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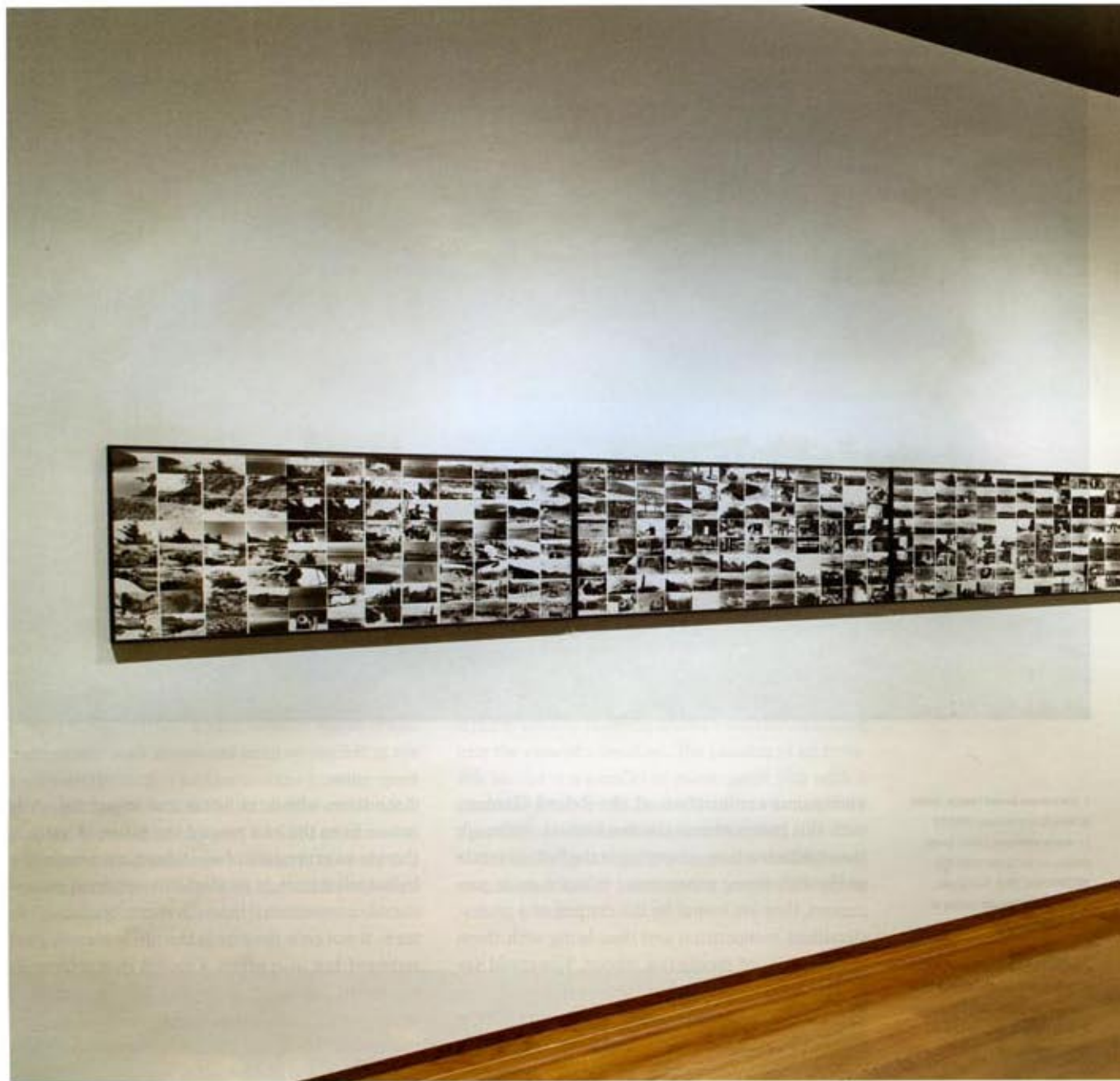
THE AVANT-GARDEN

TRAFFICKING IN
CONCEPTUAL ART

• WHERE'S THE GREEN BOMB?—THE ONE THAT SPARES
THE REDWOODS.

