



A Few Steps Away

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There will be no opening reception due to social distancing measures

When I used to walk into my neighbourhood coffee shop or bar and they knew my order—or even better my name—I felt like a local. I wonder if they will recognize me with a mask on. The acknowledgement of my selfhood is an affirmation that contextualizes me within a particular location—this is a deep and powerful feeling. All of a sudden the characteristics of my personality become intertwined with notions of place and become pointers on a cognitive map of the neighborhood. The result is a shared feeling where locality becomes a catalyst that brings people together. A group of locals who feel connected to a place can be called a community.

For artists, community is what constitutes a scene. The ability to gather, converse, and commune nurtures a social ecology and allows the community to thrive. Studio visits, going to bars, dancing in empty galleries on New Year's Eve, and leaving an opening without looking at the art begins to glimpse the strong social component to art making. The works that artists produce are a compression of these moments of relation that end up reflecting their locality within the city. However, the mechanisms of art history often leave out the particulars of place in favour of the analysis of aesthetics dislodged from their cultural moment.

Philip Monk manages to effectively make the link between cultural history and aesthetic production in his essay "Picturing the Toronto Arts Community: The Queen Street Years."¹ This essay, among many others by Monk, chronicles the development of the Toronto art scene during the late 1970s to early 1980s in relation to the Queen West area of Toronto's downtown. "The name offhandedly referred to an energetic art community that lived, worked and played in the neighbourhood"² writes Monk about the now hyper-gentrified and boutique shopping area of Queen West. Monk cites several galleries around the Queen and Spadina area that were important for the scene's development; however, locations like the Cabana Room, the Cameron Public House, and the Rivoli stuck out to me as places where artists could unabashedly play.

To be achingly sentimental for a moment, this reminds me of recently lost spaces like the Holy Oak,³ the Beaver,⁴ Double Double Land,⁵ and (for a short time) Bambi's⁶ that all provided much needed space for artists of my generation to play. Spaces like these act as safe spots on the map of a city undergoing hostile and unregulated development. When conditions prioritize play over productivity the body opens up to the city—a necessary component of the actualization of locality.

The media has used the idea of the local over and over again to endear audiences to marketed content. Popular TV sitcoms such as *Cheers* (1982-1993), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), and *Friends* (1994-2004) all use the trope of the local café or bar as a narrative constant in order to establish common ground with the audience. Viewers are more equipped to buy into characters and plotlines after subconsciously replacing Cheers, Monk's Café, or Central Perk with their own local hangouts. The media presents images that are intended to reflect an idealized self-image of the audience—in return we consume.

As a resident of Toronto, it is easy to feel a sense of giddy excitement when watching Canadian TV shows like *King of Kensington* (1975-1980), *Train 48* (2003-2005), and *Nirvana the Band the Show* (2017-2019) that simultaneously depict and narrativize Canadian locations. For example, the main characters of *Nirvana the Band the Show*—Matt and Jay—pursue the opportunity to perform at the Rivoli as if it was the pinnacle of a band's achievement. The now somewhat novel feeling of seeing your locality reflected in the media was a powerful, dare I say profound, gesture for the 20th century. Similarly, the artists of Monk's Queen West used the media of the media (photography, magazines, video, performance) to enact a glamourized and dramatized reflection of the scene they sought to create. By performing the local, artists are able to create the community they desire. However, when the Internet overtook television as the dominant mode of communication, notions of locality saw a significant shift.

In some ways the COVID-19 pandemic was an accelerant to a loss of locality that began years ago. As the Internet became a place people could "go," the need for the local to represent physical space started to dissolve. Community now appears in online spaces where people find each other not through proximity but affinity. Online the term play takes on a new meaning as online multiplayer games like *Animal Crossings* and *FarmVille* establish communities that are larger than the population of most countries. At its peak, *FarmVille* hosted 83.76 million users in March

