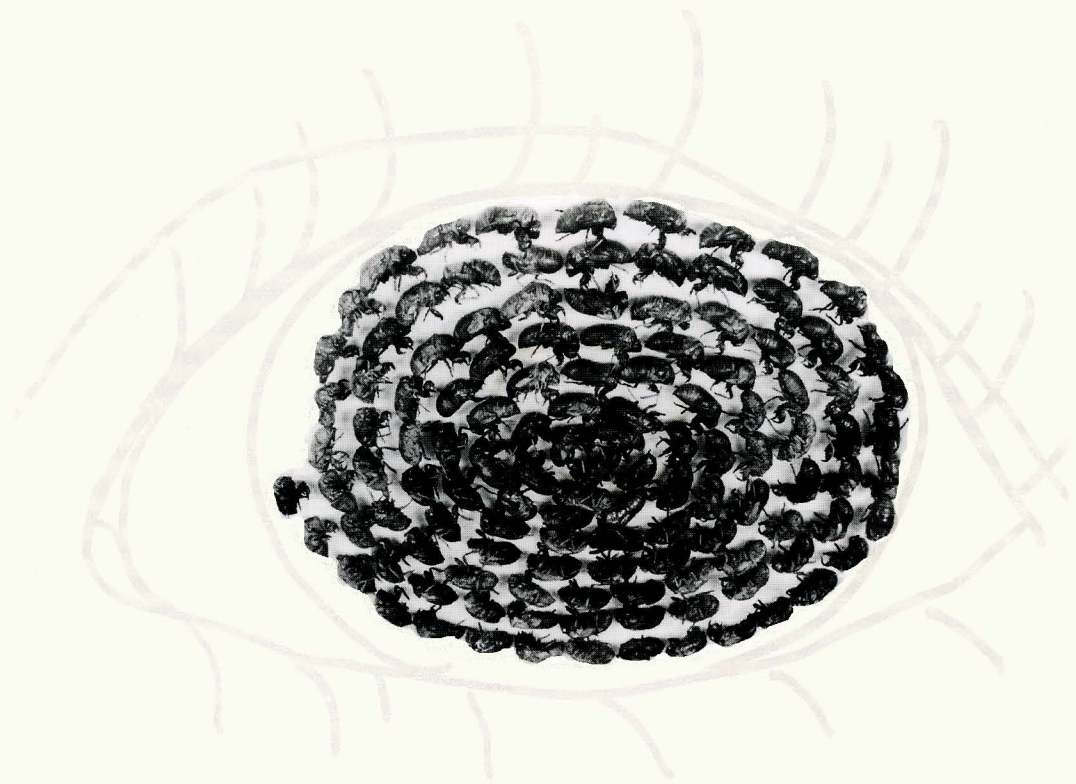
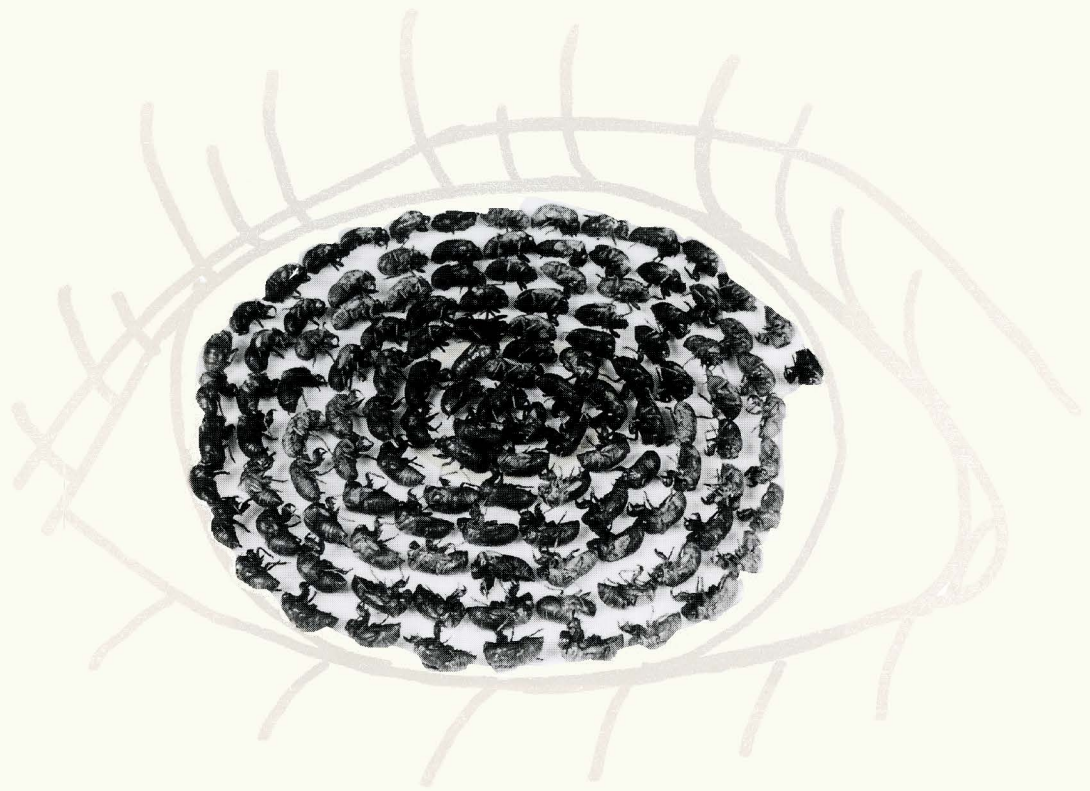


