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This Is(n't) Paradise Anymore: Toronto's ChromaZone Collective

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My research for this project began as an engagement with the notion of past, present, and future of “topographies of style” within Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The majority of my academic work has been concerned with Toronto-specific art and culture, and my fascination with this city began long before I moved here. As a child, I remember seeing glimpses of the landscape in news reports on the television, but early clips from the *New Music*, a ‘cutting edge’ music program that often featured local artists, gave me a glimpse of a fading and distinct independent culture in the city which thrived in the late 80s and early 90s. By bringing to attention the fashion and lifestyle focused productions of Toronto's ChromaZone Collective, I hope to spark a conversation about Toronto within this context, engaging in a kind of recovery as well as reflection upon a not so distant past. My main resources for this work have been images, press releases, and conversations concerning the ChromaZone Collective's work found in archival sources such as Concordia University's Contemporary Canadian Art Database and exhibition catalogues produced by the ChromaZone Collective, most importantly their 1983 *Chromaliving* catalogue.

In my exploration of the fashion and lifestyle exhibits produced by ChromaZone, I am interested in considering not only the place and time of Toronto in the 1980s, but also the aesthetics and politics behind this work. The ways in which the ChromaZone

collective produced their work was an intentional engagement with the art and lifestyle industries that were emerging in the city at this time. This emergence posed new kinds of challenges to the specific type of art and culture production system ChromaZone envisioned. Simultaneously, I'd like to potentially think about the ChromaZone collective in relation to the present state of independent art and fashion in Toronto, and possibly other cities, today. What is the lasting influence of one of the city's earliest independently run artist centers on Toronto of the present?

Collective member Andy Fabo described the ChromaZone project as providing the creativity and energy to move art off of museum walls and into the streets of the Queen West art scene (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). By "jaywalking these intersections" (a phrase I borrow from the original ChromaZone fashion show posters and press), of both time and space, and in some cases of art and fashion, what were the lasting effects of the ChromaZone collective's work on Toronto's cultural landscape, memories, and futures? What can we learn about economies of art, and simultaneously fashion, during this time as opposed to today in Toronto by investigating this subject matter? While examining the state of the fashion industry by interrogating a site which attempted to position itself outside of it may seem academically unorthodox, I understand it as a creative attempt to dissect an alternative history of the topic. It is an opportunity to step outside of the confines of the approaching bleakness of the here and now. To start thinking about possible answers to these questions, one must first investigate the history of my chosen site of engagement.

My original intent with investigating the ChromaZone collective was to discuss their first venture as artists into the world of fashion as it seemed to me to be an interesting example of the struggles in these related industries. However, to understand ChromaZone's engagements with fashion, one must first understand the formation and structure of the collective as a whole. It was September of 1981 and according to ChromaZone member Andy Fabo was also the tail-end of the early conceptual era of Canadian Art (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). Toronto's art and culture scene was beginning to stagnate. Installation based exhibits were dominating the curatorial scene, and colour field painting was a hot commodity in the commercial art world (Lypchuk, 40). The gallery system was literally sucking the life out of the Canadian art and culture scene. Figurative imagery in artworks was out of style, and still too often lifestyle objects such as those created by designers or craftspersons were still left out of the competitive gallery system. ChromaZone dreamed of an inclusive artistic community which asked the question: whose artwork is not being shown and whose work is left out of the gallery system (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone History*)? Simultaneously, artists needed an alternative model of production and sale so that they could work and still make a living. The system was broken and ChromaZone wanted out.

To address this deficiency of an alternative perspective artist Oliver Girling met with Rae Johnson, Andy Fabo, and Bruce Cumber to discuss strategies for forming a collective. Cumber suggested the name ChromaZone for their group (Concordia Contemporary

Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). We can understand this name almost literally as a place designated for chroma, the greek word for colour (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). The core of the collective would go on to include Sybil Goldstein, Tony Wilson, Tim Jocelyn and Hans Peter Marti alongside Girling, Johnson, and Fabo, (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*); however, membership would be loose and always changing throughout the years they were together.

On September 15th 1981 ChromaZone opened their doors to the public for the first time. Housed at 320 Spadina, the collectively run gallery was also the apartment of founding member Oliver Girling (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *Chromazone/Chromatique*). Much like the space itself, rent was split in half, and the collective's share was covered by the artists on a sliding scale basis (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromZone/Chromatique*). Anywhere from five to twenty dollars from each person involved ensured that the collective could plan only two months in advance of their shows, and avoid relying solely on government grants to fund their programming (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *Chromazone/Chromatique*). In the words of a Globe and Mail reviewer in 1982, "Toronto's newest and most rambunctious artists' co-op, ... the only one (to my knowledge) that is *not* funded by the fairy godmothers" (Bentley-Mays, 11).

