

[Report a problem](#)

My City's Still Breathing: Collective Consciousness

VARIOUS LOCATIONS, WINNIPEG NOV 4 TO 7 2010

by AMY FUNG



A conference attendee at the opening of the new Plug In ICA building during My City's Still Breathing / photo Leif Norman

A conference attendee at the opening of the new Plug In ICA building during My City's Still Breathing / photo Leif Norman

In naming a civic arts conference [My City's Still Breathing](#), there's an undeniable layer of self-criticism at play, but one that ultimately resonates with poignancy. The title comes directly out of a song from Winnipeg's own John K. Samson of [the Weakerthans](#), whose lyrics capture the pain and pride of living in Winnipeg and echo the indomitable will of those who choose to stay in this isolated prairie city.

As Winnipeg has embarked on creating a new cultural plan in the same year that it has been designated Cultural Capital of Canada, the complicated relationship between artists and their city was put up for rigorous debate at the conference. A parade of local, national and international speakers spoke over an engrossing four days, with one thing blindingly clear: Winnipeg has a fiercely strong sense of who it is—and, more importantly, who it is not.

A consistent thread throughout the conference included a post-, if not outright anti-Richard Florida sentiment, with speakers and audiences alike dismissing his simple, cookie-cutter solutions for a "creative city" by welcoming a multifaceted approach to stimulating culture within an urban centre.



Filmmaker John Waters delivers his public address at My City's Still Breathing / photo Leif Norman

Winnipeg is a city first and foremost for the locals, and the strength of the conference was its ability to contrast approaches on how one lives, works and breathes culture. It brewed a nexus of complex and often opposing ideals for the arts and for the role of artists in the city—and rightly so. A city is deeply complicated, an ever-increasing contradiction caught between the needs of the urban and the suburban, and this conference was outstanding in its capacity to feed this complexity.

There were a few bumps, namely a navel-gazing conversation between [Robert Enright](#) and [Eric Fischl](#) on the last day of the conference that seemed completely out of place. And one panel in particular became a dangerous, double-edged sword: On the one hand, the panel, which

included [Gus Rogerson](#) of Hell's Kitchen, New York City, and [Dyan Marie](#) of Dupont/Bloor West, Toronto, was clearly the audience—and my personal—favourite. Its demonstration and realization of "artists as citizens" was deeply inspiring. On the other hand, by the end of the conference, the panel's premise and related models became cause for concern; red flags were raised about the reality that artists need to live and therefore be paid for the work that they do—in community development and otherwise. (While the situation for many artists is to "just do it" for free, nobody expects urban planners and transportation engineers to "just do it" for free; it's more widely recognized the time and skills of these latter professionals make their communities and cities a better place to live.)

After all has been said, I hesitate to call the conference even a conference at all. Most conferences consist of top-down lectures and breakout sessions to network and serve individualistic projects and needs. My City's Still Breathing went above and beyond—it was a seminar designed to enrich the collective consciousness of Winnipeg. Peer-led presentations provoked more questions than answers, which in my opinion is the sign of time well spent.

Programmed (or rather, curated) by Mary Reid, the [Winnipeg Art Gallery's](#) curator of contemporary art and photography, and organized by the [Winnipeg Arts Council](#), the conference was tailored for the city, which is a surprisingly and perhaps disappointingly original idea in our starchitect-crazed, homogenous-sprawl era. As a lasting bastion of a fiercely independent visual arts community in Canada, Winnipeg spawns an unending slew of internationally recognized artists who stay almost as often as they leave. However, unlike most situations where cities ride the coattails of artists who once lived within their borders, proclaiming their communities a "cultural hub," the opposite is true in Winnipeg as artists who stay or leave are always proud of the place they've come from. While presenters gave alluring examples and posed theoretical quandaries using model cities from Shanghai to Vancouver, the focus in the room was always clearly rooted in the livelihood of Winnipeg—which needs no resuscitation, as the city continues to thrive on surviving.



Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stirnson perform at the opening of the new Plug In ICA during My City's Still Breathing / photo Leif Norman

Conference highlights

Opening Night

[John Waters](#) gave the opening keynote on Thursday night in

Winnipeg's Garrick Theatre, an old single movie house barely converted into a concert venue for artists ranging from Public Enemy to Joan Jett. Prefaced with an all-too-short set by John K. Samson, Waters seemingly walked straight onto stage from the airport and delivered a 90-minute stand-up routine that wove between the underbelly of Baltimore, behind-the-scenes film stories, the adult lives of children he's worked with, the experience of growing up with Divine, and the magical act of sharing, if not downright exposing, your city's characters through stories.

Alan Freeman

While there were many engaging presenters from around the world who were progressively passionate about developing a cultural city, none of them will be moving to Winnipeg anytime soon—except, that is, for [Alan Freeman](#). A cultural economist who has been crunching the meaning of numbers for the Greater London Authority, Freeman will soon be undertaking similar actions in the city he has fallen in love with after working through two prairie winters at the University of Manitoba.

Plug In ICA

With three consecutive nights of opening parties at [Plug In](#), the corner of Portage and Memorial was a bright, well-lit place that signalled a new era of contemporary art for the citizens of Winnipeg. The weekend saw the return of many Plug In alumni like James Lam and Gilles Hébert, the debut of new works by [Eleanor Bond](#) and [AA Bronson](#), and the fun of performances by [Adrian Stimson](#) and [Lori Blondeau](#). As Buffalo Boy and Belle Sauvage, the latter pair continued their interactive Wild-West photo portraits with a crowd mighty eager to dress up in costume—and this being Winnipeg, after all, some arrived already dressed in costume.

A Three-Hour Modernist Architecture Bus Tour

Modernist and brutalist designs are being widely eradicated in favour of a contemporary preference for glass, but Winnipeg has managed to hold onto many of its period buildings—at least for the time being. As a city with residents championing the notion of heritage modernist architecture, Winnipeg's downtown core and pockets of St. Boniface are still dotted with historical buildings by [Moody Moore and Partners](#) and [Green, Blankstein, Russell](#), not to mention the wondrous [Paroisse du Précieux Sang](#) designed by a young, genius [Étienne Gaboury](#).



Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan present *City Stories with the Winnipeg Tarot Company* at the Fort Garry Hotel during *My City's Still Breathing* / photo Leif Norman

o www.artsforall.ca

[Subscribe to Canadian Art today and save 30% off the newstand price.](#)

RELATED STORIES

Wanda Koop: On the Edge of Experience

For nearly three decades, Wanda Koop has used painting to critique technology and its impact on nature. Appropriately, these themes weave through her travelling survey currently on in Winnipeg, which includes a new performative collaboration, *Hybrid Human*.

Eric Fischl: In Deep Water

Celebrated New York artist Eric Fischl has numerous Canadian ties, from his teaching at NSCAD in the 1970s to his current exhibition at Toronto's Barbara Edwards Contemporary. David Balzer reviews the latter, finding languid, elegant watercolours.

Bodies in Trouble & Time3: Performing the Capital