ISSUE NO. 116 \$9





THE REMATERIALIZATION OF THE IDEA

TRAFFIC:
Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–1980

by Daniel Baird



Left: Roy Kiyooka, *Halifax Sea and Rock*, 1971, silver gelatin prints. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Right: Ian Wallace *Pao-Am Scan*, 1970, silver gelatin prints. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

a simple piece from 1968 entitled *Opinion (Art as Idea as Idea)*, American artist Joseph Kosuth printed the dictionary definition of the word “opinion” in white on a black background and mounted it on a board. Kosuth’s piece is not interesting because it reminds us of the dictionary meaning of a common word, but because it gestures toward the nature of a larger program he also pursues in essays like “Art After Philosophy”: namely, that the enterprise of art should no longer be focused, as late Modernist critics like Clement Greenberg would have it, on producing objects designed to create a particular kind of aesthetic experience but, rather, on an investigation of foundations—of art in particular and its place in the world and, perhaps, of everything else as well. And for Kosuth, following pivotal figures in the history of analytical philosophy like Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin, this investigation should give special importance to language.

The conceptual art movement, whose exhilarating inception was so beautifully described by Lucy Lippard in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, is, in a way, the culmination of ideas set in motion by Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: namely, our experience of the world is not one of transparent, unmediated access to the truth but is shaped by concepts, and art history is

the dynamic convergence of an idea or concept and a historical moment. Conceptual art owes much as well to the often explosive self-regard of art dating from the 19th century: Manet's critique of representation, Cezanne and Picasso's metaphysics of perception, Duchamp's *reductio ad absurdum* of the art object, Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus—the list could go on and on. Art has long been grappling with its own idea. In the context of this creative promiscuity, one that facilitated so much improbable cross-breeding, it is hard to understand Jasper Johns's refined work or Robert Rauschenberg's combines without looking back to Duchamp. In this context, Kosuth's program can feel puritanical: instead of a wild proliferation of materials, forms and ideas, there is a narrow, moralistic-sounding focus on language and foundations. But that need not be case. "If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form," Sol LeWitt writes in his famous "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," 1967, "then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps—scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations—are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product." For LeWitt, conceptual art is neither purely analytical nor about final products or answers but, rather, about the process of an idea. And in a way Kosuth's "Art as Idea as Idea" pieces are in this vein: they propose pathways of thought, and raise questions, without predetermining a conclusion. "Conceptual artists are mystics," LeWitt wrote in "Sentences on Conceptual Art," 1969. "They leap to conclusions logic cannot reach."

Many of the things we take for granted in contemporary art—the idea that materials are neutral, that works of art might include more than one media, that they need not involve objects at all but can be communal and participatory—originate in some form in the extended moment covered by "Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–1980." Curated by Barbara Fisher of the Justina M Barnicke Gallery of the University of Toronto, Grant Arnold of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Catherine Crowston of the Art Gallery of Alberta, Michèle Thériault with Vincent Bonin of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery of Concordia University, and Jayne Wark of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, "Traffic" is currently on view at the University of Toronto Art Galleries in Toronto, Mississauga and Scarborough and will subsequently travel to its other host institutions. Sprawling and somewhat shapeless in the best possible way, "Traffic" is a startling reminder of the sheer scope of conceptual art: there are paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, prints, videos,

books, performances and everything in between. The work of many of the recent heirs of the conceptual art movement can feel slick, prescriptive and academic, unwittingly running afoul of LeWitt's prescient dictum, "when an artist learns his craft too well he makes banal art." The work in "Traffic," on the other hand, is by turns raw, earnest, brooding and playful, and thrums with a restless and youthful sense of freedom: this is art as concept, art as idea, art as process but, above all, art as a mode of thinking whose end is by no means known in advance, taking to heart Johan Huizinga's argument in *Homo Ludens* that thought originates in the gay anarchy of play. Somewhat awkwardly divided up into distinct but overlapping scenes in Toronto, Guelph, London, Montreal, Halifax, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver, "Traffic" is also a reminder that art—and especially conceptual art—is always personal, fuelled by the relationships and conversations of a particular place and time.

One of the most powerful strains of art making in the latter half of the 1960s and through the 1970s was at once procedural, process oriented and, ultimately, diaristic. By "procedural," I mean a set of rules that shape the parameters of the piece, the

1. Lisa Steele, *Internal Pornography*, 1975, three channel video transferred to DVD, 30:00. Courtesy of the artist and V tape, Toronto. Photo Credit: Toni Hafkensheid.