The ChromaZone was intended as a people's gallery. It exhibited work in a range of price points, welcoming the public in during daily hours. From 12 - 6PM one could come

in and buy a cappuccino, read a magazine, or view art (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). This was in stark contrast to how freelance writer Donna Lypchuk described the dominant art scene of this time: Toronto was “suffering from a serious but spiritually mature case of zen-like detachment from the concept of pleasure” (Lypchuk, 40). Chromazone wanted to change the gallery experience. Chromazone’s first show, *Monda Chroma* set the stage for the five year life span of the collective. The Press Release for the exhibit read more like a manifesto:

“ChromaZone/Chromatique is a project by four painters and a filmmaker in the Dundas/ Spadina area to present exhibitions in the neighbourhood by local and foreign artists. In the context of mass-media image blitz by corporate advertising people need a new order of imagery, and the artists we will present use primarily traditional forms: painting, drawing, and sculpture, to try to work it out. We want images of the working life; office, construction site, classroom, club, the sporting life: rock and roll, sex, astronauts, the domestic life and the daily lives of artists. We aren’t professional curators we trust artists and their work. We believe in the capacity of artworks to address the complexities of late twentieth century living in Toronto and other neighborhoods of the global village, such as careers, ambitions, the rent, we will continue learning new forms and languages and using new technologies to keep redistributing the wealth” (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database. *Monda Chroma Press Release*).

A few months after their initial opening, on December 18, 1981, the collective presented *The Fashion Show* (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *The Fashion*

Show). This exhibit was first presented as a runway show at The Theatre Center, and was later exhibited in the ChromaZone gallery alongside art related to the first production of the project (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *The Fashion Show*). The project would then go on to include work by new designers and artists, and play an integral role in 1983's *Chromaliving* show. Curated by ChromaZone's Rae Johnson and heavily influenced by fellow collective member Tim Jocelyn's textile work, the show featured two slogans on their promotional posters: on the original flyer "Jaywalking the Intersections of Fashion and Art," and later in 1983's *Chromaliving* show catalog, "Leisure Wear For the Nether Zone: between low-tech and high tech fashion/high art and low life" (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). The first production was hosted by Oliver Girling, and featured artist designed clothing by David Buchan, Tanya Rosenberg (later known as Tanya Mars), and Robert Stewart, as well as couture pieces by Tim Jocelyn, Aileen Beninger, and Annie Nikolajevich. David Buchan was an artist who engaged with fashion and dress throughout his work, exploring ideas of sexuality and identity. His piece *Euclid* was also included in the show. Tanya Rosenberg (Tanya Mars) had been working on a series of codpieces made from materials such as Campbell's Soup cans, styrofoam meat packing trays, and toy Light Brite pegs among other pieces of 'trash' (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *The Fashion Show*).

The other participants in the fashion show came from more traditional backgrounds in textile and fashion design and their work expressed this training. These examples include Aileen Beninger's *Kinetic Dress* design, the Canadiana influenced applique

pieces of Tim Joceleyn, and party wear designs by Annie Nikolajevich. In their professional designations there was a divide between artists and designers in the group. However, a press release from the program shows that the roles of these artists and fashion designers were not so neatly contained and that they shared similar discontents. For example, artist Robert Stewart asserted that his intent was to “give Diana Vreeland the heeby jeebys with his collection,” (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *The Fashion Show*) which included a champagne glass leotard and a gold macaroni suit. Similarly, fashion designer Annie Nikolajevich’s designs were said to “slit the throat of conformist taste with a Club Med smile” (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *The Fashion Show*). Artists and designers in the show created wearable artworks in styles that captured the discontent felt by the members of the ChromaZone collective: art needed to be pleasurable and livable, but not lacking in substance. By erasing the lines between lifestyle and art those involved in the ChromaZone fashion show made statements about the ways in which they lived, and hoped to live, as artists. Work could be fun, and rather than allowing the art industry to suck the life out of you, one could put life back into art by engaging with audiences in familiar ways. Reminiscent of the anti-industrial and re-vitalizing efforts of William Morris’ arts and crafts movement, the Fashion Show was a moment which made the ChromaZone Collective’s intentional crossover between art and lifestyle quite public. *The Fashion Show* also highlighted what these two industries could learn from, not only one another, but also creative, do it yourself models of production and consumption, and how their aesthetics could speak of these politics.

