

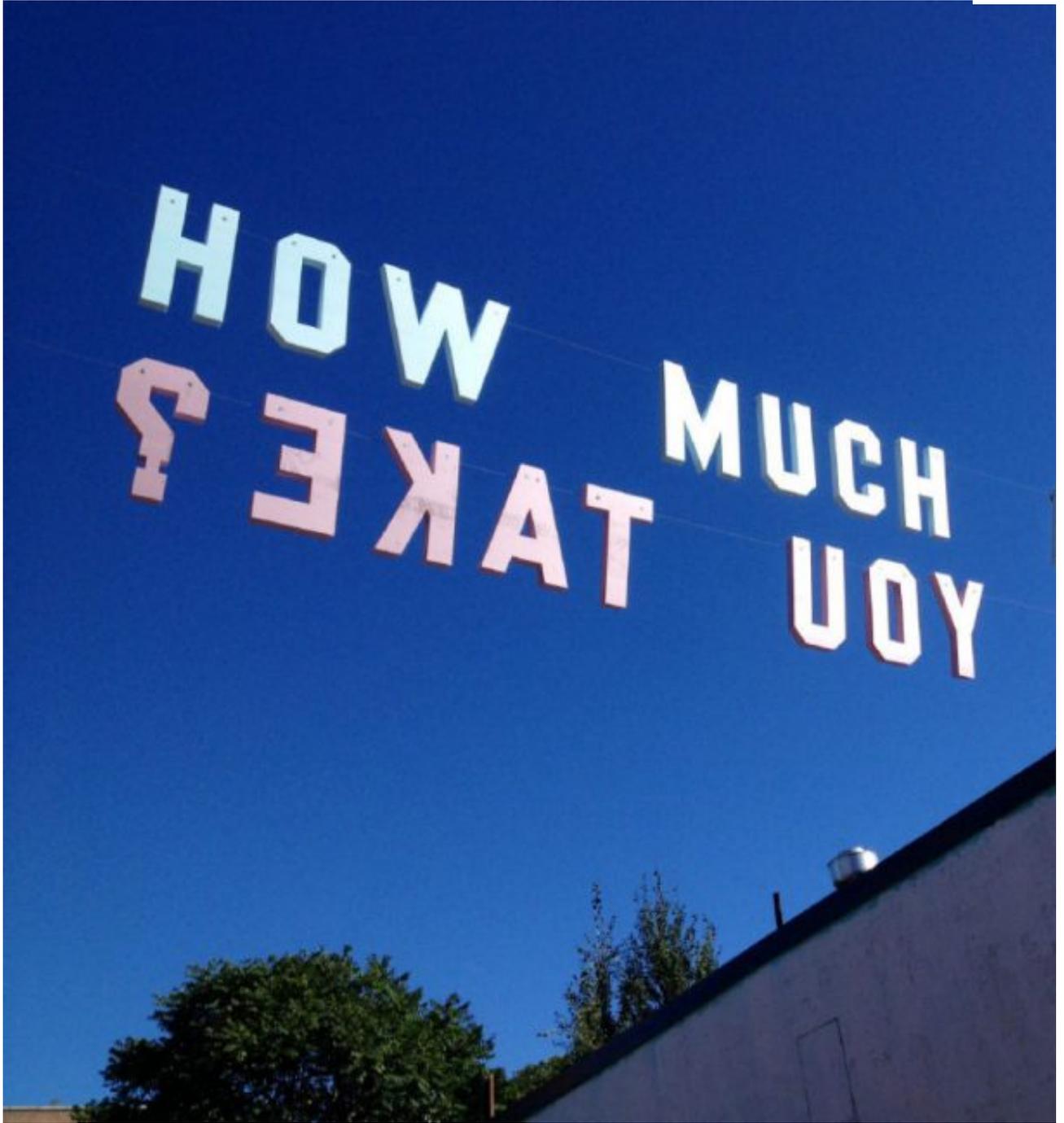


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MOCCA feels pinch as trendy restos, boutiques, move in

Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian art on move next year, with no destination in sight. Current show looks to capture anxiety of moment





Jesse Harris's text piece "How Much Art Can You Take?" hangs above the driveway to MO neighbourhood in transition from art hub to gentrified commercialism.

