



# In Your Face: the people's portrait project

by Gillian McIntyre

**Gillian McIntyre** is Adult Program Coordinator, Art Gallery of Ontario. She may be contacted at [Gillian\\_mcintyre@ago.net](mailto:Gillian_mcintyre@ago.net).

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On July 1, 2006 *In Your Face: the people's portrait project* exhibition opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) with content derived entirely from the public. Interpretive planner David Wistow and I conceived of the show as a way of experimenting with visitor engagement during the time that the AGO underwent a radical Frank Gehry designed renovation and reinstallation. David and I had collaborated before on two experimental interventions in the Degas (2003) and Modigliani (2004) exhibitions where the public was invited to make and exhibit art in the exhibition spaces. We wanted to take the idea further by creating an exhibition made entirely by and for the public. One of our goals was to explore new programming options as we planned for the new 21st century AGO. We were also curious to find out about our existing visitors and potential new visitors in a very real way.

Initially the exhibition was scheduled to be on display for six months. The response was so overwhelming that the date was extended to September 2007 when the AGO was completely closed to complete renovation and reinstallation. The exhibition then traveled to the Portrait Gallery of Canada (a program of Library and Archives Canada) in Ottawa where it remained open until September 7, 2008.

The idea was straightforward. We sent out a call for submissions in January 2006 in newspapers, via e-mail and on the AGO web site. The public was invited to submit postcard-sized portraits in any medium of their choice including writing. The only criteria were that the art be original, 4in. x 6in. and that a signed consent-form accompany each piece. We would not judge the art, and there were no limits to the number of submissions. We stated that we would display

all portraits received by December 1<sup>st</sup> that year that met the criteria.

## Public response

By the opening day we had 10,000 portraits in a variety of media from oil paintings, encaustic, fabric, modeling clay, water colour, pen and ink, photography papier-mâché, silk screen, relief print, collage, drawings and digitally based imagery. Portraits arrived from a range of people: professional artists (some represented in the AGO's permanent collection), people who had never made art before, hobbyists, children. Packages of portraits came from groups: classes, families, whole communities etc. By December 1<sup>st</sup> we had 17,000 on display. Initially submissions came from Ontario, then from across Canada,. Eventually we received international submissions from countries as far-reaching as Australia, Italy, Germany, the United States, South Korea, Japan, Holland, Brazil, Britain, India, Switzerland, and France.

Hundreds of letters came with the portraits:

This is a self-portrait of a 52-year-old woman disabled by MS, arthritis and osteoporosis. It was a pleasure to embark on this mini project and prove I could still do something.

We are members and friends of the Middle Road Community, an intentional community in rural Nelson, British Columbia. We had lots of fun working together to create these pictures. Thanks for your support of art and sharing/spreading the word ...art is for everyone, art is in everyone.

I wish to thank you for this opportunity to show our faces to the world! Because we live with developmental disabilities the public



Title wall on opening day—the walls filled floor to ceiling by the end of the exhibition . ©Art Gallery of Ontario 2008.

often shies away from us. This exhibit will allow us to have our face in public as an equal, as one of the 10 billion who helps to create an amazing diverse world...

Salvation Army Home, Toronto

### Exhibition Design

Part of the exhibition space reserved for blockbuster exhibitions was dedicated to *In Your Face*, and we worked with the exhibition designers to create a flexible hanging system that could accommodate work as it arrived. Installation officers mounted and installed new work as they could throughout the show. Despite our ideas they made their own curatorial decisions as they juxtaposed pieces. We accepted this as a sense of ownership on their part, adding to the organic growth of the exhibition. For labeling, as the high volume of entries became apparent, we decided that we could not list all the names without risking errors and omissions. Better to opt for anonymity in an egalitarian way.

We also wanted drawing stations so visitors could create their contributions right in the space. The 3D designer created these using old frames from the AGO's collection to suit a variety of visitors. Some were large enough

for group use, some low enough for children plus a table with a mirror for solo visitors. We also added two display cases so we could incorporate some of the letters and packages that came with the portraits, giving a full sense of the project.

### What Worked Well

*In Your Face* thrived most of all because of the unprecedented public response. We were able to capitalize on this creative energy by allowing the exhibition to develop in an organic way through a transparent process, flexible structure, and an open-minded attitude about the outcome. The concept was straightforward and clear, allowing the nuanced complexities to develop as the exhibition evolved.

### Capturing Community and Institutional Imagination

Word of mouth advertising spread remarkably far, showing that the exhibition tapped into people's imagination. Many expressed surprise that an institution like the AGO, seen by many as elitist, could be so accessible. *In Your Face* was hung in spaces adjacent to galleries with portraits by artists such as Picasso, Modigliani, Rembrandt, Augustus John, Chuck Close, Frans Hals, Otto Dix etc. Professional

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*Headphones—Self portrait of a young man from Toronto. ©Art Gallery of Ontario 2008.*

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artists were happy to submit alongside amateurs despite the fact that we were unable to acknowledge names. With no advertising budget, ***In Your Face*** received significant media attention, more than many exhibitions with large advertising budgets. Various groups, for example the Boys and Girls Club of Canada, approached the AGO to partner with ***In Your Face*** for the media launch of their after-school, weekend, and summer programs. On several other occasions TV stations elected to hold interviews with the exhibition as a backdrop.

### ***Social Use of the Gallery***

The exhibition was extensively used by the public as a social space. A surprising number of people created elaborate portraits in memory of relations; then visited with family and friends, often traveling a great distance to do so. Visitors, often in groups, spent a long time at the drawing stations creating their portraits. Others used the frames or installation to pose their companions for photographs. We also found that security staff liked the exhibition and reported many interesting discussions with visitors.

