

THIS DOUBLE BIND

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View of the exhibition. Photo : Paul Litherland.

As much as possible given the time and space allotted is both a command and an escape clause. This directive to systematically remove as many artworks as possible from the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery storage vault and install them within the exhibition space puts forth an idea that is at once conceptually expansive, theoretically ambitious, and physically exhausting. At the same time, though, the subsequent proviso “given the time and space allotted” offers a welcome limitation, a respectable excuse for inefficiency and underperformance, a solid reason to give up and turn back in our (spurious) attempts to show the entire collection.

The project's combined bravado and absurdity is only one of its potent ironies. The bizarre collision of a 1960s systems-based conceptual approach with the aesthetics of an eighteenth-century salon is another. So, too, is the fact that a decidedly non-narrative curatorial approach (employing a system of artwork selection based purely on a work's location in the vault) allows a surprisingly rich array of chance juxtapositions, comparative examples, and associative readings to arise. As the collection essentially "curates" itself, paratactical relationships organically emerge within an interpretive framework based on probabilities rather than predetermination. This museological methodology allows a series of unbiased selections to inspire an unconventional connoisseurship that highlights process over pedigree. In truth, our curatorial presence in this project has been largely an administrative one. More numbers than words permeate our many research documents. The production of the exhibition has encompassed the training of more than a dozen temporary staff, the confirmation of hundreds of accession numbers, the endless re-working of hand-made lists and detailed CAD drawings, as well as the mapping out of maximum installation heights based on the average reach of a human standing on five-foot scaffolding. In terms of its labour model, the project's public side collides Fordist production lines with relational aesthetics by focusing the Gallery's resources toward the training and remuneration of project participants who become collaborators immersed in a performative display of both themselves and of the collection.

The most potent contradiction posed by the project, however, comes from its ardent desire to display the entire collection. This desire, as we have come to see, is also the project's greatest challenge. For every time a work is removed from its position of repose within the quiet vault and enters into the din of the world, it becomes both wondrously alive and yet dies a little death. The work, once exposed, exposes itself to the dangers of a public life against the elements and amongst the masses. And yet, is this not how the artwork "works"—by animating the space around it and drawing our eyes to its prismatic presence?

This double bind—how to balance preservation with presentation—is perhaps the most intense of museological conundrums. Conservationally incompatible and always in tension, these two directives of protecting and activating are what make Ross' photographs of the Concordia University offices so strangely poignant and the actions of the Ellen Gallery installation team so oddly compelling. When considered together, all of these aspects are what make *As much as possible* a project that is as outlandish as it is necessary.