

Street Art Shakes Up the AGO

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Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette have been granted full license to bring street-influenced mayhem to the AGO—even to the gift shop.

BY BRONWYN KIENAPPLE • PHOTOS BY CORBIN SMITH



The Young Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario's little-known free section, was the site of the jam-packed, January 20 opening of *NOW*, a collaborative installation by Sean Martindale and Pascal Paquette—part of the AGO's *Toronto Now Series*.

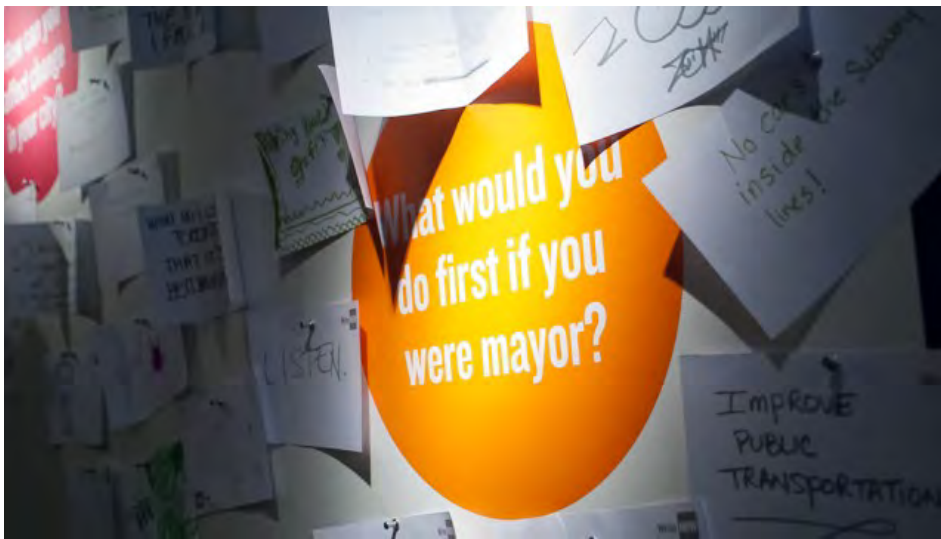
Both artists are typically known for their street art—Martindale, for his urban interventions (such as pocket planters made of advertising posters and tree planter alterations) and Paquette, who works under the name Mon Petit Chou, for graffiti. And yet, Martindale sees their AGO stint as a perfect opportunity for showing how street art and gallery art tend to inform, and not isolate, one another.

While the Young gallery serves as the anchor for the two artists' creative vision, it seemingly could not contain it.

The AGO gift shop is now the site of *Gift Shop Gift Shop*, a parallel store created by Martindale and Paquette that is peppered with self-referential items. Shoppers can buy souvenirs of the gift shop itself, like a 25 postcard set containing shots of store products, or liquefied overstock re-formed into acrylic cubes.

Martindale wanted this project to explore the role that the gift shop plays within the AGO. "We recognize that a lot of people go to the gift shop without going to the gallery, and that a lot of people feel more comfortable in a commercial environment than a gallery environment. We wanted to address that," he said.

The artists will also be engaging with FRANK restaurant. They'll design custom items for the menu and host an affordable dinner that they hope will attract a diverse crowd. They'll even be directing tours and other activities at the AGO's Weston Family Learning Centre.



Visitors to the installation are invited to contemplate pressing social questions and pin proposed solutions to the wall.

Having the Young Gallery as the project's home base suits Martindale and Paquette's purposes very well. "We're happy that we are in the free part, because that suits us in our practice that Pascal and I both have of doing stuff out on the street and in public where it's readily available," Martindale said. "Part of our goal of this project was to address [the gallery's obscurity], to show that this space can be made a bit more visible, and that contemporary projects can play a bigger role there."

While the gift shop and FRANK installations reflect on the AGO itself, the Young gallery is bursting with commentary on Toronto today. Video projections documenting the artists spray painting the word "NOW" repeatedly using early graffiti styles, or continually painting over the work of other local graffiti artists, pay homage both to the art form, past and present, and to the complicated relationship we have with it in this city.

"We wanted to address that it is an ephemeral form and that there's a big push to eradicate it a lot of the time," said Martindale. "A lot of people don't recognize the difference between a permission wall and a non-permission wall, or tagging from a more developed piece."

Sitting side-by-side with the installations is a plethora of signage, leaflets, and other documents that the artists have splattered over the gallery, all emblazoned with their Toronto NOW branding (including a play on the City's official logo).

The artists are also compiling a NOW Service Bureau Public Directory of (real!) grassroots organizations with official sounding names such as the Department of Public Memory that are available to step up when the city fails to provide adequate support.

No other opening in the Young Gallery's history had been so well attended (the crowd was double the previous record), and so it appears there is an appetite for Martindale and Paquette's DIY vision.

NOW: A Collaborative Project runs until April 1, 2012. Learn more at nowexhibition.com.

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