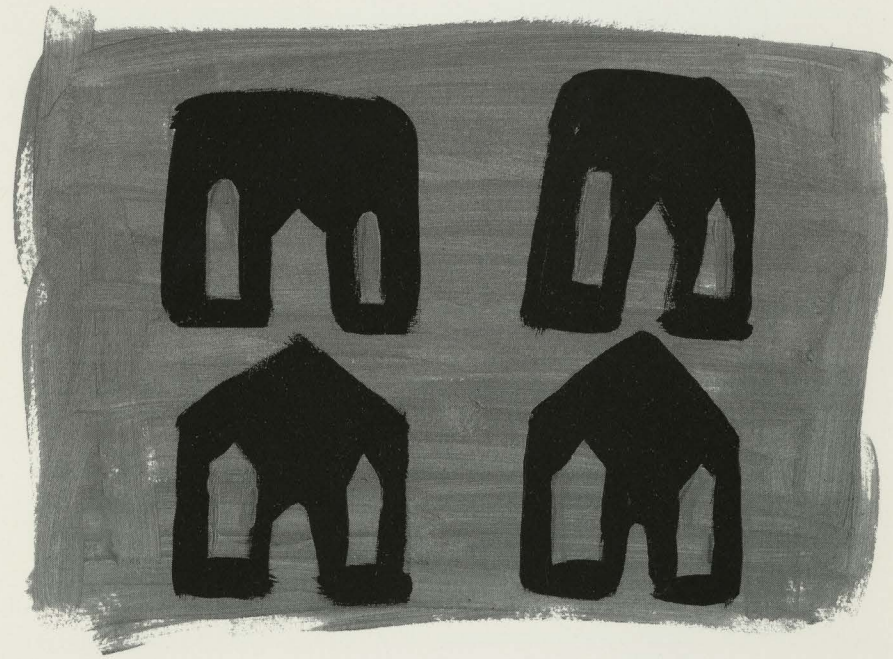
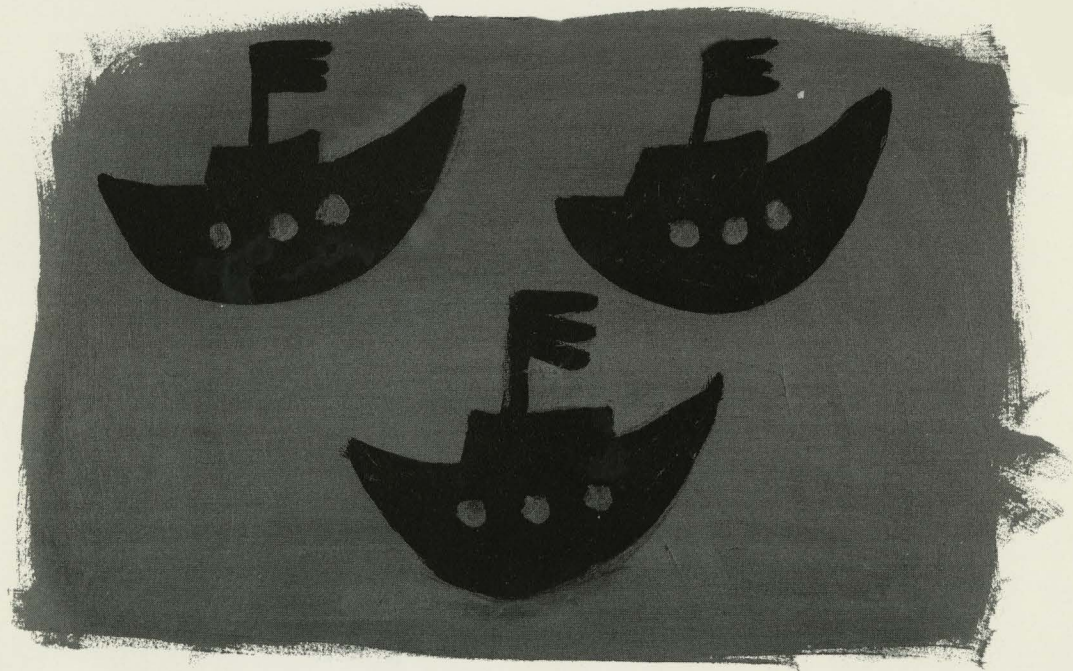




Images derived from medieval Japanese Buddhist Temple scroll paintings







Blanket is a distinctive collective in Toronto's complex contemporary art community and yet it shares many of the characteristics of numerous maverick collectives that came together in the 80's and 90's.