2. Michael Snow, *Venetian Blind*, 1970, 24 Ektacolor prints in painted wood frames. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank. Photograph: Toni Hafkensheid.



work itself being the means through which it is carried out. And of course what it means to "follow a rule," as Wittgenstein point out, is in no way self-evident. In Tom Burrows's *Sand Pile*, 1969, for instance, there is a video of Burrows attempting to pour a perfect, conical pile of sand, and in front on a pedestal is an exemplary pile that invites the viewer to touch and change it. *Sand Pile* acknowledges Robert Morris's influential essay "Anti-Form,"



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where the importance of physical accident is placed at the centre of sculptural practice, and also Robert Smithson's pour works, but the tension between the generic sand pile and the video of the artist suggests that this work is less about form than about the act of letting form happen. In Vera Frenkel's groundbreaking 1974 multi-media work *String Games: Improvisation for Inter-City Video*, two teams of five people, one in Montreal and one in Toronto, play a game of Cat's Cradle with big lengths of white string; the performances were teleconferenced live between the two cities so that the performers, improvising, could respond to one another. *String Games* is an unusually evocative work, suggesting the tensile lines that bind the people together in fragile disequilibrium, the communicative lines running between cities, and their continuous and potentially volatile feedback; one can imagine adding to *String Games*'s complexity indefinitely—not just two cities, but four, six, eight.

In a country like Canada, with an abundance of space and wilderness and an art history that consists almost entirely of landscape painting, one would expect conceptual artists to find innovative ways of taking on landscape, and so they do. Jeff Wall's wonderful early work *Landscape Manual*, 1969–1970, is a crude words-and-pictures piece documenting a drive

through drab Vancouver suburbs, the camera set on the car's dashboard. The text accompanying the generic images is not about the experience of the drive, or of a drive, but is rather about his relationship to photographs of such drives. *Real Scenery Flashing Past* runs the caption to an image of a street with telephone poles, dark trees and a small clapboard house, the text commenting "the rider did not attempt at any time to make any particular connection between 'real' photo images and 'real' scenery flashing past the car windows." Wall is here acutely aware of how experiences and their representation have gradually become virtually interchangeable. Roy Kiyooka's *Long Beach to Peggy's Cove*, 1971, made while the artist was teaching at NSCAD, is a compilation of small photographs tracing a drive from Long Beach to Peggy's Cove—city roads, rolling hills, a bridge, drifting clouds. Whereas *Landscape Manual* is distancing and ironical in a way that anticipates Wall's more spectacular and self-conscious later work, Kiyooka's piece presents landscape as so irreducibly linked to movement and time it cannot be reconstituted as a contiguous whole. And in David Askevold's *Halifax Travelogue*, 1969, both landscape and cityscape disappear altogether into blurry shots of the street taken every block from a city bus; space becomes pure, abstract movement.

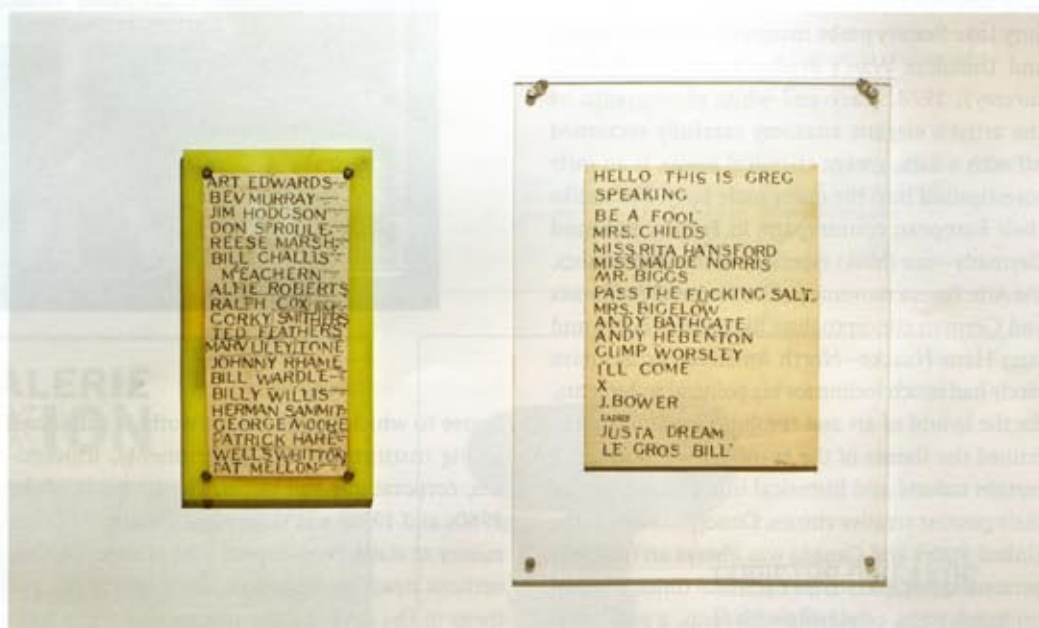


1. Tom Burrows, *Sand Pile (Sand to Pyramid to Sand)*, 1973, video in dvd format, table, sand. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Permanent Collection Fund. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

