

## Cultivation Station

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London, Ontario's legendary art history records an important band of artists tilling the local creative soil over many years. The impact of their enterprise on Canadian modern and contemporary art has been substantial. Additionally, it is noteworthy regarding 'London art' that the commitment of various local galleries and public institutions to harvesting the works produced by artists – and also importing into London significant Canadian and international works – has helped cultivate a lively 'scene' here, just two hours west of Toronto. My own history in London, now nearing twenty years in length, certainly did not enable me to experience some of the earlier and highly significant initiatives such as Region Gallery and 20/20, or to witness the previous iteration of what is now Museum London nor see the McIntosh Gallery's prior period with its artist residencies. Yet I observe today with pleasure that the contemporary programs of those extant institutions, coupled with the significant contributions of commercial galleries such as Thielsen's on Adelaide and the Michael Gibson Gallery on Carling, make it possible for an art hungry Londoner to have a good 'feed' without hitting the 401.

With the arrival of the new DNA on Dundas I am reminded of the significance to an art community of other kinds of 'hybrid' or 'in-between' ventures that enlarge the possibilities for art presentation and thus further enrich the local cultural ecology. In that light, any narrative about art in London intended to include commentary on 'out of the ordinary' gallery programs past and present, would be incomplete without mention of the Forest City Gallery or the projects of the storied Embassy Cultural House. Both of those were founded, or perhaps planted, by artists who understood the necessity for the community and for artists themselves to have access to the surprises and challenges that come via contexts where new works – inventions not necessarily involved with the sanctioning of museum exhibitions or bearing the price tags commercial galleries must append – can be encountered.

In context of such enterprises, a lesser-known entity in the history of hybrid spaces in London, Ontario, also comes to mind: the tiny gallery that was named The Palace at 4 a.m. Located on Blackfriars Street just west of the bridge, it was a 90 square foot room with a largish window and a single door, a space that operated from about 1995 to 1998. Managed by artists and students, and programmed by and for artists of all statures and for students, too, it featured a bi-monthly array of new, inventive, and often surprising contemporary art. In my own experience, it was a significant place of creative cultivation and artistic risk-taking.

As an artist I was charmed by both the moniker and the mandate of that 'Palace,' and at one point I produced a printed, sculptural 'model' of the gallery as an homage to its character as a container where art simply flourished. My piece was meant also to acknowledge the Giacometti sculpture of the same name: a famous surrealist tableau dedicated to a lost love. Ultimately, The Palace @ 4 a.m. (I'm speaking now of both the surrealist and the London-based iterations)

represented for me the embodiment of a fertile narrative of creativity and memory. And with the London incarnation specifically, The Palace A@ 4 a.m. signified an everyday place that, like a garden, yielded compelling earthly delights.

DNA's initial foray in late fall 2013, documented in this publication, involved numbers of artists and their myriad approaches and was marked by a spirit of invention founded upon the fertile ground of London and also on avant-garde ambition. It represented an exciting new moment in the history of creative cultivation here. DNA's promise of further experimental programming, complemented by the presentation of works by established artists, and also of events that couple art with other practices, offers the community an exciting new source of anticipation and, undoubtedly, expression.