

No TYPICAL DONOR

Declining government support means it's a daunting new world for small Canadian arts organizations forced to compete with bigger institutions for sponsorship dollars. And yet private art philanthropy in Canada is on the upswing. Lydia Perović reports

This year, the Power Ball, the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery's biggest annual fundraising event and one described by society pages and fashion media as the "official launch of the summer social season," added an Artist Ambassadors ticket package to its sponsorship options. A response to arguments that few artists can afford to attend the event at \$160 general admission and \$500 VIP cocktail reception prices, the Power Plant development staff pitched a "subsidize-the-artists" option to its sponsors, who, by buying the \$2,500 package, got to keep their two tickets (plus formal acknowledgment and tax receipt) and pay cover for 10 artists who attend free of charge. Before the cynics among you rush to judgment that instead of creating a tier of affordable tickets the Ball crew looked for more sponsorship, consider what fundraising parties are meant to achieve. Yes, the "artistic edginess" of the performers the Ball presents is a carefully cultivated element of event branding, while artists can't afford to attend. Sure, the Ball is a target, lampooned by An-

drew Harwood and Gallery TPW's D-List Ball and recently re-contextualized in not exactly flattering terms by one of the Power Plant's own commissioned artists, Scott Lyall. And yes, judging by the media coverage, TV and sports personalities, what they wear does seem to be the main focus of the event ("What to wear to a revolution" is how the *Globe and Mail* reported on last year's "Revolution"-themed edition). But all of this attention translates into publicity. Such large fundraising events need to reach people who don't necessarily understand or have keen interest in contemporary art—and make them want to part with some of their disposable income, rather than give it to a great number of other worthy causes, say Médecins sans frontières, the Sierra Club or the Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation. In a world where contemporary arts are not deemed essential, celebrity culture, branding, sponsorship advertising, exclusivity and hype production are necessities.

Fundraising events are now a crucial

source of revenue for many visual arts organizations, but they are only one component of the private and corporate revenue these groups are learning to access. "Government funding bodies have not been able to follow our gallery's growth," says Gary Hall of Gallery Toronto Photographers Workshop. "If you factor in inflation, the three levels of government are giving us less in funding today than they did 10 years ago. The only way to survive is through donations and fundraising." Artist-run centres are in the same position. "I wish our government grants were larger—but I am learning that increases have now become impossible for arts councils to do without cutting some other organization's grant," Ann Dean, Art Metropole's director, tells me. "Fundraising and private donations are becoming primary concerns for us—we have recently applied for charitable status to simplify fundraising in the future and are preparing a major fundraiser for a capital project next year."

Stories like these ones are representative of the entire sector. A number of reports have shown that government funding for

POWER BALL 9
REVOLUTION

A FUNDRAISER AND 20TH ANNIVERSARY PARTY
 FOR CANADA'S LEADING CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

3 May 2007 at 8:30 pm
 The Power Plant

The
 Power
 Plant

public galleries and artist-run centres—in all cases, save large public museums like the National Gallery of Canada — has at best followed the inflation rate and at worst fallen under it (cf. mid-90s Harris government cuts to the Ontario Arts Council) over the last 10 to 15 years. As the sector itself has grown, the percentage of visual arts organizations' revenue that comes from the government has shrunk accordingly. A Hill Strategies report prepared for the Ontario Association of Art Galleries based on the 2003 OAG Data Exchange, *A Profile of Art Galleries in Ontario* (2005), shows that the government-contributed percentage of the total revenue of 21 surveyed Ontario public art galleries fell from 85 percent in 1993 to 63 percent in 2003. Private revenue, on the other hand, grew both nominally and percentage-wise, from 4 percent to 11 percent (representing a fourfold increase, with inflation adjustment; and the report indicates that earned revenue also grew significantly).