By **MURRAY WHYTE VISUAL ART CRITIC**

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“HOW MUCH ART CAN YOU TAKE?” reads the dangling sign suspended over the driveway of

the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, and the answer, in Queen St W., the heart of the so-called Art and Design District, seems to be less and less.

The text is a piece by Jesse Harris, and it helps capture an anxious moment. With only a handful of exceptions, galleries and artists have all but packed up and moved on, making way for designer coffee, condos and a growing complement of haute denim boutiques and rarefied foodie restaurants.

MOCCA itself is feeling the pinch: At the tail end of a 10-year lease – it expires in August 2015—even a bona fide national institution can fall prey to the ruthlessness of the downtown Toronto property market.

When its lease expires, MOCCA will move out just as the bulldozers move in to make way for – what else? – condos. Its future – location, function, you name it – is uncertain, and that’s the spirit embraced by “To Be Determined,” the museum’s current offering.

The moment is ripe for reflection, and TBD offers equal parts navel gazing and hand-wringing about both the museum’s immediate future and long-term prospects.

And fair enough: At the tail end of a predictable process that has seen the forces of culture work merrily along as unintentional gentrification elves, sprucing and preening until their grassroots urban renewal rewarded them with skyrocketing rents and a one-way ticket out, the question hangs as heavily as ever: Culture has been thrust into the role of cure-all for a litany of urban ills, but what happens when culture outlives its curative function?

The answer, for the most part, is what MOCCA faces now: A forced waywardness to parts ungentrified to start the process anew (to the indignation of many, former city councilor Kyle Rae once referred to art communities as “beneficial bacteria” that should be encouraged to move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, leaving a legacy of pricy real estate and designer espresso in their wake).

Whatever the case, TBD stirs up the ghosts of past forced migrations at the same time as it tries to imagine possible futures. The balance matters: You’re not allowed to complain if you’re not willing to do something about it, and this is something the show takes to heart.

Harris’s question seems almost like a dare, and if you take it, you find yourself faced with a down-in-the-mouth declaration in bright, sunny letters: “Sometimes artists work here,” reads a banner pinned to the exterior brick of the building near the entrance, and it seems almost a pre-emptive lament.

The banner is a piece by Tomas Chaffe. It was made for an artist-run centre in Nottingham,

England, in 2010, but its eminently transportable nature – here and now, maybe Bloor and Lansdowne next year, Brixton in London or the deep Bronx in New York, take your pick – speaks to the relentless universality of the forces at play.

But no use complaining, really, the show seems to say, and as you slip inside you find your way to the meat of its problem-solving priorities.

Practicality hardly reigns, but an identity crisis can be a productive thing for institutions, which have traditionally relied on their bricks-and-mortar as the overarching context for what they do.

Cut loose, free-thinking becomes not only possible, but necessary, and Arabella Campbell's work here might just be the loosest: It's little more than a set of directions, out the door and down the street, to see what you might find.

The piece is a blunt metaphor for the museum's own impending forced march, but its poetic implications, of openness to a world beyond the quiet tyranny of a museum's always-white walls, gives a pause of a different kind.

Art isn't just what hangs on the walls or sits in the room, and hasn't been for a good many decades. Recently and increasingly, though, art isn't something apart from the big world Out There. The nebulous zone of social practice in recent years has seen art seep into previously uncharted territory: workaday challenges of local communities and activism.

A museum can hardly exist as an ad hoc social practice experiment, but its elements – community engagement, an erosion of the barrier between audience and artist – are worth considering, and TBD, to its credit, does.

Maggie Groat's poetic work, "Fences Will Turn Into Tables," seems a nice little emblem of exactly this. The title is literal: A table fashioned from old fence boards, the transformation from barrier into communal meeting ground is aptly at the crux of the museum's current identity crisis.

These are growing pains not unique to MOCCA, which has the added urgency of a soon-to-be no fixed address. But museums all over the world are struggling mightily with a world where virtuality, particularly of images, seems to threaten their very function.

