



## Introduction

The grand inauguration of The World Portable Gallery Convention 2012 on September 5th occurred between the auspicious bookends of two other conventions of unavoidable hype and power, namely, the Republican and Democratic National Conventions of the United States. This coincidence presented us with a facet—albeit a grotesquely exaggerated facet—of the *raison d'être* of conventions. On one hand, conventions marshal huge resources both for developing their infrastructures and holding events, often paid for by the public.<sup>1</sup> In HRM (Halifax Regional Municipality), this has meant federal, provincial and municipal government dedicating over \$164 million CAD in a gamble on the construction of a new convention centre—the Nova Centre—generating profits for the city and revitalizing its downtown core, what leaders call “spinoffs.” But on the other hand, the numbers only mask the hidden investments behind these particular events. It can consist, for instance, in the promise of close and private access of corporations to powerful lawmakers (and vice versa), as displayed in the opaque spectacles of American corporatism. This was just a timely reminder of the hegemony that conventions have come to stand for, and why the power of gathering needs to be considered from other angles.

In the earlier stages of planning this project (long before moving Eyelevel’s actual office space into the main gallery as an overly formal convention hall lobby reception desk), we discussed how to convene a variety of people, and about our own roles in the process of selection and invitation; if this were a real *World Convention* of portable galleries, then why

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<sup>1</sup> Between these two events a total of more than \$136 million CAD was paid out by US taxpayers. These figures, along with expectations of what attendees will spend on “hotels, meals, transportation, gifts and other purchases” were calculated into the expected profits that event organizers touted will end up in the hands of the locality; in the case of Tampa the “windfall” was projected at anything from \$150–\$200 million CAD: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/research-firm-projects-rncs-local-economic-impact-of-1536-million/1246353>; no room here to go into doubts about the verity of these figures (converted here into Canadian currency).

not leave it open, why not allow anyone to submit according to their self-initiative?<sup>2</sup> Might there not be an unforeseen encounter, which is in fact a trait of portable galleries as they move around unprepared publics? For a number of reasons, total openness was not the route we took; interested in existing practices that had come into their own formats, as opposed to one-off works tailored to a specific size (say, an exhibition of xeroxes), we were also less concerned with the postal-centric interests and at times utopian aspirations of mail-art. What makes a gallery a gallery in this case is its consistent returning to a set of presentation methods and scales, and a playing on a developing identity that is different from individual artists'.<sup>3</sup> Of course there is overlap. But there is also a deliberate gesture of role-play involved, that of the gallerist, the museum director, the curator or host. The institutions they represent are modest and mostly run by whatever means are available. However, this scale is often used as a critical reflection of the larger institutions normally referenced by the words gallery, museum, etc., and thus role-play positions one in a mediating capacity, as the embodiment of "bodiless beings."<sup>4</sup> In portable galleries the absurd awkwardness of being a person and speaking for an institution is pushed to its limits, and recuperated.

In initial discussions, we found several issues kept coming up related to the funding systems in Canada, which have been causing consternation among some artists today, and whose bureaucratic imperatives had been remarked on 30 years ago by A.A. Bronson in the seminal and influential book "Museums by Artists."<sup>5</sup> Even the idea of the open-submission mail-in show had the feeling of something illicit, as it appears to ask people for their participation without remuneration according to national standards. But portable galleries are often self-propelled, in any case, revealing a dilemma latent in the project. What does it mean when self-initiated spaces begin to receive funding at legally mandated levels, is it some kind of betrayal of principles? In a more sophisticated formulation, a question arose during the WPGC 2012 opening artist talk by Paul Hammond and Francesca Tallone: is it the artist-run centre legitimizing the small gallery project, or the small gallery legitimizing the artist-run centre?

Their **Gallery Deluxe Gallery** had been active in an attic crawlspace in their Halifax apartment from 2005 to 2007, and was for WPGC 2012 re-constructed in uncanny detail in

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<sup>2</sup> A short mention should be made that "portable" in the World Portable Gallery Convention 2012 project refers in a few cases to small and unofficial spaces as well as those, the majority, that are technically mobile.