All through this century, collective action by artists has been essential in terms of bringing new art to the Canadian public. We can go as far back as the formation of the Group of Seven in 1920, to trace this movement through to the publishing of *Refus Global* in Montreal in 1948, and chart it to such varied activities as the exhibitions of the Painters 11 in Toronto in the 50's or the multi-media events of the Intermedia group in Vancouver beginning in 1966.

In the sixties the forerunners of collective artist-run galleries evolved. The first two were established in the small city of London Ontario. The Region Gallery opened in 1962, requesting Canada Council funding soon after it began. 20/20, the real prototype of the artist-run centre, was founded in London in 1966. It's Board of Directors was made up of artists and established the practice of paying artist's fees. The early seventies saw the founding of many of the nation's artist-run centres that still exist: A Space, Forest City, Plug-In, Optica, etc.

By 1980 all the artist-run centres that currently make up the scene in Toronto were in existence, albeit in completely different locations. It had become public knowledge that a new art community had burgeoned along Queen Street West and bars and restaurants catering to this new community opened accordingly. Artists from all over Canada were flocking to Toronto during this period and their population increased dramatically. It became difficult for the established alternate galleries to represent all of these new artists. They were particularly resistant where dissident sensibilities were encroaching on their predominantly formalist and structuralist aesthetics.

The recession of the early eighties produced the first prototypes of the maverick collectives of the fin de siècle. By this time many young artists had become frustrated with the increasing bureaucratization of the artists-run spaces. Identifying this phenomenon as part of the accountability required to get core-funding from the arts councils, they began to take polemical positions against such funding, either advocating small project funding or eschewing funding altogether. In the changed political

and economic environment of the early eighties, it became very apparent that we would not be seeing many new government funded spaces to accommodate succeeding generations of artists.

The first collectives that reflected this significant cultural rupture were **ChromaZone** (1981) and **Eye Review** (1982). It is worth noting that both began by actually running spaces. However, neither group felt it was necessary to locate in the requisite loft warehouse space that had become the North American cliché for a serious gallery. That was simply beyond the budget of these self-funded collectives and too reflective of a type of art world-imposed homogeneity from which they were trying to disassociate themselves.

ChromaZone located itself in a small apartment above a fabric store on Spadina and Eye Review was founded in a tiny storefront on the eastern edge of the Junction. Both collectives immediately began working on projects that took place in venues outside of their galleries, neither group feeling tethered to their modest spaces. ChromaZone mounted *Jaywalking at the Intersection of Fashion and Art* in December of 1981 and the mammoth exhibition, *Chromaliving*. Similar to

ChromaZone, Eye Revue is most often remembered for its satellite activities which included the *Eyedentity* series at the Orbit Art Room and the display window exhibitions at Union Station. By taking a stand against accepting government funding, ChromaZone hoped to become more of an entrepreneurial endeavor, even while recognizing that this position would most likely create a short life span for the collective. After much heated debate, this approach was softened to allow for project funding. The group closed its space on Spadina in the summer of 1983 and did four subsequent projects until 1985. Eye Revue was funded for only the last year of it's four years of existence.

Also of note was the **Women's Cultural Building** a feminist collective that crystallized feminist activity in Toronto with in a series of projects that included a storefront installation festival, readings and major group shows. This collective evolved into the **Women's Art Resource Centre** in the latter half of the decade.

There was lull in the downtown art scene of the mid-eighties but three very different collectives were formed to fill the void that

was created by the collapse of a fairly cohesive Queen Street art community. In 1984, **UMAS** (United Media Artists) was founded “to facilitate production, research and dissemination of cultural activity in the form of video, performance, film, print and related media.” Their best-known projects have been the *Emperor’s New Clothes* (one that introduced artists whose production was in media other than video to the medium) and *Diderot* (a video magazine that included an eclectic mix of video artists). In 1984 **Republic** formed. Their first exhibition in 1985, *The Power of the Cross*, was a template of what was to come: group shows with weighty themes, nomadically moving from space to space, involving a mixture of high-profile and emerging artists. They produced a half-dozen shows before entropy took its toll. **Public Access** was formed as a project-oriented collective in 1985, interested in finding alternative ways to bring visual and textual work into the public sphere. Besides their publication, *Public*, their best known projects have been *Some Uncertain Signs*, a series of artists’ message on the electronic pixel board on Yonge street and *The Lunatic of One Idea*, a series of artist’ projects on a gigantic video

walls at Square One Mall in Mississauga.

