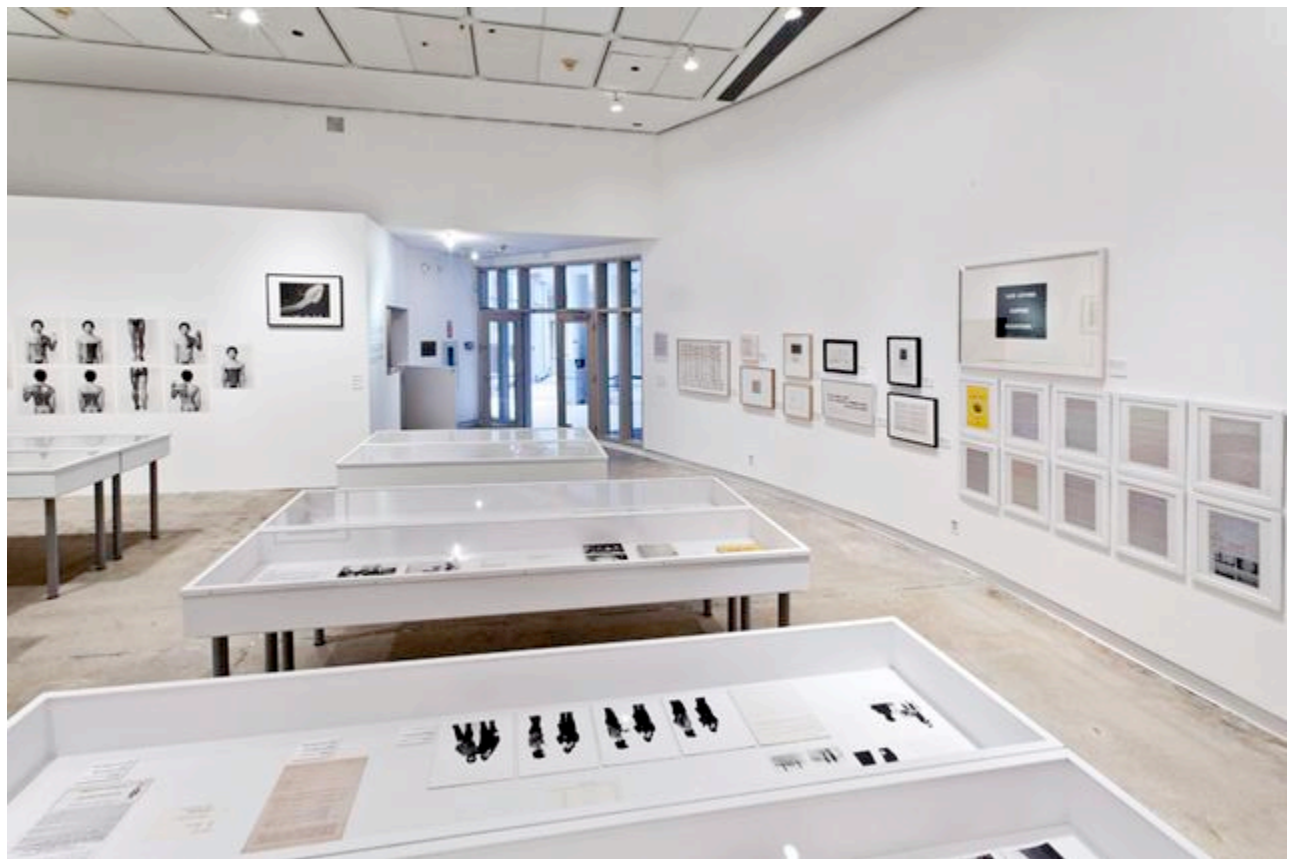


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# On Tour: TRAFFIC: Conceptual Art in Canada

Submitted by Magenta on Thu, 03/17/2011 - 05:20 in



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/1.%20TRAFFIC%20install.jpg>

**TRAFFIC: Conceptual Art in Canada, 1965-1980:** Installation view: Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto, Mississauga (2010).

## Navigating TRAFFIC

### Interview by Bill Clarke

TRAFFIC: Conceptual Art in Canada: 1965-1980 is arguably the most important exhibition currently touring Canada. Recently shown in Toronto at the University of Toronto Art Centre and several satellite galleries, TRAFFIC brings together a staggering amount of work that illustrates the development of Conceptual Art in Canada from the mid-60s to the early-80s. One of the most important and enduring art movements of the 20th Century, Conceptual Art originated within the social and political turmoil of the 1960s – from the rise of feminism and gay liberation to anti-racism and anti-war movements – and presented a profound challenge to the institution of art.

The exhibition focuses on specific manifestations of Conceptual Art practices in urban centres across Canada. Close attention is paid to the inter-regional and international traffic that lead to fertile cross-pollinations and exchanges among artists in this country.

Magenta editor Bill Clarke sat down with Barbara Fischer, Curator of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto and one of the curators of TRAFFIC, to discuss the exhibition, which travels to venues across Canada through the summer of 2012.