The 2005–2006 *Business for the Arts Annual Survey of Public Museums and Art Galleries* finds similar trends. For the 117 surveyed Canadian museums and galleries, between 1996–97 and 2005–06, private-sector revenue grew at the fastest rate of all revenue categories. A random selection of visual arts organizations' balance sheets from recently published annual reports also shows an increase in private-sector revenue. For the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Tor-

onto, the percentage grew from 25 percent in 2006 to 43 percent in 2007, with the strongest component of that increase being individual donations. The Art Gallery of Ontario's most recent statement of operations—issued before the “Transformation” campaign, which is itself largely privately funded—shows 33.5 percent of the gallery's revenue came through “donations, bequests and membership fees.” As Royal Ontario Museum director and CEO William Thorsell likes to point out in his media appearances, only 20 percent of the museum's “super-reno” was funded by the Government of Ontario.

So where is all the money coming from? Private revenue levels for art galleries included in the *Business for the Arts* survey indicate that individual donations and special events have a stronger showing than corporate donations and sponsorships. Corporate sponsorships, however, remain the most visible kind of the private-revenue sources. While only the largest private donations get into press (e.g. Tony Gagliano's AGO campaign that generated \$500,000 each from 19 Italian families, the W. Garfield Weston Foundation's \$12 million donation to the AGO, Michael Lee-Chin's \$30 million donation to the ROM, Isadore and Rosalie Sharpe's \$5 million contribution to the Canadian Opera Company building-completion campaign), the branding that goes along with corporate sponsorship has reproducibility and permanence. The Giller Prize, Nuit

Blanche, the Sobey Art Award and Caribana are all Scotiabank-owned “brands” now; the Royal Bank of Canada is co-sponsoring and creating art awards (the RBC-MOCCA Award and RBC Painting Competition, respectively); the Bank of Montreal is sponsoring the Siminovitch Prize; HSBC, the Shaw Festival; and GreatWest Life has keen interest in community arts initiatives. Torys LLP has partnered with CARFAC (Canadian Artists Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens) and Pro Bono Law Ontario plans to offer free legal advice to visual artists. Rogers sponsors the Rogers Writer's Trust Fiction Prize. All of these corporations also have donation programs in addition to the sponsorships, but the information on how the size of one compares to the size of the other is not readily available.

To say that the corporations are in it for advertising and fiscal sheltering reasons, and to grow reputational capital, would be to say nothing new. In a way, the Maecenas and Medicis were after the same. Individual art patronage, however, causes less queasiness—it is not undertaken for palpable returns, it seems: it is less of a trade and more of a gift. Family wealth that enables such donations, however, has been accrued in the same system of value creation and distribution that produces Scotiabank's profits—and government grants come from the same pool, caught by taxation into re-distributive channels of arts councils.

The Power Plant

The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery
at Harbourfront Centre
290 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5V 1A5

POWER BALL 9 cocktail party

HOLT RENFREW BOSS

AYLESWORTH PUMA

ROGERS NATIONAL POST NOW

SKYY VODKA FIJI ARAMARK BY BONSAI

DUFFLET

The Power Plant

"Oh the things corporations are coming up with to place their brands," laughs Yves Theoret, MOCCA's general manager. "Pop Tarts have sponsored a pop art exhibit recently, and I've heard of a Parmigiano retrospective sponsored by Parmalat." He has no qualms with corporate sponsorships and donations as long as there's a clear separation of "church and state": programming must stay absolutely independent of any interference. "We, and other organizations, are members of the Canadian Museums Association and subscribe to its code of ethics. The donors and sponsors give to the institution, not to this or that project, or artist within it."

Neither one of us could remember a recent Canadian example of a sponsor publicly threatening to withdraw funds due to "unacceptable" artistic content. But what if that's because our contemporary art is—in religious, political and sexual terms—tame? How much contemporary Canadian art offers reason for sponsor outrage? Theoret offers an example: "There was a storm around the National Gallery of Canada 1989 purchase of Barnett Newman's minimalist abstract *Voice of Fire* for \$1.8 million. The discussion was all about tax-payers' money being wasted, however. Short-term, the gallery might have lost a few memberships, but the public debate about art that the event occasioned was of great value." I remained unconvinced, but we agreed that the aesthetic hate-ons of private funders stay invisible, perhaps be-

cause ideological selections take place in the decision-making about whom to consider sponsoring.

