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*Heather Nicol*  
Thank you!! xo

by Heather Nicol

with contributions by

Ian Carr-Harris and Yvonne Lammerich,  
Murray Whyte, Jessica Vallentin

An exhibition in celebration of artists who teach

Fifty four projects in three days

Thursday May 13 – Sunday May 16, 2010



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# List of Artists

## Fine Arts

Debbie Adams  
Lois Andison  
John Armstrong  
& Paul Collins  
Barbara Astman  
Barbara Balfour  
Mark Crofton Bell  
Yael Brotman  
Ian Carr-Harris &  
Yvonne Lammerich  
Lyn Carter  
Carlo Cesta  
Moira Clark  
Nicole Collins  
Tara Cooper & Terry O'Neil  
Luigi Ferrara & Company  
Peter Freeman  
Catherine Heard  
Gordon Hicks  
Johanna Householder  
Alexander Irving  
Michelle Irving

## Performing Arts

Shelagh Keeley  
Stan Krzyzanowski  
Colette Laliberté  
& Sandra Rechico  
Nina Levitt  
Pamila Matharu  
David McClyment  
Lisa Neighbour  
Heather Nicol  
Lewis Nicholson  
& Gwen MacGregor  
Luke Painter  
Paulette Phillips  
Ed Pien  
Karin Randoja  
Lyla Rye  
Fiona Smyth  
Chrysanne Stathacos  
Monica Tap  
Lisa Steele  
& Kim Tomczak  
Michèle White  
Jay Wilson

# Foreword

**Art School (Dismissed)** was created as a celebration of artists who extend their creative practices into the realm of education. A three-day exhibition in the spring of 2010, it included a condensed and abundant program of dance, music, and performance. The event took place in downtown Toronto's historic Shaw Street Public School. The building had been decommissioned for many years—a long period that had left it feeling frozen in time and almost forgotten.

The school's breezy classrooms and wide hallways served as the context for new works in the fields of site-specific installation, sculpture, video and new media, drawing, painting, performance, as well as many hybrid forms that blend and cross boundaries. The exhibition explored the rich interface between teaching and learning with wide-ranging projects that were nostalgic, witty, irreverent, haunting, and complex. As both makers and teachers, the artists in *Art School (Dismissed)* were uniquely situated to explore and question notions of authority, history, memory, and the dissemination of knowledge. Childhood and play inspired many of their works.

Faculty were drawn from OCAD University, the University of Toronto, York University, Sheridan / UTM, the University of Guelph, U of T Scarborough, Centennial College, George Brown College, Humber College, and other educational institutions, such as the Toronto District School Board, The Toronto School of Art, and gallery / musical ensemble education programs. The dynamic gathering of participants in *Art School (Dismissed)* can be seen as a portrait of the art-educational landscape at that moment, and an opportunity to reflect on some of the most important voices influencing young artists in the Toronto region.

The artist-as-educator identity is one that often conflates the economic necessity for an artist to have a "job" with a deep passion for discourse and inquiry. *Art School (Dismissed)* pays homage to artist-educators, who are typically mid-career or established practitioners juggling their exhibition and performance schedules with the demands of teaching.

Historically, knowledge in the arts has been acquired through apprenticeships and mentors. Education in general, and art education in particular, has gradually become institutionalized through academies and art schools. Within this context—or even despite it—mentorship continues as a meaningful dimension in the development of artists. Each of the "Fine Arts" teachers in *Art School (Dismissed)* was invited to select an exceptional student for inclusion in *Teacher's Pet*, an emerging artist salon that formed a component of the show.

A celebration of artists who educate, *Art School (Dismissed)* found a perfect setting in the Shaw Street Public School. The neglected building became a potent backdrop and palette for inspired new works in many disciplines, demonstrating the fertile connections that exist within teaching, learning, and creating.

**Heather Nicol**

May 2011

# Old School

*Art School (Dismissed)* did more than adapt a strategy of creative re-use for a tired old building. It reclaimed its soul.