### ***Increased Diversity and Access***

Toronto is a very multicultural city, a reality not yet well reflected on the AGO's walls or amongst visitors, board or staff. ***In Your Face*** submissions reflected diversity of all sorts—class, ability, culture, gender, religious belief, and sexual orientation, in a natural way.

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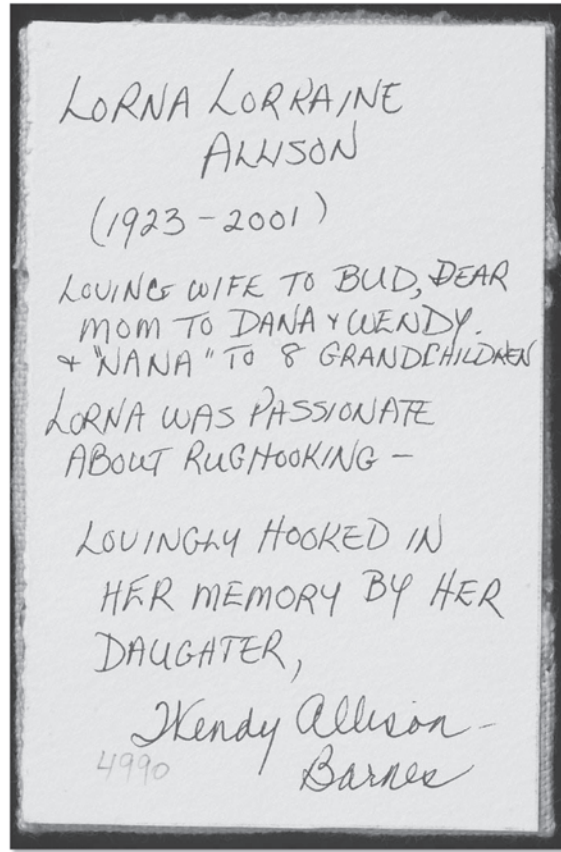


*Visitors to the exhibition—participants looking for their portraits. ©Art Gallery of Ontario 2008.*





Rug-hooked memorial portrait. We were amazed at the care people took.  
©Art Gallery of Ontario 2008.



The back of a rug-hooked portrait sent by the daughter in memory of her mother who was a rug-hooker. The family all came to the AGO to see the exhibition. ©Art Gallery of Ontario 2008.

As a consequence, as contributors came to see the show diversity was reflected amongst the visitors.

### Challenges

#### Copyright Issues

Questions regarding copyright nearly prevented *In Your Face* from going ahead at the beginning. As we were mounting the exhibition in high profile curatorial space where no art would normally be displayed without copyright approval. We sought legal advice and came up with a copyright waiver form giving permission for AGO to use and reproduce the works. (See related article in this issue. Editor

#### Workload

Although the response was extremely rewarding and the work received interesting, the workload on top of existing jobs was enormous. Our 17,000 entries entailed many visits, phone and email enquiries. All submissions had to be entered on a spreadsheet and given a number with documentation of

copyright sign-off etc. Two student interns plus three volunteers worked diligently to keep up. With the drawing stations in constant use, we had to ensure that they were well maintained. Twenty volunteers were recruited and trained to work in the exhibition space with the public to maintain drawing stations and engage the public with the art as well as making links to the AGO's permanent collection.

#### Social media

We started an *In Your Face* Flickr site (<http://flickr.com/groups/artmatters/>) with the idea of having a parallel call for entry and then projecting a digital slide show of the virtual submissions in the exhibition. There were institutional concerns regarding copyright and the display of content intended for a personal use website in a public institution. Due to this the in-gallery projections did not go ahead. However, three years later, the site still exists and is growing. Community engagement in the age of Internet requires us to adapt or become irrelevant. People are used to user-generated content sites such as Flickr, You Tube



Young woman—A self-portrait from a young woman with cerebral palsy. ©Art Gallery of Ontario 2008.

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and Wikipedia and notions of expertise and relevance are shifting.

### **The Exhibition's Impact on the Newly Reopened AGO.**

*In Your Face* was very much in the institutional consciousness during the time we were planning for the future transformed AGO. The overwhelming public and media response to the exhibition could not be ignored, and it spurred rethinking some of our traditional approaches. For example, early in the development of *In Your Face* we made a conscious decision to be inclusive and hang all the portraits that met the criteria. We discussed vetting and decided to make decisions as we went along. In the end absolutely nothing was excluded. Now that the AGO is open, visitors' voices and responses are incorporated by the interpretive planners' strategies throughout the galleries. There is also more concerted effort going into community engagement, community consultation, and accessibility. In ways such as this the AGO's overarching vision changed from curatorial

expertise is paramount to visitor experience is paramount. To facilitate this, and ensure that the vision is shared throughout the AGO, a cross-departmental team developed guiding principals aimed at creating a more holistic way for the institution to plan. These principles, including relevance, diversity, creativity, forum, responsiveness, and transparency are being applied to all of the new gallery's decisions regarding exhibitions, acquisitions, interpretive strategies, and education programming *In Your Face* was an experiment in alternative programming that privileged participation and creativity, fostering new levels of audience engagement and community partnerships. The democratic approach, borrowing from social media and social networking practices, attracted an overwhelming response from a broad variety of people. Institutional concerns about quality and voice became insignificant as the project gathered momentum, showing what can happen when institutions and the public work together as both producers and consumers of culture. ✨