Shawn St. Michael, the AGO's director of development, also spoke about the "respect for the institution" that is now a necessary part of the sponsorship game. "Donors like the orientation 'hub' approach that we've adopted, and are increasingly interested in what an institution can offer in the way of education programs or neighbourhood engagement, and not exclusively programming." With collection donations, donations for the creation of specific programs as well as old-fashioned bequests and campaign donations the AGO receives making news, I ask St. Michael about the practical side of the donorship process. "Cultivating donors requires full-time focus. We have donor-stewardship staff who oversee a donation from its beginning to, one hopes, its renewal. They supply donors with detailed reports on what their donation accomplished. A donation is only a beginning of the relationship." What would she recommend to a smaller organization with no connections, since I've heard cold calls never work? "You must research how your mandate dovetails with the mission of a potential organizational or corporate donor. And yes, fundraising is 'people-to-people' fundamentally; having the right people to make the call can make all the difference."

Having the right people is why art organizations are increasingly interested in

seeking board members with high fundraising potential. The board of any randomly selected arts organization is now likely to have a mix of members with connections of the funding-potential kind and members with art credibility—and often more of the former. This is not a development that should cause concern; it can only become an issue if fundraising overshadows all other purposes in the running of an organization. Fundraising balls and award ceremonies are another way for an art organization to establish connections with the business world or potential funders.

When I interviewed Joe Goulart, outgoing director of development at the Power Plant (which has since created two new positions: development specialist and coordinator), about the fastest growing source of revenue at the Power Plant, he noted that corporate contributions were well below private donations, stable government funding and foundation contributions, highlighting the impact of a donation from a unique non-profit group. "Partners in Art has made possible two new commissions, Scott Lyall's work this year and Candice Breitz in 2009. PIA is a group of 60–80 high net-worth women interested in helping the creation of contemporary art." But, he said, traditional sponsorships are not likely to diminish in importance. "RBC will sponsor the exhibitions to come out of commissions. We were able to offer free admission to our public all summer

thanks to the Hal Jackson Foundation-*NOW Magazine* sponsorship this year.”

Although I started off my research for this article with a preconception that donors primarily interested in contemporary art production are somewhat rare and have a definite profile, none of my interlocutors would confirm it. Who would be interested in something that often embraces the ephemeral, or begins by defying the possibility of ownership? Would it be an aging, upwardly mobile hipster, a baby boomer or somebody much older and thoroughly educated in the canon? The traits kept changing. “Yes, contemporary art may be a little less popular with donors,” the AGO’s Shawn St. Michael concedes, “but there isn’t a definite profile of a contemporary art donor. They all, though, see the appeal of being part of something from its inception—and of contributing to development of a new talent.” My other sources also remained agnostic about the contemporary donor figure, their age, vocation or aesthetic positioning. In the first instance, it’s the artists and writers themselves who donate work (to organizations for fundraising projects) and time through unpaid volunteer work. But what’s considered a more typical donor set is almost as diverse. There are the women of Partners in Art. There is Sallah Bachir who, for instance, recently sponsored Peter Kingstone’s project *100 Stories About My Grandmother*. There are also bequest donations, like the fund for the acquisi-

tion of contemporary art created by David Y. Hodgson’s estate. And then there are donors and collectors like Jay Smith and Phillip Lind, who have a life-long interest in art and clearly developed tastes.