**Mount St. Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax  
March 18 to May 8, 2011**

**Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton  
June 24 to September 18, 2011**

**Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery (Concordia), Montreal  
January 21 to April 7, 2012**

**Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver  
Opens May 26, 2012**



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[/images/2.%20TRAFFIC%20Carr-Harris.jpg](#))

**Ian Carr-Harris: Nancy Higginson, 1949- (1972):** Collection: Carmen

Lamanna Gallery Trust, Toronto.

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**Bill Clarke (BC):** Why did you think it was time to organize an exhibition around Conceptual Art in Canada?

**Barbara Fischer (BF):** The idea for *TRAFFIC* came to us about seven years ago. We noticed that, internationally, a number of art historians were looking at the Conceptual Art phenomenon in a new way and re-examining its history. There was a rediscovery of certain conceptual methodologies by younger artists, and even the Turner Prize – with Martin Creed’s *Turning the Light on and Off* installation winning in 2001 – fostered a new-found popularity or sensationalism around conceptual-based practices. In addition, there were new exhibitions around the world looking at the histories of Conceptual Art. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall, a new generation of curators traced its manifestations in Eastern Europe and Russia, and there was already a lot of work underway about conceptualism in Latin America.

However, in recent international surveys, including the important exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* in 1999, developments in Canada appeared only marginally. Clearly, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Canadian artists participated and contributed in major ways to the international phenomenon – from the exchanges taking place at NSCAD, to the early developments of Vancouver photo-conceptualism and Toronto’s *General Idea*, to name just a few. As this pan-Canadian history had not received much attention here, it was perhaps no surprise that Canadian developments fared so poorly in international re-evaluations of Conceptual Art.

**BC:** How did you locate the works in the show?

**BF:** We developed a team of researchers across the country (Halifax, Montreal, Vancouver, Edmonton and Toronto), and worked with a team of Graduate and Post-graduate students to scour archives, publications and exhibition catalogues. We conducted interviews with artists and curators. I'm still amazed at how much of the work in the exhibition comes directly from the artists rather than from museums or private collections. Many of the artists in the exhibition have never been shown together before even though their works are deeply related and were sometimes even produced in direct collaboration with each other. So, it was critical to work as a team with partners and curators from across the country. I don't think this exhibition could have been produced by just one institution.



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</images/3.%20TRAFFIC%20Steele.jpg>)

**Lisa Steele: Internal Pornography (1975-76):** Installation at the Doris

McCarthy Gallery, Toronto. Courtesy the artist and Vtape, Toronto.

**BC:** The exhibition is far-reaching and there is so much to look at. How did you organize the exhibition?

**BF:** The structure of the exhibition emerged during the many discussions amongst the members of the curatorial team – Catherine Crowston, Grant Arnold, Jayne Wark, Michele Theriault with Vincent Bonin, and myself. It was important to us to show the connections and exchanges between Canadian and international artists, as much as to focus on some of the specific, intra-Canadian and local manifestations. For example, in Montreal, artists were interested in the premises of Conceptual Art from the point of

view of the politics of language and the political upheavals in Quebec, whereas artists in Vancouver were more specifically concerned with their place on the edges of a rapidly globalizing economy and Vancouver's urban modernity. Throughout the exhibition viewers will see specific responses to cultural and economic transformations that were taking place across Canada during the 60s and 70s.

**BC:** Where did the title for the exhibition come from?

**BF:** The title, *TRAFFIC*, appropriately suggests that conceptual artists were 'trafficking' in shared ideas, communicating along new routes of communication in a de-centered and globalizing world. In addition, both the ideas and the artists in the exhibition were moving across borders. For example, Suzy Lake and Tom Dean are associated with the history of contemporary art in Toronto but, back in the 1970s, they were living and working in Montreal and had moved there from the U.S. There was a lot of interesting 'traffic' between the U.S. and Canada generally: students and artists were coming north to seek protection from the draft in the US, and others, such as Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge spent a number of years in New York. The exhibition also includes a number of works by American artists who came to Canada to make work, especially Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, Joseph Kosuth, Vito Acconci and Martha Wilson, for instance. This 'traffic' points to the increasing fluidity and internationalism of the art world in the 1970s.

**BC:** Did you notice any common threads or themes as you were putting the exhibition together?

**BF:** Yes, we noticed several, but among the most prevalent was artists' interest in the possibilities of geography and mapping, as well as new communications media and networking. Artists examined and experimented with the old and new information technologies of the time – from using the telephone to video, fax machine and even teleconferencing. The contemporary media environment has changed the reading of a lot of this work, much of which is seen now as prescient. We are in the midst of the information revolution, and we can now look at how deeply informed the work of the 60s and 70s was, playing with and critiquing existing and emerging formats of mapping, language and communication. At the same time, artists seemed to recognize the possibility of making the future, which makes much of this work seem uncanny, and astonishingly pertinent and relevant, now.

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**Published in** [Magenta Magazine Online \(/epublish/1\)](#), [Spring 2011, Volume 2, No. 2](#)

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