<sup>3</sup> For a formative attempt to cluster together a typology, see "There's a New Beard In Town," an online archive of portable exhibition spaces created by artist Hannah Jickling for the Or Gallery in 2005, which attests that in the past decade and a half, portable exhibition spaces in Canada and beyond have gone from being a novel fad to a widespread phenomenon. Accessible at: <http://www.orgallery.org/webprojects/hannah/>

<sup>4</sup> See Luc Boltanski for a description of spokespersons and their troubled place as the means for institutions to act—but an inherently unstable one because of their existence as "flesh-and-blood beings like all the rest of us (...) and hence condemned, like all of us, to the ineluctability of the point of view (...)" *On Critique* (Polity Press, 2011), p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> The significance of Bronson's "Humiliation of the Bureaucrat" in *Museums by Artists* (Art Metropole, 1983) as a precedent into the line of inquiry around artist-run culture is rendered bold in the ambitious project that occurred in Vancouver in early October 2012, called "Institutions by Artists," organized by PAARC, Fillip, and ARCA. See Vincent Bonin's article on p. 65.

Eyelevel, featuring the work of Chris Foster. At the time they closed, they had been considering ways of attaining funding.

Beginning in 2007 and more active until 2010, in a similar use of surplus space, Daniel Joyce, Miriam Moren and Ryan Park had made the **161 Gallon Gallery** out of a small storage closet in the stairwell to their 2nd floor. During an introduction in their living room at the opening of Lukas Pearse's sound installation at 161, Daniel Joyce recounted how they received a letter drawing attention to CARFAC's fee schedules, which seemed somewhat counterintuitive to 161's intentions.

Though not so romantic as it may seem, Halifax's artists have, by nature of the economically challenged region (in the broader sense and in relation to arts funding), become extremely accustomed to making work either about, or with, limited resources. This long-standing characteristic is sometimes a curse, but often a license to detach from the dependency on systems standardizing the work of artists and galleries. In light of just how heavily administrated artist-run spaces have become, comic relief helps clear the air, such as in the **P.R. Rankin Gallery**, initiated by Eyelevel administrators Elizabeth Johnson and Michael McCormack, which acted simply as an answering machine by which anyone calling Eyelevel was diverted to an invitation to participate by leaving an audio art message after the beep.

There are countless examples where legitimation spells the end of a self-initiative, and no shortage of these is quite willing to make a change for access to more support (in today's startup culture, such scenarios are almost cultishly sought after). On the other hand, just as numerous are the self-initiatives that could no longer be carried on because life had caught up with the protagonists, who had tired of self-supporting, or who had just gone on to other things.

Several of the participants in WPGC 2012 represent a middle way: coming in and out, making temporal compromises, taking breaks and returning when there is an opportunity, or inspiration. None of the participants involved in this project make portable galleries their exclusive work. Indeed, it is also this marginality that gives the small institution some of its power, some of its more lasting characteristics. The **Museum of Mental Objects**, co-instigated by Judy Freya Q. Sibayan, deputized a number of individuals to become museums themselves: institutions to house works accessed by whisper, and un-mediated in any other way. This may sound self-effacing, but Sibayan revels in the agency concentrated in being an ex-centric:

“Away from the centre, I set my own values and goals and become my own construction as a subversive. Here, I am free to move ‘away from the language of alienation (other-ness) to that of de-centring (difference). Here, the narrative of continuity’ of the white cube ‘is threatened, it is both used and abused, inscribed and subverted.’ Here, the image of the ex-centric is ‘often as deviant as the language of de-centring might suggest.’ Here the image of the ex-centric is that of the fool who speaks truth to power as the off-centre contests narratives

of centring; as she makes art in a ‘de-centred world where there is only ex-centricity.’”<sup>6</sup>

In practice, ex-centricity describes the very marginal space of encounter with many portable galleries: on sidewalks, after-hours, by chance, in privacy. **The Velcro Gallery**, by Craig Leonard and co-organized by Beck Osborne, for instance, featured alternating button designs from a number of artists who had responded to an open call. Over the month, whenever Osborne wore the jacket on her daily errands, the gallery was open.

Following a series of WPGC 2012 evening presentations at the Seahorse Tavern—Halifax’s most venerable pub in a bustling night life area directly adjacent the Nova Centre construction site—Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel Dugas brought **MediaPackBoard** to the streets.<sup>7</sup> Consisting of a closed-circuit shoulder-mounted television monitor streaming live footage from a pole-mounted video camera, it converted the fence surrounding the site and edges of Thursday night hedonism into a world of crevices to explore. Of course, gallivanters meet such fringe activity with mixed reactions (depending on states of inebriation), but then screening images of alternative uses of public space, or even broaching the topic, can be a little disturbing.