While *The Fashion Show* in itself was an interesting preliminary event in the ChromaZone collective's history, its influence upon the incredibly popular 1983 *Chromaliving* show is immeasurable. Known to some as "the artist's shopping mall," (Lypchuk, 40) the exhibit consisted of a large scale takeover of the former Herridge's Department store. As Donna Lypchuk has described, the building was filled with every "imaginable perversion of familiar and everyday objects," and in doing this, it turned the idea of consumerism on its head and provoked questions about the commodification of art, and art's relationship to life and style (41). The event was partially funded by do-it-yourself efforts as well as a 6000 dollar production grant which took care of 75 exhibiting artists along with a large production team. The *Chromaliving* show welcomed a wide range of visitors and did so without the assistance of an existing, privately run gallery. While the Chromazone collective and gallery ran without government assistance, a show of this scale and size was made possible with a grant which seems like pennies to artists in the city today, given the incredible scale of the production.

Set up like a department store the show featured furniture, paintings, and fashion pieces, as well as boutiques for shopping for smaller items, such as t shirts or knick knacks. The *Chromaliving* displays were a thoughtful poke at the Canadian Living Home Show (and perhaps large scale art fairs) but presented new ideas for living outside of the dominant and the banal options could find at a typical trade show. It welcomed large crowds, families, and school groups in to experience 'life in colour' (Concordia Contemporary Canadian Art Database, *ChromaZone/Chromatique*). Expanding upon

1981's show at the Theatre Center, *Chromaliving* featured a fashion show which included works by those involved in the original incarnation of the event, along with new pieces by other designers such as Roman Balicki, William Brown, Andy Fabo, Elinor Rose Galbraith, Matt Harley, Jaime Hart, Denis Joffre, Frances Leeming, Teresea Novaes, Natalie Olanick, Ralph Roberts, and John Scott (ChromaZone, *Chromaliving Catalogue*). Hair for the show was done by John Steinberg of the legendary Yorkdale salon the Rainbow Room (ChromaZone, *Chromaliving Catalogue*). This list includes only half of the participants that were in the fashion show, but all involved were credited in the catalog for their participation (ChromaZone, *Chromaliving Catalogue*). While styles in the show varied, they remained in eccentric and creative tastes, influenced by the Queen street aesthetic.

While the event did not receive much press or praise outside of Toronto, to those who lived and experienced art and culture in the city in the 1980s, the event is legendary. Similarly, Lypchuk argues, the show "identified cross cultural, cross-disciplinary, and cross gender movements that had yet to infiltrate the public or parallel art-gallery systems" at this time (42). The *Chromaliving* show catalogue notes the group's efforts to include a wide range of art and lifestyle objects as following in the footsteps of artistic movements before them, such as the Bauhaus or the Arts and Crafts Movement (10). As suggested in a timeline created by Andy Paterson in the edited collection, *Money, Value, Art: State Funding, Free Markets, Big Pictures* (2001) "the ChromaZone collective . . . anticipates a coterie of artists collectives working outside of museums and established exhibition spaces" in Toronto (35). The collective's specific response to an

over-commercialization of Toronto's art and fashion scene is significant to us now that the 1980s is now over thirty years in the past. How can we reflect on memories of the ChromaZone collective in a present context? Queen Street and the surrounding areas continue to see rising rent costs that force creative and independently owned spaces out and corporate chains in. A perfect example of this struck me while walking down the stretch not too long ago. The MOCCA (Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art) at Queen and Ossington, is set to be sold and re-located due to development (Adams). This gallery was also the site of the 2011 exhibit *This is Paradise: The Cameron House and 1980s Toronto*, a show which featured many works by members of ChromaZone (MOCCA Website, *This is Paradise: Place as a State of Mind*). As I walked past the courtyard of this building, I was greeted and then quickly turned away from an invite-only Nike sponsored party being held on the premises. This - Toronto, Queen Street - isn't the same paradise it was in the 1980s. How does this effect the lives and work of artists and independent designers in the city today? Simultaneously, how can these artists and designers, if we take cues from ChromaZone, clothe life in art, and be involved in changing these conditions? Can they? Can we liberate art, fashion, and design from the grip the mass produced? Reflecting upon the five years that the ChromaZone collective worked together to reach these goals, one might be able to find the answers.

“Hopefully a model for art production will emerge that will eliminate the top down, corporate funded kinds of art that we are seeing. And hopefully younger artists will take the lead, follow Chromazone's influence.” - Rae Johnson

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