, 'This is our pet artist!' It's like, 'They're our personal artists'. Like, 'That's our barber. That's our butcher', instead of all of these blank houses where you don't know who lives there. (Elizabeth, 5 August 1999)

As Elizabeth suggests, participating in local events can often generate pride among neighbourhood residents in the activities of local artists, such that they might assume verbal ownership of the artists themselves. Studio tours arranged and promoted by local artists, either independently or in conjunction with citywide arts events, were common in all of the neighbourhoods I sampled. They were particularly common in those neighbourhoods that had not yet firmly established a reputation as art districts or those that several artists were inclined to characterise as conventional middle-class residential neighbourhoods.

Living and working in neighbourhoods with populations composed predominantly of nonartists can be an isolating experience for many artists. In these situations, artists often feel that 'The only people we can turn to in the community are other artists and people who are conducive to creativity and art' (Peter, 21 February 2000). However, when the tone of a neighbourhood is quite conservative and conventional and not directly indicative of the presence of artistic residents, artists can often remain invisible even to each other.

> This doesn't seem to be a neighbourhood that is filled with a lot of other artistic people. Although I'm learning that there are more artists around here than I ever thought. But the neighbourhood as a whole is pretty mainstream. (Rob, 26 July 1999)

While many artists experience isolation, that sense of aloneness can be augmented for those who live in nonartistic neighbourhoods where there is little immediate and direct sense of a cultural life and where artists are physically cut off from regular contact with each other. Take, for example, the experience of a retirement-age painter who has been so involved in community arts activities that she has had little opportunity to meet her suburban neighbours:

> A year ago I went around with flyers for my art school and I put them in a lot of mailboxes. Not one response. Not one phone call. Nothing. You would have thought somebody would have at least been curious. I would say that there are not too many arts-oriented people in this neighbourhood. (Nancy, 19 November 1999)

Frustrated by the lack of response to her advertising and the lack of interest in her home-run art-school initiative or her artistic abilities, Nancy has concluded that her Scarborough neighbourhood is not supportive of the arts. A similar conclusion was reached by a much younger woman who is a

recent printmaking graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD):

> We lived at Coxwell and Danforth, almost Scarborough, and it had a real small-town quality to it. Most of the young people who lived there were quite conservative and just had aspirations of moving to the suburbs. There were a lot of old people there and they would look at me like, 'What are you doing staying at home working on art?' (Cybèle, 27 July 1999)

Evidently, instead of feeling respected for the creative work that she engaged in, within the confines of this 'straight' neighbourhood Cybèle felt both self-conscious and alienated. A mainstream residential framework offered Cybèle no affirmation of her creative talents and no support for her emerging sense of self as artist. Thus, although this may have been a 'real neighbourhood' where 'people really live and are not transient' (Rebecca, 29 September 1999), for Cybèle it produced the expression of a more pressing need to see other people making similar lifestyle choices, people who were nowhere to be found. Another artist, Tim (5 October 1999) has argued, 'In our ordinary middle-class neighbourhood you feel somewhat estranged having the studio in the house and you don't really feel a part of what is going on around you'. It is interesting that when Tim moved his workspace out of the home and into a studio building off Queen Street West, his interest in and desire to connect with his immediate surroundings returned.

> Here there's the flavour of people living around the neighbourhood. You can hear the kids in the street coming home from school and you can watch the neighbours across the road. You get a hint of life. You're not so isolated in the matter-of-factness of city life. (Tim, 5 October 1999)

Although Tim insists that he is less isolated in this downtown art district, his relationship with the residential elements of the neighbourhood is ultimately a voyeuristic one; he stands at his second-floor studio window peering down at the comings and goings of children and families on the street below. Nevertheless, it is the security and validation of knowing that other artists live, work, socialise and exhibit nearby that has allowed Tim to begin to appreciate those qualities of permanence

and family life that he had so readily dismissed in his own middle-class neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood, then, is a spatial framework that seems to become meaningful for many artists when it is connected in some way to their artistic practice.

> Where I'm living now, let's face it, is pretty damned remote. I'm kind of at the end of the universe here ... This neighbourhood isn't particularly significant to me ... If I refer to the neighbourhood, I'm not referring to this neighbourhood, I'm talking about the neighbourhood around College and Grace in the Little Italy area. I had a studio there for about four years. So that neighbourhood was really my neighbourhood for a period of time. I think of it as my neighbourhood even though it has changed so much that I hardly go there now. (Lynn, 29 March 1999)

Separated from a downtown art scene that tends to be concentrated in and around the intersection of Queen Street West and Spadina Avenue, this painter does not feel any sense of attachment to the Polish neighbourhood in which she has lived and worked for fourteen years because there is little creative traffic, minimal street life to which she feels able to relate, no history of overlapping studios that friends have had and no social spaces in to meet with other artists. Without these mechanisms in place to encourage the establishment of connections to the physical spaces of the neighbourhood and to provide the opportunity to imbue them with personal significance, artists like Lynn can feel removed and disconnected from their immediate surroundings. They choose, instead, to rely on memories and experiences of living and working in other areas of the city where artistic activity is more prominent and prevalent. The occasional journeys back downtown provide an opportunity for artists to revisit old haunts and to reconnect with those neighbourhoods that continue to play an important, if seemingly rather distant and imaginary, role in their lives.

Conclusions

The distinctive microgeographies of artists suggest that contemporary visual artists are sensitive to the availability of particular kinds of urban spaces and to the ways those spaces are regulated.

Attracted to marginal niches that shelter the possibility of sustaining improvisational creative and spatial practices, artists display a remarkable attentiveness to the details of the rapidly changing urban fabric. In a desire to experience urban life as it is lived, artists seek to live and work, not in neighbourhoods that have been substantially revised or restructured through the process of gentrification, but in those that present themselves as a hodgepodge of activities and appearances. This social, economic, ethnic and architectural diversity provides artists with 'a rich menu of possibilities, which can trigger and stimulate' creative practice (Bianchini and Landry 1994, 23). It is here, in the stimulating milieu of poverty, illness, destitution and downtown decay, that artists have traditionally found the conditions that make an area desirable to them (Hume 1998). They gather where there is some kind of culture bubbling underneath the surface, from which they draw their creative energy. Over time, these areas become suffused with layers of personal and collective meaning, transformed into reflections of artistic selves. When a neighbourhood begins to function as a reference point for city residents beyond its boundaries, however, it can lose its significance for the individual artist. Gradually, the artist may become detached and removed, anonymous and, finally, absent. In the process, the transformative power of their involvement is rendered but a memory. How distant that memory becomes will vary with the age of the individual and the extent of their initial—and perhaps continued—involvement.

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