2. Greg Curnoe, (left) *List of Names of Boys I Grew Up With*, 1962, drawing, ink on paper. Collection of McIntosh Gallery, University of Western Ontario, London. (right) *Row of Words on My Mind No. 1*, 1962, stamp pad ink on paper. Collection of the estate of Greg Curnoe, courtesy of Wynick/Luck Gallery, Toronto. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Much is often made of the way conceptual artists repudiated the creation of art objects, especially paintings, and that may be so. Nonetheless, conceptual art is rich with notes, drawings and sketches, reflecting LeWitt's remark that the process, mistakes and false starts included are often more interesting than the finished product. LeWitt is best known during this period for his intricately geometrical, shimmering graphite wall drawings, but he also did works meant for a smaller scale whose underlying algorithm was far less deterministic, like a 1971 work done for NSCAD's famous lithography workshop in which short, disconnected lines cluster and scatter across the page. In addition to being a singularly talented writer in a generation of fine writer-artists (Robert Morris, Mel Bochner, Donald Judd

explorations of the boundaries and identity of the self. Conceptual art's mode of self-regard is both playful and ruthless, and Michael Snow's work is exemplary in this regard. *Authorization*, 1969, is an instant, black-and-white snapshot of Snow taking a photograph of himself attached to the surface of a mirror so that the viewer can watch himself watching Snow seeing himself through a camera, and the later *Venetian Blind*, 1970, consists of 24 colour close-ups of Snow's face, eyes closed, somehow ecstatic, riding through the canals of Venice. In Ian Carr-Harris's amusing *I thought I had better not*, 1973, there is a table painted silver and a photograph of the artist's lower body in underwear with the caption "I thought I'd better not include my face so as not to embarrass you." In Colin Campbell's grimly brooding video



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and Daniel Buren were all notable stylists in prose), Robert Smithson was also a refined draftsman, and his sketches for his pour and boulder-slide pieces are both dynamic and classically beautiful. Greg Curnoe's word-diary pieces, on the other hand, are direct, a little goofy and emotionally exposed. The print *Homage to Sam Langford*, 1970, for instance, has a feverishly typed catalogue of the contents of the Nova Scotian Hotel in Halifax, Nova Scotia, doodles of a bird and a camera at the bottom, and the lyrical early pieces *List of names of boys I grew up with*, 1962, and *Row of Words on My Mind*, 1962, both achingly intimate, almost adolescent works.

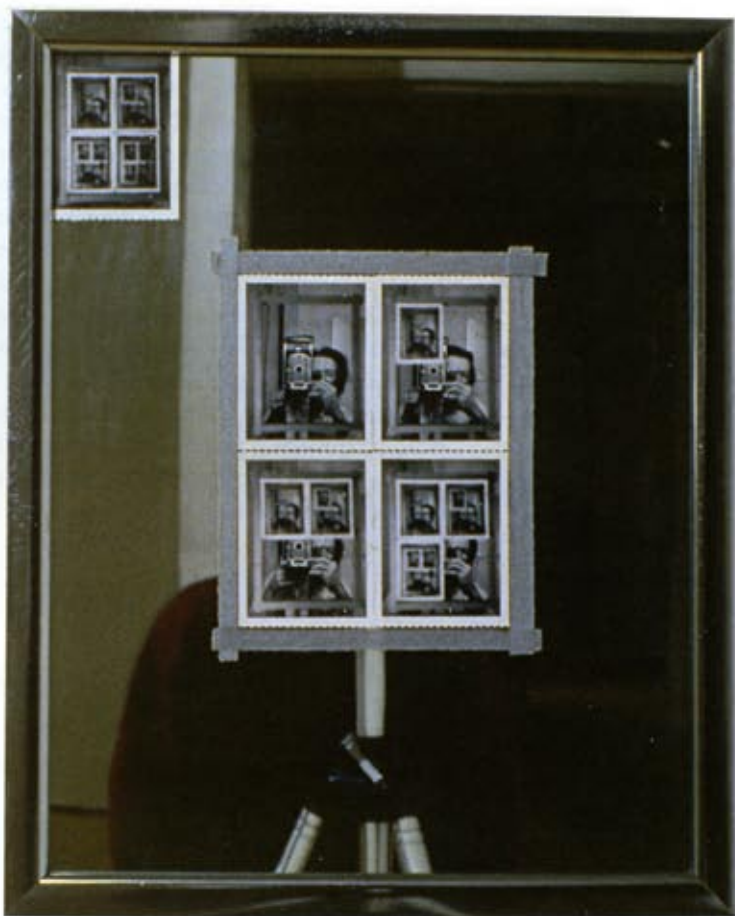
Any movement fuelled, as Joseph Kosuth would have it, by a boundary-breaking turn toward philosophical foundations inevitably contains