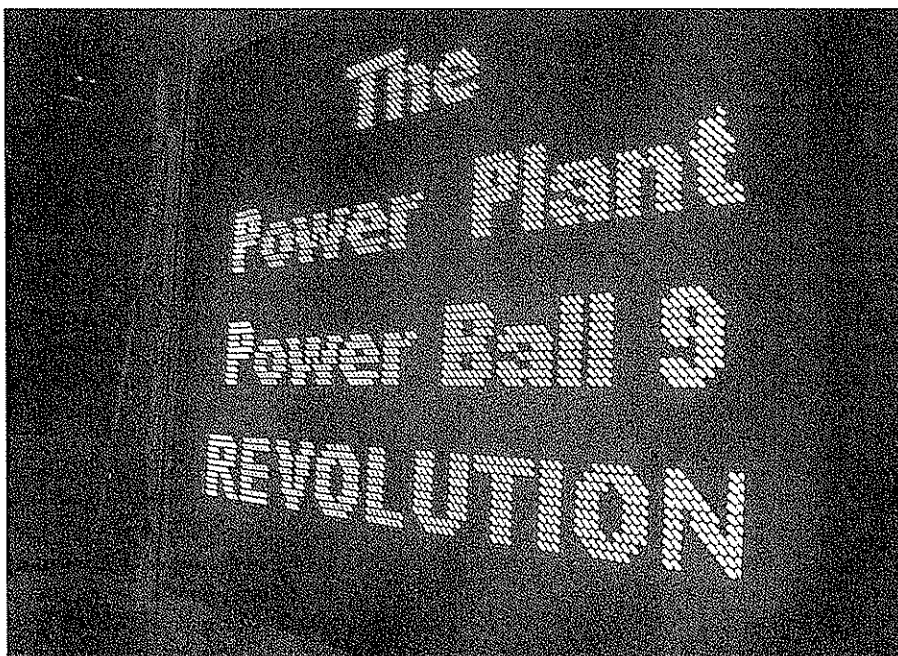
To seek the perspective of a private donor, I met Phillip Lind an hour before Scott McFarland’s opening at the Monte Clark gallery in September. The Rogers Communications vice chairman is also a trustee at the AGO and honorary director at the Power Plant. “I hear from a friend who’s heading the McGill University campaign that corporate donations are just a small fraction in comparison to the amounts coming from personal donations,” he says. “It is possible that this is a growing trend in art philanthropy. Corporations’ motives are clear in investments of this sort. When you visit any of our Rogers-sponsored art events, you could easily argue that our main reason for participation is logo visibility.”

Yet Lind speaks with great enthusiasm about the artists who first opened the world of contemporary art to him—the Vancouver School of conceptual photography, Jeff Wall, Gordon A. Smith, Scott McFarland, this year’s Sobey Award-winner Tim Lee and Toronto’s Michael Snow—while betraying not a trace of sentimentality about Toronto’s present visual arts scene. Are a few spectacular building renovations enough to proclaim the city’s cultural renaissance? “We should be aware that we can’t measure up to a number of other cities at the moment,” he says, be-

fore elaborating on the need for a more serious and multifaceted commitment to Toronto’s arts. “Berlin is now where it’s at in terms of contemporary art—and Germany has been keeping its top position on the global art map for 20 years now. London also had a perfect storm recently: the renovation of Tate Modern followed by the emergence of many other smaller galleries, the growing role of private collectors like Saatchi and the Frieze Art Fair have all helped make London an art centre of global importance.”

Toronto has grown too, he agrees, and on his global list of must-visit galleries the city is well represented. But after acknowledging the growth of the cultural sector, and the growth of its created and received revenue, two essential questions remain. The first is, has this increased sector revenue meant increased individual artists’ revenue and led to a better standard of living for artists? TPW’s Gary Hall is adamant that it hasn’t. “None of this SuperBuild, condos growing everywhere, ‘creative industry’ talk is trickling down much wealth to individual artists,” he says. Demetra Christakos, OAAAG executive director, concurs: “Artist revenue did not grow as quickly in the last years. However, there’s never been a better time to be an artist in Ontario—and I’ve seen different times. When we were growing up in Northern Ontario, nobody would tell us that anything’s possible, and we truly didn’t believe it. We do everything we can today to instil a sense of

PHOTO: JODY GLASER



possibility in emerging artists, and rightly so. What I'm also noticing with younger artists is that they are willing to combine and experiment in their vocation, try freelance design, try out 'neighbouring' disciplines, and don't tend to possess an idea that they always have to choose between a certain idea of artistic purity and everything else."

