

NetherMind is an artist collective that organized four annual exhibitions in Toronto from 1991 through 1995. The collective's members shared an interest in sculptural approaches to surrealism and produced sprawling exhibitions in rough, dark warehouses and industrial spaces. Following their fourth exhibition in 1995, the collective took a 17-year hiatus and pursued individual exhibition careers. They re-emerged in October 2012 with an exhibition that took place in St. Anne's Anglican Church in Toronto. Today the collective is comprised of the artists Tom Dean, John Dickson, Catherine Heard, Greg Hefford, Mary Catherine Newcomb, Reinhard Reitzenstein, Lyla Rye, and Max Streicher. Other artists also associated with NetherMind in the nineties were Miki McCarty, Carl Skelton, Anastasia Tzekas, and Manrico Venere.

The term "artist collective" sometimes refers to two or more artists working together to produce and exhibit a body of work. Of that type of artist collective, the N.E. Thing Company may be the original Canadian manifestation, and General Idea the most notable over the last 50 years. The NetherMind collective model refers quite simply to a group of artists who come together to "put on a show." The Chromozone group of painters active in Toronto in the 1980s is perhaps the best-known Canadian art collective of this type.¹ Money is raised, a suitable exhibition space is acquired, and each artist contributes work to the exhibition.

Gary Michael Dault noted the proliferation of this latter type of artist collective in Canada in the 1990s was a product of the period's economic and cultural context.² Just as the great post-war expansion of university and visual art education had begun to produce new artists in record numbers, the Canadian economy entered its second major contraction in a decade. The small and shrinking trade in Canadian fine art had neither the capacity to absorb the production of this new generation of artists nor the ability to represent installation, new media and time-based art forms. The educational sector, traditionally an important support

¹ Andy Fabo, Sybil Goldstein, "ChromaZone / Chromatique: A Brief History 1981-1986," November 2009, CCCA Canadian Art Database: http://ccca.concordia.ca/chromazone/chromazone_history.html.

² "Toronto artists, brought into contact through university friendships and certain congruencies of sensibility, began to band together into groups: groups in search of their own funding, their own exhibition spaces, their own promotion, their own curating, their own documentation. Untethered, as Fabo puts it, to real estate, which none of them could have afforded anyhow, these new collectives set about exploring the city for suitable sites to bend to their temporary purposes: vacant warehouse spaces, ghostly abandoned industrial basements, empty storefronts (the advertisements for recession), rooftops, hallways, the walls of the pubs where they drank beer and doodled their next procedural moves on wet cocktail napkins." Gary Michael Dault, "Amid the rubble of the recession, a new generation of inner-city Toronto artists is blooming," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 11 #4, December 1994.

structure for the art community, had stopped growing. Victims of a boom and bust economy, artists with graduate degrees took on odd jobs – a career path more exceptional at the time, but which today has become a commonly accepted career path for MFA grads.

Against the backdrop of today's massive redevelopment of Toronto's downtown, it's hard to picture the community 25 years ago. The garment industry's move out of lower Spadina in the seventies (the parts of the city now called the Fashion and the Entertainment districts), manufacturing's exit from Liberty Village in the eighties, and Parkdale's post-war economic decline created inexpensive working class neighbourhoods and decaying commercial districts with large chunks of cheap industrial space.^{3 4} Warehouse spaces were converted into clubs, lofts, live/work arrangements, galleries and studios supporting a low-rent economy of both established and emerging artists, musicians and people just wanting to be part of the alternative downtown community. It was a distinct sub-culture, supporting a mythic narrative of urban pioneering and social belonging, and defining itself in opposition to the dominant Canadian mass culture.

The process was of course not unique to Toronto. An artistic and urban counter-cultural movement of squatting in vacant buildings took root across the UK and Western Europe in the sixties. Galleries in converted storefronts, warehouse spaces, and factory lofts, began to emerge in London and New York.⁵ These new alternative exhibition spaces addressed two issues: They were a creative response to economic and cultural exclusion from institutionalized spaces and they were part of the emergence of minimalist, conceptualist and performance-based art – a reaction against the neutrality of the “white cube” gallery

³ During the late 1970s and early 1980s, manufacturing operations within Liberty Village began to decline due to a shift from rail to road shipping, the need for larger manufacturing facilities, and lower manufacturing costs in suburban or offshore locations. In 1990, the Toronto Carpet Manufacturing plant on Liberty Street shut down, and the Inglis plant (owned by Whirlpool since 1985) ceased operations in 1991. The Inglis factory and Massey-Harris factory (with the exception of 947 King St. West) were demolished. Decreased industrial activity and lower property values caused many Liberty Village buildings to fall into neglect.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_Village

⁴ Tom Slater, Toronto's South Parkdale Neighbourhood A Brief History of Development, Disinvestment, and Gentrification, UrbanStudies, University of Bristol, U.K., Excerpted, condensed, and updated from an article in The Canadian Geographer, Fall 2004, titled “Municipally Managed Gentrification in South Parkdale, Toronto.”
<http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/pdfs/researchbulletins/CUCS-RB-28-/Im'Slater-Parkd.pdf>

⁵ See Sandy Nairne, “The Institutionalization of Dissent,” pp. 387 -410, *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, Routledge: New York, 1996.

space.⁶ The “white cube,” the clinically white painted four walls of the gallery space was, however, still the dominant paradigm for exhibitions, and through much of the eighties, the first thing the new artist tenants did was to put up drywall and paint it white.