Also out that night cladding its curator Hannah Jickling, **The Coat of Charms** was received by downtown Halifax youth with surprising curiosity. A trench coat gallery that featured the work of Portland-based collective F\* Mtn, a number of strikingly incendiary-esque kaleidoscopes, its exhibitionist gesture of flashing strangers was softened by the consenting intimacy of gazing through a delicate peep hole. Similarly challenging the viewer and artist alike in exhibiting and experiencing work in marginal and unexpected places is Gordon B. Isnor’s **Alopecia Gallery**, a gallery located on his face, where he curated an audio piece by the duo Duke and Battersby whose faintness required the viewer to put their ear very much in Isnor’s personal space.

Intimacy is the portable gallery’s secret weapon.

Hans Ulrich Obrist’s **Nanomuseum**, a truly handy exhibition space in the form of a folding picture frame, hosted another gallery, Vitamin Creative Space’s the shop, presented by the artist Matt Hope. This convoluted arrangement served the simple function of providing a portable reading room for one or two people.

Standing somewhat more sedentary in Eyelevel (but arriving by post), **Nasubi Gallery**, Japanese artist Ozawa Tsuyoshi’s institution in a milk-box, exhibited the work of Ken Lum, who presented a single nose-wiped child’s mitten he had found in his Vancouver studio ages

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<sup>6</sup> Judy Freya Sibayan, “Thoughts on the Work of the Ex-centric,” in Ctrl+P Journal Issue #17 (available: [http://www.ctrlp-artjournal.org/pdfs/CtrlP\\_Issue17.pdf](http://www.ctrlp-artjournal.org/pdfs/CtrlP_Issue17.pdf)). Sibayan is here quoting Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1989).

<sup>7</sup> The panel, held September 6th 2012, was called “Expose Your Self: Gallery as Performer” and featured presentations by Hannah Jickling, Gordon B. Isnor, and Valerie LeBlanc with Daniel Dugas.

ago and kept until present. Moving from his long-time home also meant the displacement of the mitten, a piece of biographical marginalia best suited to a small space.

Mathieu Arsenault's existentialist bicycle messenger service **Fixed Cog Hero** literally occupied the Eyelevel Members Gallery, which acted as the office for his constructed monastic persona. Peppered with philosophies of loneliness, Fixed Cog Hero spiritualized the act of delivering messages, stories, gestures, letters, and small objects throughout Halifax.

Despite its more systematized and diligently charted and documented operation, Kate Rich's **Feral Trade**, an international courier service operated through luggage and "harnessing the surplus freight potential of existing travel (friends, colleagues, passing acquaintances) for the practical circulation of goods," is very much about the singularity of our interaction with commodities.<sup>8</sup> At its Gottingen Street destination, the Feral Trade Café was set up to serve these smuggled snacks.

UK-based artist Gustav Metzger's ongoing **RAF** campaign provided a kind of punctuation mark to all of the works about portability, making the simple demand to *Reduce Art Flights*. Posted on the sides of buildings and telephone poles, in storefront windows, and on notice boards, as a political or motivational campaign it was intentionally left open-ended for interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

Altogether, then, what we saw in a convention of portable galleries was almost an anti-spectacle, with as much centrifugal impetus as centripetal force. True, institutions and their actors can align, exchange and nest in one another, and their critique or rejection of conventional power structures is certainly oriented toward production: forming micro-communities, narratives, and support networks. But the fundamental challenge of portable galleries to standardization and power rests in the contradictions they embrace, living between the world of individuals and publicness, short-circuiting the mechanism separating open and closed, through practices tied tightly to daily life. From the perspective of a gathering in the margins, the concept of "spinoffs" sounds much more ludicrous than an art exhibition in a beard.

Michael Eddy and Michael McCormack

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<sup>8</sup> Quote from Feral Trade website: [feraltrade.org](http://feraltrade.org)

<sup>9</sup> One Atlantic Canadian artist read it more as an equity campaign for those on small budgets (i.e. reduce the cost of flights for artists) rather than an ecological message, which is somewhat telling about the region.