The second remaining, and equally important, question is, are burgeoning culture industries and "art hubs" creating art that is important, that turns on, engages, gets talked about, incites passions—and occasionally gets sponsors into a huff? We can never know anything about Toronto's visual arts without a lively critical culture around Toronto's visual art. Where do we get our information about reviews of art being produced by our contemporaries? When was the last time you rushed to read anybody's opinion about an opening or a visiting exhibit? There can be no art powerhouses without vigorous writing about art. ♦

• Lydia Perović has written for n + 1, OpenDemocracy.org, Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies, Critical Sense, Books in Canada, Xtra!, National Post, Globe and Mail, journal Social Semiotics and InterGovWorld.com.

ENTHUSIASM *at the* LIMIT

An event that deploys contemporary art and populism simultaneously, Nuit Blanche risks failure by either standard.

Nicholas Brown on Jon Sasaki and Nuit Blanche

*F*or I Promise It Will Always Be This Way a few dozen costumed team mascots will take the field at Lamport Stadium and work to whip the crowd into a fervent frenzy. They will pull out all the stops with their mascot shenanigans, while stadium rock plays over the loudspeakers. However, as the night progresses and fatigue sets in, the mascots will require cigarettes, naps, snacks and bathroom breaks. As plush heads are set aside, illusions will be broken, the enthusiasm will dwindle, and the music will be slowed down accordingly to mirror their lethargy. The true subjects of this celebration will be futility and pathos.¹

1. Jon Sasaki's
Nuit Blanche
Press release,
2008.

It's a bit ungenerous to judge an artist's work by the promises made in his press release, but when Toronto's annual Nuit Blanche first releases details about the event it's hard not to let expectation creep to the forefront. The one-night presentation of art puts Toronto's art community in the service of crowds numbering up to a million. Saddled with the pressure to live up to the hype, Nuit Blanche has become a yearly source of performance anxiety.

When Jon Sasaki proposed to fill Lamport Stadium with mascots eager to perform for 12 uninterrupted hours, hype itself became the subject of the work. Emptying the field of athletes, Sasaki brought the mascots—hype-men and women who are there typically to rally support for a team—

to centre stage. Naturally, people began to speculate about the outcome. Would the performers hold up throughout the night? Would Sasaki garner enough of an audience to generate the energy of a mainstream sports spectacle, or would the event collapse under the weight of sweat and exhaustion? And was that the point?

I also made predictions, having contacted Sasaki early on to discuss I Promise It Will Always Be This Way (2008) when it was still a work-in-progress. Crammed into his studio amidst dozens of outdated uniforms (my favourite among them being Toronto's own retired city mascot, replete with drooping CN Tower cap and a chest-mounted clock set to the year 2000), I spoke with the artist about the likely outcomes of his project. We agreed that exhaustion was a salient topic for an all-night party, and that a field dominated by slumped, unconscious lions and sharks with human heads exposed for ventilation would offer a beautiful critique of the Nuit Blanche phenomenon.

Fast-forward to 5am, Sunday, October 5th: jock jams are blaring and mascots are dancing, still stirring the substantial crowd into a frenzy. Audiences are picking their favourites, motivating individual mascots to continue despite waning energy and possible heat exhaustion. Reconsidering prior conversations and Sasaki's press release, our predictions suddenly feel presumptuous, our expectations cynical. Did we really *want* it to end in a whimper?

Not necessarily, but a bit of background