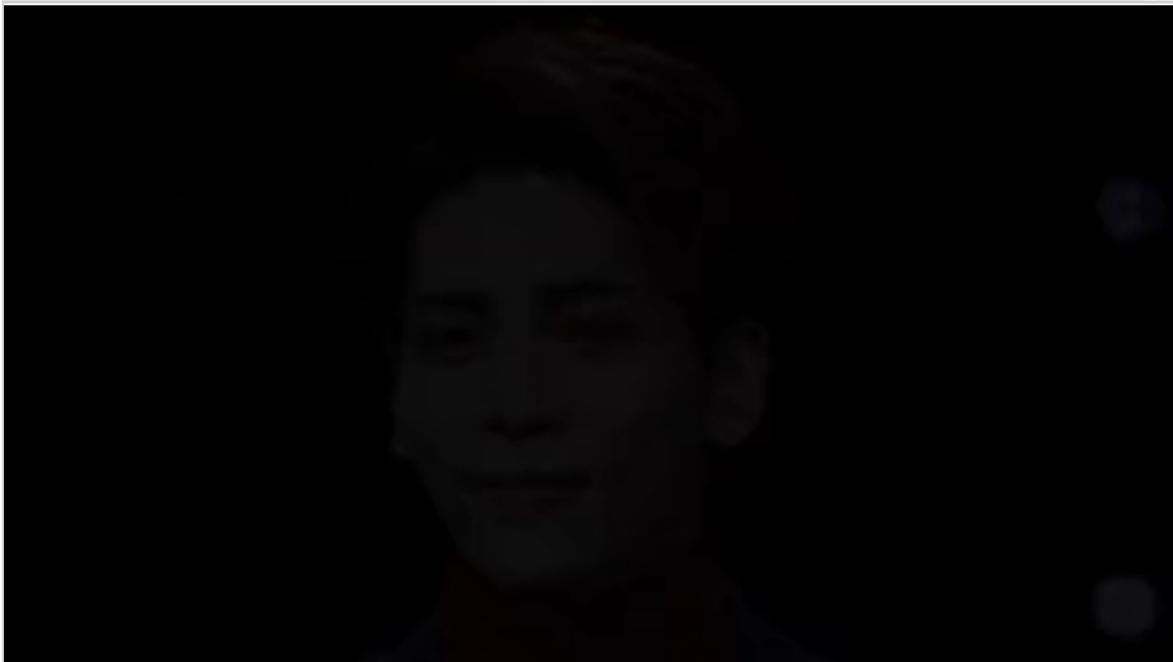
Smartphones are a gateway of instant self-directed research, meaning museums can still start conversations with their displays, but if they spark an interest – which is a good thing – they can rarely finish them. Not having that last word is probably a good thing for museums, though they're still trying to figure that out. As they shift from a role of exalted cultural authority to merely a louder voice in a growing chorus, that's a tall order.

It's also what makes TBD worthwhile. The heart of the exhibition, to my mind, is a grid of few dozen 8" x 10" sheets, each one teasing out a possible future. They're the result of an open call the museum made to architects, designers, and artists, and while they're more blue-sky dreams than real-world proposals – a mobile cube museum, a floating barge that cruises the inner harbour, various versions of complete virtuality – the ideas they spark are invaluable fuel for an institution setting course into uncharted waters.

There are exceptions to this kind of forced migration, and close at hand. Around the corner, the developer Artscape has repurposed an old school on Shaw Street to house artists' studios and various cultural agencies, including the Koffler Gallery, a privately-run contemporary art institution. Further west on Queen Street, a condo development struck a deal with a coalition of local arts agencies to include a purpose-built facility that will become the Toronto Media Arts Centre, the collective roof over the heads of the Images Festival and InterAccess, to name a couple.

But those are the exceptions, as the saying goes, that prove the rule, and such havens are far too few to save all but the fortunate or well-timed. MOCCA is proving to be neither, at least so far, but looking at TBD, I can't help but think it might be better that way. There's nothing like impending doom to sharpen one's priorities, and MOCCA, poised on the knife's edge of absolute necessity, is pushing forward, not looking back.

TBD continues at [MOCCA](#), 952 Queen Street West, to Oct. 26.



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