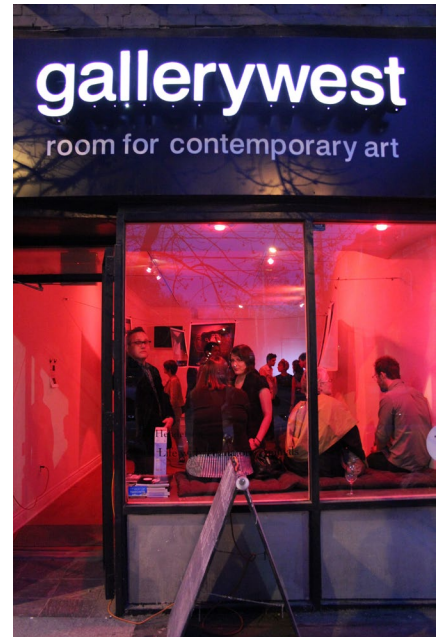


POST MORTEM

An interview with Evan Tyler by Roy Mitchell

When I turned off the lights one last time and closed the door to **gallerywest**, a contemporary art space where I was the gallerist for four years, there was silence. After a time, I began to reflect on the experience and some of the individuals who made the experience of running an art gallery so energetic and worthwhile for me. One of those individuals was Roy Mitchell, artist, activist and public persona. Roy and I collaborated a couple of times in the **gallerywest** space, once for his then-radio show called “Roy Nation” which was broadcast live from the venue, and another time for “Nuit Rose”, where Roy and his collaborator, Ken Fraser, spun a “wheel of life topics” and provided advice to an audience on said topics from “two older gay men”.

Roy was a regular **gallerywest** community member, and his efforts and support, both artistic and political, are an inspiration to me. In 2010, as a fresh prairie transplant to Toronto, Roy was one of the first individuals to welcome me and made me feel part of the artistic community. This combined with Roy’s excellent interviewing skills and lovely personality, prompted me to ask him to interview me on the topic of closing **gallerywest**. This interview brings closure to an important chapter in my life, and also allows Roy and me to reflect on something that has meant a great deal to both of us: Toronto and its ever-changing landscape.



August, 2014

Before we talk about the end of gallerywest as we know it, let’s talk about the beginnings. What brought you to Toronto from Regina? Did you come here intentionally to set up a gallery?

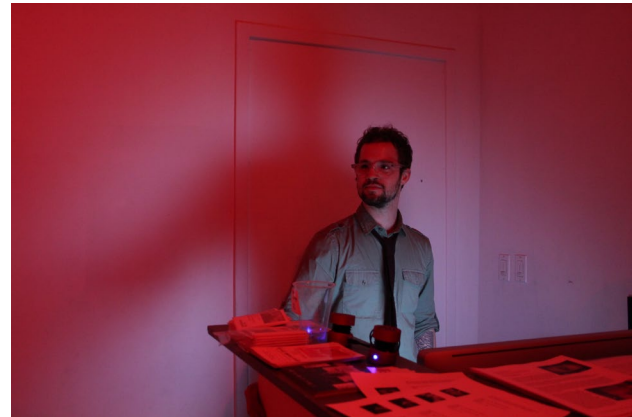
When I made the decision to move to Toronto to start a contemporary art gallery, it was a time in my life when I was yearning for a change. I had been visiting Toronto frequently and I was doing some odd jobs and contract work for organizations such as Mammalian Diving Reflex, and with whom I have maintained a working relationship. I became more connected to Toronto with each visit – a city that I once swore I would never move to because of an unpleasant visit in 2005 where there was a garbage strike, transit strike and a terrorist threat all in the same week. I think I just caught Toronto at a bad time.

The genesis of **gallerywest** began with the closure of galleryDK, an artist co-operative photography space in Parkdale where I had shown my work in 2009. When the collective of artists who ran the gallery approached me to say they were closing the space and the lease was up for grabs, I took this as a sign for me to move to Toronto. I guess even on a subconscious level, I had always been

programming an art gallery in my head, so it was exciting to make that materialize. Also, I had been watching a lot of “Mary Tyler Moore” sitcoms around that time, and perhaps I was channeling some of Mary’s “free spirit” in regards to transplanting oneself in an unfamiliar urban setting.

It seems to me that you had a pretty clear mandate when you started the gallery... Saskatchewan artists, contemporary work, emerging artists, video, photography, sculpture. What was your background in art prior to the gallery?

My background is grounded in art-making and facilitating exhibitions in Regina art galleries and spaces. I grew up in Regina, SK where I completed my BFA at the University of Regina, majoring in Intermedia. I was particularly influenced by my Intermedia teacher, Lee Henderson, with whom I have maintained a connection, and he has been part of **gallerywest** as an exhibiting artist, writer and community member. Years ago it was his class that provided an environment where I discovered making art was very important to me, and that it could be done in many mediums via video, performance and installation.