**At the old Shaw Street School** on the western fringe of the ever-up-and-coming Trinity-Bellwoods neighbourhood in Toronto, it's 8:31 forever. AM or PM, I suppose you can take your pick—Shaw Street, with its soaring neoclassical columns, mahogany banisters and acres of terrazzo, is firmly rooted in the analogue era—but in my mind, it's morning: late September, cool and crisp, the last memories of summer fading as the schoolyard fills with a mob of rambunctious grader-schoolers gleefully indulging in a final 14 minutes of mayhem before the bell rings. Except at Shaw Street, those 14 minutes will never pass. Here, it's playtime forever.

At least, that's how it felt one weekend in the spring of 2010, when the school, a hulking silent tomb of a building showed, for the first time in a decade, signs of life. I'll admit, I almost dismissed *Art School (Dismissed)*, for fear of it being a navel-gazing pedagogical dialogue and stayed home (sick, of course).

But that building: I'd lived within blocks of it for close to a decade. I remembered when the grand entrance was blissfully free of construction hoarding and alive with comings and goings way back in the late 90s, before the Mike Harris Tories' students-per-square-foot rule shut it down simply for being grand, its vast foyer, generous classrooms, broad hallways and generally inspiring proportions being far too humanizing, I suppose, for the common-sense revolution. At 8:31 one morning (my guess: the moment after a unionized Toronto District School Board employee's mandated shift began) the switch was flipped, the clocks froze, and Shaw Street entered its long limbo.

When it closed in 2000, Tory fiscal restraints in all the wrong places told us why. But in the eternal upswing of the property market in this end of town, the real question left to answer was when: When would the cash-strapped city capitalize on the prize real estate its grand old school occupied and get condo-ized? How long could it possibly be before this stately old hall of learning would be tricked out in generic décor moderne?

And then, in 2010, how on earth had this not happened yet? I had gotten an email from Heather Nicol, but late—the show was to open only a day or so afterwards. Despite my minor misgivings, I needed to see inside. The list of artists included many I knew and respected; but those doors, open at last? It could have been a juggling expo; I was going in.

With the building, Nicol had created the perfect lure, as the line-ups to get in all weekend proved. What I found inside exceeded all expectations. I hesitate to name an artist specifically for fear of excluding anyone—though I won't pretend to not have favourites; Debbie Adams' hysterically funny but also achingly sincere summation of the insecurities of youth with her teachers' rubber stamps, which you can see in this book, is one—but I found myself at turns provoked, tickled, disturbed, moved. The projects were remarkably fully-realized and fully felt—all the more so, given the scant three-day timeframe for which they'd be on display. Something went right here—very right. And it's not just the rich vein of emotional truth the project, with its exploration of the completely common experience of being young, alone, and faced with authority and forced socialization for the first time, inevitably mines.

You could have developed this theme for a museum or gallery show and not see something half as honest, provocative and deeply felt. Every artist here internalized the experience, and processed it in kind. Though *internalized* and *processed* seem too clinical terms here; the sense I got, wandering through *Art School (Dismissed)*—up one side, down the other, through again and again—was one of heartfelt embrace of not just common experience but a building itself.

It's odd how we can talk these things for granted. Our lives unfold, as city folk, anyway, almost exclusively behind walls and under roofs—structures built for working, learning, living, sleeping, even dying. Ian Carr-Harris, who made for one of the many moving projects here with Yvonne Lammerich, has devoted a portion of his practice to the examination of the force such structures can exert on the human psyche, and there's no denying its power.

For as long as our species has built things, we've freighted those buildings with symbolic cargo: Pyramids to denote imperial significance, castles to indicate military might, skyscrapers to give physical form to the towering influence of corporate power. Even in the era of high Modernism with Le Corbusier's so-called "machine for living," he and his followers' democratizing architecture, supposedly a purifying cleanse of such architectural signification, became in itself a language for a particular utopian model (and eventually its failure, as the Corbusian machine evolved from democratic space into warehousing for the poor in the form of housing projects).