Painters typically wanted as little visual activity as possible in the surrounding environment to suppress possible distractions from the surfaces of their work. But sculpture is inherently more engaged in the surrounding space and framing a three-dimensional work against a white wall only works from a single point of view.⁷ Limited ambient lighting and focused spots, after all, may be all that is needed to bring sculpture into dramatic relief. Initial discussions among the NetherMind artists focused on the treatment of the rough industrial space and what degree of preparation it might need. The question of whether the floor should be swept or left as it was engaged the idea of the space as a found object in the exhibition.

The character of the “found object space,” and the low-level ambient light became it’s own event in the NetherMind exhibitions of the early 90s. It contrasted sharply with the dominant modernist showroom aesthetic characteristic of the department store and the futurist, antiseptic minimalism associated with science fiction set decoration in films like *THX 1138*.⁸ The dominant contemporary architectural aesthetic of the recently constructed art schools that many of the artists had attended as students, featuring glass walls and studios bathed in sunlight, was nowhere to be found in the NetherMind exhibitions.⁹

The darkened exhibition space may have reflected another characteristic of the time – the profound pessimism and communal despair that accompanied the ongoing crisis of the AIDS epidemic. The documentation of death had become a recurrent subject in the contemporary art of the early 90s, prompting

⁶ Brian Doherty analyzed the politics of representation with the white space in *Inside the White Cube - The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press: Santa Monica/San Francisco, 1976.

⁷ Formalist aesthetics in the sixties had argued for the expansion of the field of art from the surface of objects to include the surrounding space. See Grégoire Mueller, *The New Avant-Garde*, New York: Praeger, 1972, and Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, Vol. 8. (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-44.

⁸ *THX 1138* (1971), Dir. George Lucas, 86 min., (USA).

⁹ The new architecture of art schools emphasized the brightly lit white cube. See Raymond Mos airy glass and concrete York University Fine Arts Phase II building in suburban Toronto built in 1973 and the Glyde Hall studios at the Banff Centre, 1976.

Adam Gopnik, writing about the 1993 Venice Biennale, to identify this work as part of a new “Morbid Manner,” in tune with what he saw as an obsession with “the display of images of death, decay, and violence,” a tendency he attributed to the influence of the work of Bruce Nauman:

The immediate model for almost all the grimmest work – for the macabre fragment, the tortured videos, the cryptic neon signs, even the simple idea of assembling a lot of morbid bits and pieces in a darkened room – is the art of the American Bruce Nauman . . . It is Nauman’s mood – the sense of building memorials-in-advance to an apocalypse whose causes are ill defined but whose inevitability is grimly certain that dominates the exhibition.¹⁰

These influences certainly exist, but it would be wrong to suggest the NetherMind exhibitions were a downer. They weren’t. If the exhibitions existed against the background of social and economic crisis, the installations by contrast communicated energy and vitality. The NetherMind collective emerged at a time when the prospects for individual artists were few and the institutions of contemporary art were being assaulted on all sides. As for many Canadian artists in the 90s, banding together in a collective made sense as a mechanism of survival. But more than that, the NetherMind members deftly negotiated a middle space for the collaboration of emerging and established artists, and for collective action and individual art practice. The collective produced a series of exhibitions that had a distinctly “NetherMind” feel, style and energy that did not describe a grimly certain apocalypse, but an alternative way of making and exhibiting art. Where Gopnik saw a sterile Mannerist, *fin-de-siecle* end game at work, NetherMind and similar artist collectives in Canada were exploring alternative spaces, extending the possible resonances in their work and initiating new conversations within the community they called home.¹¹

¹⁰ Adam Gopnik, “Death in Venice,” *New Yorker*, 2 Aug. 1993, pp. 67-73.

¹¹ An early example of exhibitions in alternative spaces in Canada would include the Embassy Cultural House in in London, Ontario. See Christopher Régimbal, “Institutions of Regionalism: Artist Collectivism in London, Ontario, 1960–1990,” *ArcPost Online Space for Artist-Run Culture*, <<http://arcpost.ca/articles/institutions-of-regionalism>> and Christopher Régimbal, “A Fire at the Embassy Hotel,” *FUSE Magazine*, Summer 2010, 12–15. 51. <<http://fusemagazine.org/2010/09/a-fire-at-the-embassy-hotel-2>>. Other examples of intervention and site specific collective projects in the 90s include the 23rd Room collective that produced the Duke-U-Menta exhibition at the Duke of Connaught hotel in Toronto, 1994, <<http://www.myrectumisnotagrave.com/writing/dukeumenta.html>>; the Farrago collective’s “The House Project, a site specific exhibition,” Toronto, 1994, and Eileen Sommerman’s exhibition “In Lieu: Installations in Public Washrooms,” 1998.