

# Access Gallery: the 'perpetual teenager' gallery looks back at its past



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Access Gallery (<http://accessgallery.ca/>)'s latest publication was, much to my surprise, an enjoyable read. When I started reading it I was genuinely worried I'd have to deal with the intimidating prose of academic art writing in a book about a gallery dedicated to emerging artists and experimental practices.

Except for a few passages, the writing is smart, clear and often personal in a way that makes the gallery's past accessible to anyone with a general interest in art. The numerous anecdotes and stories were so good they made an outsider like me feel like I missed some memorable exhibitions – and parties! – since the gallery was founded in 1992. It also has a quirky and revealing mix of images of people, spaces and exhibitions.

It's called Unsuitable as an Institution (<http://bit.ly/1A726k5>): the tenacity of access gallery. The book isn't "a history" or even "the history." It's more like a collection of memories, voices and "misrememberings," as Kimberly Phillips (<http://www.ecuad.ca/people/profile/14292>), the gallery's director/curator, writes in the Foreward.

"I wanted to coax into being a series of recollections about the organization and observe the pattern that might become recognizable as a result," she writes.



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The text is written by 29 exhibiting artists, writers, directors and supporters chosen by Phillips. They were asked to reflect on an “exhibition, event or occurrence that was definitive of their investment in the centre.” Their recollections are arranged chronologically by year. The gallery’s exhibition for each year are also listed.

I didn’t realize the kind of reputation Access has among the city’s network of artist-run galleries. Phillips describes it as an image of the “perpetual teenager”: “collaborative, experimental, contradictory and wry .”

Unsuitable as an Institution is unusual in that it isn’t being published because of a major anniversary or milestone. It comes after 23 years of operation because a similar book was intended to be published on the anniversary of the gallery’s 20<sup>th</sup> year in 2012. When Phillips took over the gallery last May, she decided to revive the project as a way to combat the built-in marginality of artist-run galleries.

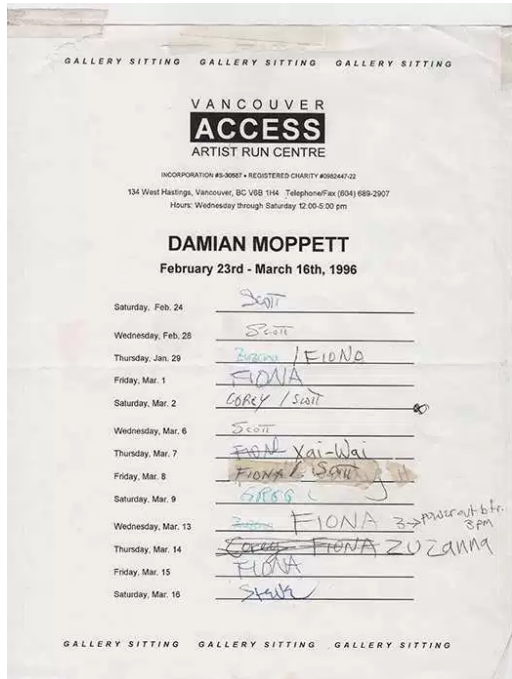
The publication has an unusual title. Phillips based it on a description of art spaces by Émile Benveniste, a French structural linguist and semiotician. For him, a gallery should never become an institution where the meaning of art is reduced to a convention. From his point of view, being “unsuitable as an institution” is exactly what a gallery should aim to become. It’s a sign of praise.

What kind of pattern emerges from Unsuitable as an Institution?

One of the patterns is how artists managed to find ways to exhibit art on a regular basis with little or no money. Scott McBride (<http://www.kpu.ca/scott-mcbride-bio>), the gallery’s first director and founding member, illustrated that by recounting how he and Owen Sopotiuik and Dave Husby early one Sunday morning got up and performed one of their first subversive acts: they claimed about eight metres (25 feet) of extra studio space in a common hallway by building a replica door, mail slot, mouldings and trim. They also drove around to retail stores to get wooden pallets to use the wood for framing and ‘borrowing’ scaffolding after midnight from construction sites. Amazingly, the artists at Access were able to build its first three gallery spaces without any operational funding.

“Everything in Vancouver that mattered happened because artists got this kind of busy,” writes artist Kelly Wood (<http://bit.ly/1AjaQBU>) about a Damian Moppett (<http://bit.ly/1uPG1jt>) exhibition in 1996. “They got things up and

going independent of institutional support or any other kind of commerce or patronage. It's the only way to go if you ask me."



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Because the gallery ran on a shoestring budget, generating cash to stay alive became critical. How do you cover the rent for a non-commercial art space in downtown Vancouver? Well, one way is to hold great parties and charge people for booze.

As Nadine Nickull recalled, the gallery's second space at 134 West Hastings was ideal because it had a closet area with a half-door that "created a natural funnel for people entering and existing the space." It made the gallery ideal for socializing. Access became known as the 'fun' gallery.

Nickull described a memorable part of the Access process in choosing artists to exhibit: a crowd of several board members and volunteers would visit an artist's studio. It became, according to Nickull, "a signature experience for many of the artists who eventually exhibited at Access: from meditative to boisterous, unnerving to uplifting, each visit was unique and special." She describes the visit as helping to break down the isolation artists can often experience working alone in their studio.

It strikes me that one of the vital roles of artist-run galleries such as Access do is create a network of friends and colleagues in a city that can be indifferent to art. They're critical parts of the ecology of art in Vancouver.

Access has had some memorable moments, events and exhibitions over the years. One of its most highly visible works was a haunting text piece by Raymond Boisjoly (<http://www.ecuad.ca/people/profile/172400>). “All that Was, Will Always Have Been, Somehow Never Again” went up in front of the gallery in 2010 when it was located was on West Hastings. I remember seeing it for many years – maybe even after the gallery moved to its new location at 222 East Georgia at Main.

Others include Kristin Schoppi’s vegetable wallpaper; the Ladies Afternoon Art Society which painted the tile floor with nail polish and covered the furniture in pink fabric and lace; the Housing Project exhibition by Kathy Tycholis which brought neighbors and passersby into the gallery to talk about housing, home decorating and politics; the exchange between Jeffrey Boone and Rebecca Belmore (<http://www.rebeccabelmore.com/home.html>) over, among other things, how she removed her bra without taking off her T-shirt for a fundraiser; and the work by Rosa Maria Robles that involved the artist smearing her blood on Mexican blankets of the type used to wrap bodies killed in Mexico’s drug war which people at the opening of the group show Broken Borders walked on and stained the gallery’s floor.



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I like how [Shaun Dacey \(http://bit.ly/1xqrKRk\)](http://bit.ly/1xqrKRk), curator of the Broken Borders exhibition and director/curator of Access before Phillips, described the gallery as existing in a kind of subterranean space. He said Access is “like a mycelia under the surface of the Vancouver art world . . .”

Sadly, the pages of my copy have broken away from the spine. It’s in the process of being transformed from a bound book to a collection of single pages. It’s now held together with a big paper clip.

[Unsuitable as an Institution \(http://bit.ly/1A726k5\)](http://bit.ly/1A726k5): the tenacity of access gallery, 1992-2014 is published by [Access Gallery \(Access%20Gallery\)](#). It sells for \$20.

\*Images from top to bottom courtesy of Access Gallery: Raymond Boisjoly All That Was, Will Always Have Been, Somehow Never Again, Access Public Art Project; Norma group photograph taken at a Sears’ Portrait Studio for Clubhouse; volunteer sign-up sheet to sit in the gallery for the Damian Moppett exhibition; and the famous half-door bar that made the gallery at 134 West Hastings ideal for socializing.