But a school carries a particular load. This is a space where our most vulnerable, coveted precious ones are abandoned to the daily chore of prescribed self-improvement. It is a storehouse of aspiration and fear, longing and achievement, kinship and loneliness. I'm not sure there's a single structure in our built environment that contains within its walls such a vast, intense range of emotion, nor one so universal. We all went to school. Some of us have kids who do, or did. Others, grandchildren. When a school goes dark, a piece of us goes dark along with it.

It's easy to point to *Art School (Dismissed)* as a metaphoric embodiment of the Jane Jacobs edict, to find new uses for old buildings, though really, it wasn't that; that task falls more to Artscape, which acquired the building from the TDSB back in January 2010 and, when *Art School (Dismissed)* appeared, was in the final stages of preparing for its wholesale transformation of the property into slightly below-market studio condominiums for its nominally creative-class clientele (the ins and outs of that project, and its merits, are subject for another analysis entirely).

No, what Nicol achieved was less the animation of a building than its spirit, both as a community hub and a storehouse of formative emotions not a single one of us could call unfamiliar. *Art School (Dismissed)* reminds us just re-use is almost meaningless in the context of *how* something is being used, and that some buildings are not just bricks and mortar. School's out for good at Shaw Street, but its final recess, that long, lovely playtime that stretched over three days in May, 2010, will live forever.

**Murray Whyte**

October 2011

# The Second Floor

## Room 9

Monica Tap  
Gordon Hicks  
Yael Brotman

Monica Tap's work explores questions of time and representation in painting. In *Escape* she used construction paper, the ubiquitous "primary school project" material, to construct several bountiful tree images that seemed to grow out of the classroom's walls onto the blackboard and surrounding areas. Her inspiration arose from her observation that although talented teachers can make school walls disappear and magically evoke worlds of imagination in a student, less adroit colleagues make those same walls close in, confining and restricting a natural learning process. The tree images were derived from historical engravings and eighteenth-century landscape drawings, and inspired by a magnificent old oak outside of Room 9. They provided a whimsical and fecund representation of a child's imagination escaping the classroom's potentially sterile environment for the marvellous tree-topped world outside the window.

Gordon Hicks referred to his sculptural installation, *Model for Room 9*, as a "daydream." He rolled out 100 kilograms of modelling clay (Plasticine) into slabs, and, using a yardstick as a template, cut long strips that meandered across the floor and arranged themselves in undulating waves. Drawing on his own remembered experience as a sometimes bored and fidgety Grade 3 student in the straight-ahead Cartesian world of public school, his thoughts were drawn to the great expanse of classroom floor that seemed to demand some sort of extravagant modelling gesture. The clear traces of race car or train sets—so enticing to certain school-age boys of generations past—were discernable in the alternative modelling map that wound and bent throughout the classroom.

In *Golden Years*, Yael Brotman combined confessional and transcriptive elements to create a two-pronged installation in the cloakroom. Having first covered the wainscotting with red paint and sheets of gold leaf in a re-imagined Byzantine style, Brotman proceeded to frame coloured drawings—each inspired by collected newspaper photos in which children are foregrounded—between two rows of coat hooks that wrapped around the walls. The viewers, faced with images outside the range of their usual sightlines, were compelled to bend down to take a closer look. At an entry/exit of the cloakroom, a handwritten book, comprised of solicited stories describing memories of elementary school traumas, sat on a music stand. Reminiscent of a medieval choral manuscript, it invited individuals to create a commonality of experience by deciphering its contents.

# Monica Tap



Monica Tap

*Escape*

site-specific collage  
construction paper

Gordon Hicks



Gordon Hicks

*Study for Room 9*

modelling clay

30' x 16'

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With love and gratitude to my family

**Martin Julien, David Protetch & Nicola Protetch**

## Exhibition Curator and Producer

**Heather Nicol** is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Toronto. Her practice includes creating new media audio-sculptures, sound and light installation works, objects, as well as independent curating. Her recent curatorial projects explore site-specific conditions found in underutilized transitional urban spaces, with a focus on creating opportunities for interventions by artists working across a wide range of disciplines. She has worked as an arts educator in museum and school settings at the elementary, high school, and post secondary level.

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