In the latter part of the 80’s one of the new maverick collectives did run its own space. Calling themselves the **Purple Institute**, they occupied the entire floor of a Style Moderne warehouse in Parkdale, mixing living accommodations and exhibition space. The Purple Institute mounted a series of funky, anarchistic exhibitions with a range of media, and made the space available to other collectives.

Since 1988 a deluge of collectives have swept through the Toronto art scene with artists banding together to rent a variety of temporary spaces for exhibitions. A new collective rises like a phoenix every year to mount the gigantic **RoundUp** exhibition in which artists open their studios to the public. After the second year in 1989, collectives (Sea Monkeys, Blanket to name a few) began joining together to rent exhibition space in order to show as a group component of *RoundUp*. A more seasoned collective that was largely culled from the defunct Ydessa Gallery came together and did two shows under the satirical, fictitious moniker of the **Grace Hopper Gallery**. In 1989 a younger group, **Spontaneous Combustion**

mounted a large show with an emphasis on installation, holography and kinetic sculpture at the giant showroom that Massey Ferguson once occupied on King Street West. They are planning a new Toronto show in the fall of this year and an exhibition in London U.K. in February of 1994.

The 90’s have seen a continuing of these strategies with form and function tailored to the needs of each group. **Nether Mind**, a collective largely working in sculpture with a strong surrealist roots and an interest in using the eccentricities of found sites to the best installational advantage, made their debut in the summer of 1991. Installing in a rough-hewn cellar of an old King Street commercial building they invited a few established artists with whom they felt an affinity, in order to contextualize their work within the larger Toronto art scene. The next year they mounted a show in a three story 30’s warehouse in East downtown Toronto.

Place and Show worked with the residents of an innovative shelter for the homeless in Toronto’s East End to create a challenging site specific installation in 1991. **Clamorous Intentions** is a trio that banded together to do

curatorial projects related to the AIDS crisis and also issues around gender and sexual orientation. As yet they have produced three projects: *Electric Blanket*, *Re:Dressing the Body* and *The Memorial Project*. In their debut outing **Localmotive** dotted the main commercial street of the Junction with art pieces geared to their environment: storefronts, hoardings, shopping carts and park sidewalks became sites for innovative work. Late in the fall of ‘92, **Diverse City**, a large group of artists with eclectic aesthetics and media (drawing, sculpture, painting, installation) filled the now familiar (Grace Hopper, Aurathon) building in the Dupont and Lansdowne corridor. Other collectives from this period included **A Bunch of Feminists**, **LivingRoom**, **Homogenius**, **Bureau** and **Shake Well**.

How does the **Blanket** collective fit into this hive of activity? One of the more casual groups, Blanket has produced many freewheeling projects since its inception in 1987. The members of Blanket reacted to the increasing bureaucracy of the artist-run centres not as outsiders but as insiders; all of them had worked as an employee of an artist-run centre. This gave them a great incentive to approach

their projects with light-heartedness and a minimum of paperwork and organizational meetings. Blanket's irreverence was epitomized by the Workscene Gallery exhibition, *Actual Photographs of U.F.O.'s*, mounted in 1990. In this show the member of the collective reacted to the tabloid media phenomena of aliens and flying saucers, underlining our curious will toward transcendence in a largely secular society. *Old*, the inaugural show at A.R.C. in 1987, laid the pattern out for many of the succeeding shows. An ambiguous title would give the collective members maximum freedom in creating their contributing pieces and yet provide a loose curatorial direction. Such a strategy was repeated in Blankets in 1987 (with an Ossington Street studio as a venue) and *Night* in 1989 at the Purple Institute. Blanket's gentle tweaking of the serious intentions and rules of the established art world was reflected in the 1989 *Blanket on Tour* project and their multiples exhibition, *Down and Dirty* in 1991. *Blanket on Tour* was a gridded poster with a list of cities' names. The shows were fictional giving lie to the ego-inflated careerism of artists in the eighties. *Down and Dirty* totally muddied the generally accepted commercial art world

when most of the artists produced a multiplicity one-of-a-kind pieces. Typical of Blanket, these were not self-righteous attacks, they were good-natured ribbings. Blanket seems to take the position that play and permission are the very core of creative endeavors, eschewing pompousness while recognizing the importance of a critical practice.

No particular medium is privileged in this collective and the shows feature photography, installation, painting, sculpture, video and laser reproductions. The casual attitude has allowed the members to grow and develop as artists without the debilitating self-consciousness that is prevalent among so many artists today. If Blanket is more unpredictable than many of the maverick collectives have emerged in the last decade, this unpredictability is worth nurturing in a time of over-determined artistic practices... and that's a BLANKET statement!

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