True/False, 1972, the artist faces the camera directly or in profile, reciting in monotone "I am heterosexual—true, false," "I am part Indian—true, false," "I want to be a star—true, false," as though here the binary categories of truth and falsehood were baffling and inadequate, as though the beginnings of an answer always lies in between. One of the most arrestingly beautiful and searching Canadian works of this era is Lisa Steele's three-channel video *Internal Photography*, 1975. In one channel, she stands nude against the background of a map, eventually drawing and erasing her fallopian tubes and ovaries onto her stomach; in another, she is lounging in a bed, lugubriously narrating harrowing passages of her life. This is undoubtedly a feminist work about identity, but it is also one that encapsulates a deep and almost

mercurial ambivalence, as though the artist resented the question itself: questions of identity inevitably abstract from the irreducible reality of the body and self.

The formative era of conceptual art was one of intense political and cultural turbulence in both Europe and North America—Vietnam War protests, May 68, Prague Spring—and it might seem surprising that I have given this aspect so little play: after all, much of the stated *raison d'être* of conceptual art, at least in the writings of Lucy Lippard and others, was an iconoclastic rejection of modes of art making oriented toward mainstream institutions and conventional narratives. And there are works of this era that are politically potent and sometimes outright funny. Greg Curnoe's extemporaneous map of our continent grandly leaves out the United States; the lipstick traces of Joyce Wieland's iconic *O Canada* are by turns mocking and ironically nationalistic; the works of both Lisa Steele and Suzy Lake fiercely probe images of women's bodies; and Theodore Wan's *Bridine Scrub (For General Surgery)*, 1978, black-and-white photographs of the artist's elegant anatomy carefully sectioned off with a dark, greasy, chemical smear, is an early investigation into the queer male body. But unlike their European counterparts in France, Italy and Germany—one thinks especially of the Situationists, the Arte Povera movement, the Viennese Actionists and German conceptualists like Joseph Beuys and later Hans Haacke—North American artists have rarely had much feeling for big political statements, for the hybrid of art and revolution that has often fanned the flames of the avant-garde elsewhere; a certain naïveté and historical innocence is one of their greatest creative virtues. Conceptualism in the United States and Canada was always an intensely personal quest, even in dark political times, a way of exploring ideas, of playing with ideas, a proclamation of freedom.

Conceptual art was less a movement, like Surrealism or even Situationism, than an experimental, iconoclastic spirit pursuing the intersection of ideas, the imagination and the world, and its commitments were never better stated than in John Baldessari's incantation, "I will not make any more boring art." It was also among the first trends of art unburdened by the studio or, for that matter, any particular place or language—Daniel Buren's striped flags were as uncannily beautiful and provocative in windows in Halifax as they were in Paris—which is why its practitioners could so easily migrate between New York, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. We take for granted today that the art world is global, artists, curators, and critics continuously connected by way of the Internet and flying between biennials and residencies, and we often perilously forget the staggering



Michael Snow, *Authorization*, 1969, instant silver prints (Polaroid 55) and adhesive tape on mirror in metal frame. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Purchased in 1969. Courtesy the artist.

degree to which the global art world is subsidized by big institutions like governments, universities, corporations and banks. The art world of the 1960s and 1970s was slower and smaller, with less money at stake. People spent a lot of time together without much to do; people wrote letters and put them in the mail; hardly anyone seemed to have much in the way of a job and certainly didn't want one. There's little evidence that anyone seriously thought of being a conceptual artist as a "career." Most of the artists were young, or had managed to remain young. I'm inclined to think of conceptual art as essentially romantic without the huge burdens of history 18th- and 19th-century European romanticism was weighed down by; it revelled in energy and open-ended freedom. In a video made in Halifax in the late 1960s, Garry Neill Kennedy and Lawrence Weiner are leaning back on a grassy hill in the sun, at once relaxed and excited, Kennedy fresh-faced, Weiner with a full black beard. "Yeah, some people still make objects," Weiner says at one point, as though he really can't think of anything that would be more of a drag. ■

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