I had worked in galleries and museums for most of my young adult life. In Regina, I was employed as a Facilitator and Workshop Assistant at the MacKenzie Art Gallery and the Dunlop Art Gallery. I had a passion for facilitating and talking about art to people, as well as engaging them in the work and making the experience of viewing art accessible and enjoyable.

How has Toronto in general and gallerywest’s Queen Street location specifically changed since you started this adventure?

The gallery has had two locations: 1332 Queen Street West (formerly galleryDK), and the most recent location at 1172 Queen Street West, in close proximity to each other in the heart of Parkdale. Since 2010, the neighbourhood has drastically changed. I recall when I first took up residence, I had to walk all the way up to Ossington to find a decent cup of coffee. Parkdale was known for being populated by artists but subsequently the upscale business and condo machine was tagging close behind. As a result the rents skyrocketed, and became too expensive for a privately-owned, contemporary art project space to survive.

Many people may no longer be able to afford to live in Parkdale, but there are now lots of good coffee shops, restaurants and places like **gallerywest’s** neighbor, BOLT featuring health juices, in the Queen West gallery district now. The whole area has been more consumer and tourist friendly.

As far as the people of Toronto, they have been consistently awesome and supportive of my art venture and general presence in the city. In my fifth year of living here, I still need to ask directions now and again, and people are very helpful, which brings to mind a great Toronto “croon” song that was the CTV sign-on and sign-off broadcast a few years back. I like to romanticize that image of Toronto as “The People City”.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpJXAavGpi4>

You curated work from artists with a range of practices and identities. You have a solid relationship with LGBTQ artists. I myself have benefited from the generosity of you and gallerywest. What connects you to LGBTQ artists and their practices?

I would like to respond to this question with a quick story. Before I moved to Toronto, I attended and supported the Regina Queer Cinema Festival held in 2010. The festival is the brainchild of Artistic Director, Gary Varro, and showcases a wide selection of queer art and film. The exhibiting artist that really caught my attention during that festival was 2Fik – a Montreal-based artist working in performance and photography. His images were political, queer and humorous, and his demeanor was fierce and professional, with a current of love and respect flowing through the conversations we had together. It was 2Fik's provocative and expressive personality that drew me to him and his work blew me away! I told him about my plan to start an art gallery in Toronto, and we agreed that he would be the inaugural artist to exhibit in the space located at 1332 Queen Street West.

I chose 2Fik for the first show, and I had him back again in May, 2012 for the CONTACT Photography Festival. Today 2Fik is being fabulous and fierce, making art, exhibiting solo shows in New York City and Europe. We still stay in contact. I love that man.

I like to tell that story because in retrospect, this important Canadian-based queer artist set the tone for what the gallery was about, and what we intended to do. It also prompted me to seek out and include a number of other great queer artists to be part of the **gallerywest** family. Much like my mandate to include western prairie artists, a complementary mandate emerged which was to connect to the queer arts community. Neither mandates were absolute or all-encompassing; **gallerywest** developed from the inclusion of artistic minorities.

Since 2010, I have worked with several queer artists from the prairies and beyond, and to note a few: Jamie Cooper, Randal Fedji, Steve Reinke, Turner Prize*, Jonathan Edward Mayhew, and Gary Varro.

gallerywest has been in two locations – close to each other on Queen West. How easy was it to find your space and why did you choose those two spaces?

The original space was a re-imagining process. Once the gallery personality was established, things got very exciting. Then one day in September, 2011, my landlord gave me notice that I had three months to vacate the space because he wanted to turn it into a real estate office. (It now exists and I go there from time to time, and reminisce about what was...)

I went through about a week of depression, and then anxiety about losing the space. As I walked down Queen Street, I happened to spot a sign on a storefront at 1172 Queen St. West advertising the space for rental. I called the number and made an appointment, and after some negotiation, **gallerywest** was reborn. The trickiest thing was trying to appear seamless in the move. I didn't miss a beat with the programming – the last show in the original space ended in November, and the inaugural show for the new space opened in December. The move was tough, but definitely character-building. The new space attracted more general public and it lent itself to more elaborate exhibitions.

And what connections do you see between that first show with 2Fik and your last one with Lee Henderson?

Wow. Yeah. Those two are definitely different shows. As I said earlier Lee's Intermedia class was one of the foundations for the career path I chose – artist/curator/shit disturber.

Lee is another artist who has exhibited his work at **gallerywest** twice. Similarly to 2Fik, he also had a show in the CONTACT Photography Festival in 2011 as a “Featured Exhibition”. But trying to compare the art of 2Fik and Lee, I would have to say that both are provocative and interesting in their different ways. I will say this: that **gallerywest** benefited from being the kind of gallery where you never knew what was coming next until about two weeks before the opening, and it was never at all like the last thing that was shown. It is the great divide between types of art practice that I believe kept people coming back.



