HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Toronto's art collectives are taking over the city's underground with an aggressive do-it-yourself attitude.

CATHARINE OSBORNE goes house hunting with such 'homeless' groups as Dead Industry, MUD and The House Project.

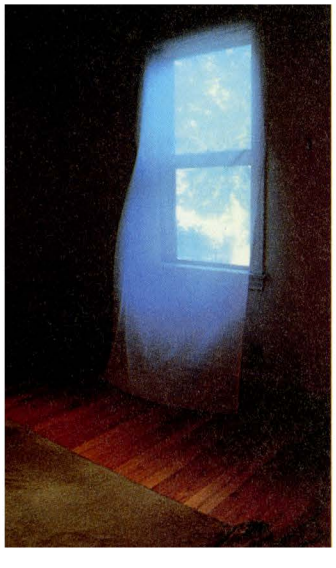
Prague might seem a long way from Toronto, but for one Canadian art collective, finding a space in an ancient European city is as easy – or difficult – as having an exhibition in their home town.

Artist Nadine Norman and independent curator and writer Sylvie Fortin seized the opportunity to show at Prague's alternative art space Galerii Mladch, rounding up like-minded artists for a recent short-term residency and exhibition. Organizing the show without financial backing was an achievement that demonstrates how sophisticated artists' collectives have become over the past five years. Toronto's art culture, in fact, did not wither into oblivion while the market crumbled underfoot. Instead, it transformed into an energetic and complex web of collective activity, with exhibitions turning up in warehouses, storefronts, vacated houses, office towers and other remnants of a weakened real-estate market.

Artists born post-1960 cynically and correctly assume that their chances of gallery representation in Toronto are next to nil. The choice is DIY or die. Even artist-run centers that have managed to survive can't support everyone, and their longevity has made them increasingly institutionalized, making them just as intimidating to a young artist as any other gallery space. Or at least that's how it can feel.

"Inaccessibility," says Toronto artist Gwen MacGregor, "was one of the most concrete pushes in the beginning for most of the collectives." MacGregor joined the long-running collective Blanket for this reason. Over its eight-year existence, Blanket has surfaced every few years to take friendly jabs at the hierarchy of the art system, with exhibitions such as "Real Photos of UFOs," or showing small, market-friendly works under the title "Down and Dirty."

Toronto is hardly new to the idea of strength in numbers. The collective lineage goes back to the early 1920s with the Group of Seven, into the '50s with Painters Eleven, and through to the '80s with groups such as ChromaZone, Public Access and Republic, who shaped the alternative fringe of what is now Toronto's main art haven, Queen Street West. Collectives are still inclined to give themselves evocative monikers – Dead Industry, Painting Disorders, Blanket, Bureau, Nether Mind, A Bunch of Feminists, Spontaneous Combustion and Grace Hopper Gallery, to name a few. But their objectives vary from those of their predecessors; similarly, their level of quality.



Above: PENELOPE STEWART **Kitchen** (detail), 1994, The House Project.

Left: NADINE NORMAN **In Passing** (detail), 1992, installation with bed of ashes.

Groups such as Painting Disorders are bound by art-school friendship. Other groups, like Dead Industry, are open to any artist who wants to join, hence the work is anywhere from worthy of wall space to pieces that should never have left the studio. Nether Mind, one of the strongest collectives in terms of competence and concepts, is a set group of sculpture-based artists at various stages of their careers. Other groups only intend to produce one-off shows responding to a particular site. These groups, such as Name 10 Parts of the Body, which showed last year in a downtown shopping center, are heavily contextualized, site-sensitive, and generally produce well-executed shows, complete with catalogues.

In The House Project, for instance, a team of seven artists and two writers put together an exhibition last year in an abandoned Victorian row-house near the University of Toronto's downtown campus. According to organizer Penelope Stewart, the group had long discussions about the implications of work that was to be placed in a domestic setting. For Stewart, it was this preparation which made the project so successful. Stewart's installation took over the kitchen by fitting white silk organza over the entire room, covering the fridge, stove, sink, floor and light fixtures. The room became both protective and claustrophobic.

In the dining room, Lois Andison installed an over-sized dinner table with two rotating steel bowls recessed into the surface, one holding toy cows, the other pigs. Upstairs in the master bedroom, Christine Ho Ping Kong nailed a series of miniature model homes to the ceiling, each surrounded by a white picket fence. This effectively played off the far more real shabbiness of the house itself. "It was important," says Stewart, "that the work was site-sensitive to the whole idea of a house."

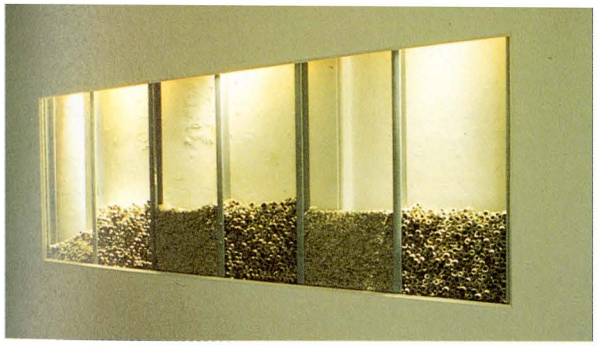
PENELOPE STEWART
L'Invisibilité, Un Acquis de longue dat / Being Invisible is well practiced. (installation and detail), 1993, photo silkscreen on silk organza.