2Fik's inaugural show was a grand dramatic event, a fanfare to the opening of a new gallery.

Lee often works with ideas of death, mortality and impermanence – with subtle humor. What better way to close **gallerywest** with such concepts.

If there has been something that has guided you in your curation and work with the gallery, what would it be?

There have been “some things” and “some ones”.

Some things: Never appear as if the gallery resembled an academic, sterile art club. **gallerywest** was created to serve the general public, and to provide provocative art in all mediums that explores topics with no allegiance to any socio/political mandate.

Although I have had some form of curatorial influence on all of the exhibitions at **gallerywest**, there were a few that I deliberately mentioned “Curated by Evan Tyler”. These exhibitions were concept shows where I worked with various artists to produce new works around an idea that I had. I would never write a didactic text explaining exactly what you are seeing and what is intended in a literal sense. Rather, I would write a creative text and allow that to be the “explanation” of the show. That is the kind of curatorial endeavour I always yearned for and so that is what I did.

Some ones: I have learned many lessons from my wife, Alice Dixon, who has a rigorously professional mind that counters my “anything goes – free spirited attitude”. I have grown and matured with the influences of artists and friends like Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, who have been a solid voice to me and they always seem to have something of substance to bring to the conversation. And I totally love their art. I would also have to say that I have consulted on various issues with **gallerywest** with my peers and others from whom I can learn from.

What are your hopes and fears for art in Toronto over the next years?

My ongoing fear and quasi-fascination with contemporary art in Toronto and beyond, is the sharp intellectual component of the culture. I have examined the culture of “art-speak”, “grant culture” and the academic shadows. I am not saying that all of that stuff is all bad – I rather like some of the order of institutions, but not so much the pretentiousness. I kind of pride myself on being a big disconnected from those intentions.

For Toronto specifically, I think we could place less emphasis on “young emerging artists” and begin appreciating “old-schoolers” who have been paying their dues and deserve merit for that. Young people will always be ready, arrived and excited to make art and to take risks. We do not need to focus on them entirely. The grants, workshops and opportunities are set up to serve young people, and often at times, young people fit a certain socio-political mandate of whatever is the governing power. I do not completely agree with the model of doing things, so why not challenge it? I like to believe that **gallerywest** made a solid effort to challenge the popular tropes and trends in contemporary art culture.

And now, let's talk about endings – why have you decided to close the gallery?

I knew a while ago that it was a choice I would have to make. The operating costs had been going up and my time to focus on art, music and curation had gone down. This year I made the decision with an increase in rent for the gallery. I found some perspective that there were some great exhibitions behind me and connections and close friendships I made during the history of **gallerywest**, so a fond farewell and closing down the gallery was due. I don't feel that if I kept it going that it would slow down in momentum – perhaps it would have become a vanity project. I think I learned all that I could from the experience and now it is time to apply my energies elsewhere.

On a separate note, **gallerywest** was a space that indulged in the Toronto nightlife culture. Art openings would run until 2 – 3 in the morning at times. Eventually that kind of lifestyle takes a toll on oneself, and as a single workhorse behind all the programming, administration and hosting, I knew it wasn't a sustainable way of going about things in the long term. Closing the gallery for me was a ticket to a new lifestyle, one that isn't about having enough refreshments at the opening, or tending to the village drunk who decides to make a scene at midnight because we ran out of beer. Being a socialite isn't really my bag either, and running an art gallery forces one into a public presence so I was happy to shed that and reboot.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking of opening a gallery in 2014?

My advice would be to go into such an endeavour with an open mind and an open heart. Also you should contact me and poach all of the great artists whom I have exhibited at **gallerywest**, because I only worked with the best. Make sure you are present at your openings and make people feel welcome and engage them in the art work – that's a most important thing.

And what will you do now with no gallerywest?

It's a new beginning. I won't have 1172 Queen Street West anymore, but **gallerywest** will always be my word(s).

And I may once again revive it, but for now, I am going to concentrate on art-making and my rap career. I have been working on a rap/dance album for the last year and I am almost ready to re-enter the self-promoted music culture. After a decade of writing and recording strange and experimental music, I find that I still enjoy writing lyrics, performing and recording. For me, rap music has always been a place of freedom and the endless possibilities of lyrical quests that happen on paper and subsequently find their way into the recording studio. It takes me to a place that feels right. That is why I continue to want to do it. Things that are easily defined through intellectual justification and analytical critique, only takes me so far. I seem to have this one thing in my life that exists outside of those parameters, and it is important for me to continue to explore and feed that expression. It's funny that hip hop music – the music I enjoy most – projects from a culture that I can barely take seriously. I feel the music I make will shake things up a little bit, not dissimilar to what **gallerywest** stood for in the Toronto art scene. I also plan to enter a graduate program in Fine Arts. My initial art school experience was fantastic and I look forward to furthering my visual practice here in Toronto.