One wonders if a mainstream institution could have initiated an exhibition program that would nurture a dialogue among the space, the artists, their work and the public – and be as successful, critically and attendance-wise, as The House Project. Or would they even care to? That is the advantage of collective enterprise. Being nomadic and without real estate, collectives are unhindered by any external forces beyond the ones they consciously make. The parameters can always be pushed further outwards.

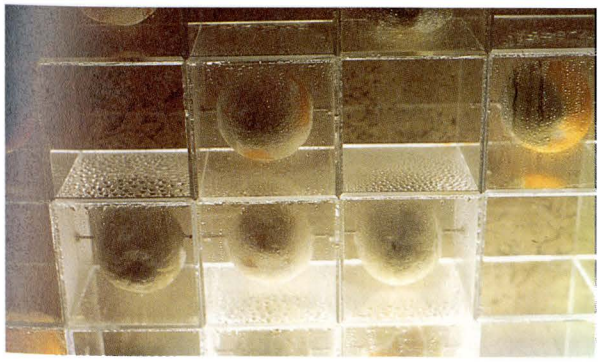
It is only recently that collectives have been recognized as a mainstay in the community. Last year, Toronto's most prestigious art space, The Power Plant, gave its much sought after nod to young artists, with an exhibition titled "Naked State – A Selected View of Toronto Art," inviting 17 artists from various collectives to exhibit.

The exhibition was a collection of work that had been previously made for other spaces. The show ended up looking that way; bits and pieces snatched from another context and pasted together as a rough-and-ready guide to what's happening on the streets of Toronto's arts community.

The artists also reacted against this displacement, believing that the transition was too simple and the context of the work was lost within the pristine whiteness of the gallery. John Dickson of Nether Mind felt that his sculpture, an enormous bulb shape made from



GWEN MacGREGOR
Non-returnable
1993, installation including found smoking pipes.



GWEN MacGREGOR
Body of Knowledge
(detail), 1994 installation.

MINDY YAN MILLER
Every Word, Their Name
1993, installation at YYZ Gallery Toronto, hair and pins.

NADINE NORMAN
In Passing
1992, installation detail, 16mm b.& w. film loop and viewer's shadow.

rubber and filled with water, barely held its own placed in the corner next to Corneil Van der Spek's enormous canvases of buffed body builders.

The Power Plant show was an introduction; but how will institutions in the future tap the collective spirit when the groups seem most effective outside a traditional context and in control of every stage from inception, execution and installation, through to catalogue design? No one has an answer to this question yet, though the continual progress of collectives might mean curators will have to step outside of their pristine museum walls with a broader perspective on how the two can interact effectively.

"Naked State" definitely boosted the profiles of the artists and collectives in general, but the show has yet to inspire a rush of interested buyers or dealers. MacGregor contrasts Toronto's dearth of commercial activity to London, where she has lived off-and-on over the years. "Collectives there are one-offs, but often a high player like Saatchi will come in and buy up one of the artists, and then suddenly there is this shift," she says. An exhibition like "Naked State" would seem the foothold to a successful, if not profitable, career. Alas, so far DIY has not turned into profit for the artists. "The Power Plant was the biggest intervention we've had," she says. "But it's not like the people who were part of that show are now suddenly showing in Chicago or something."

The rootless existence of collectives has meant that over the years artists have honed an ability to transplant exhibitions wherever space can be found. The five artists who went to Prague had to work on the logistics of how to develop their themes – of latent memories and a sense of transience – and make the work, as they intended it to be, sensitive to the gallery space and to an unfamiliar city.

Artist Nadine Norman initiated the Prague project after finding Galerii Mladch on a trip to Europe last year. Norman's recent work has used ash as an embodiment of temporal existence. In one installation, made for a Montreal gallery, she stenciled the walls with a floral pattern that resembled Quebec's provincial emblem, the *fleur-de-lis*. A reflection, possibly, of the delicate ties Quebec has with the rest of Canada. Appropriately, through the course of the show, the ash slowly gravitated to piles on the gallery floor.

The other artists are equally as economic in their materials. Mindy Yan Miller's installation held last year at Toronto's YYZ Gallery was a series of names of personal friends and ancestors written in pins on the gallery walls. She then hung single strands of human hair on each pinhead. From Yan Miller's personal standpoint, the frailness of the installation stemmed from issues concerning her own Jewish identity.

Gwen MacGregor's work is conceptually similar to both Norman's and Yan Miller's connections to a distant history. From the banks of London's Thames she has recovered thousands of exquisite, discarded smoking pipes that were popular in Britain at the turn of the century. Her 1993 installation *Non-returnables* traced the history of the pipes back to their origins in Canada. They were laid out in a hollow in the gallery wall and presented as precious artifacts.

Penelope Stewart, fellow Toronto artist David Miller, and Montreal photo artist Barbara Claus have similar themes running through their work: a sense of displacement; vague personal histories which carry an overwhelming sense of transience. Not a new theme, but appropriate, given Prague's own changing identity and the group's nomadic existence.

BARBARA CLAUS & A. CLEMENT, **Limbre(s)**, 1993, installation