

Conceptual creations drive Traffic at Art Gallery of Alberta

BY NANCY TOUSLEY, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD AUGUST 26, 2011

Presented By:



Calgary artist Paul Woodrow presented a live performance on Traffic's opening weekend with his Tadpole Quartet.

Photograph by: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

The first survey of conceptual art in Canada is a huge, dense and exhaustive exhibition that nonetheless was filled with viewers one recent Saturday at the Art Gallery of Alberta, where it is now on view.

And why not? Conceptual art, in which art and philosophy hooked up not to make more art objects but to dematerialize the artwork, might be the most influential art movement of the 20th century. The coupling ignited the spark that opened visual art to new practices, forms, materials and priorities.

In place of old assumptions about the nature of art and art-as-commodity, conceptual art shifted the substance and value of art to the idea. Ideas themselves could be art and an art idea could be manifested in anything an artist chose: a word or sentence, texts, actions, events, videos, performance, everyday life, sound, information, communications like letters and postcards, documents, bookworks, photographs. And process was privileged over product.

If this all sounds too intellectual, forget that. Imagination was running rampant. As Lucy Lippard, an important American writer on conceptual art, has observed, it was a movement started by young artists

who were trying “to escape from the frame-and-pedestal syndrome in which art found itself by the mid-1960s.” Their experiments and practices were varied and rich with humour, drama, poetry, parody and more.

Calgary artist Paul Woodrow presented a live performance from one vein of conceptualism on Traffic’s opening weekend with his Tadpole Quartet (1973). The work for four saxophonists and fish in an aquarium was restaged at AGA for the first time since 1979. Its musical composition is determined by chance, the positions of swimming fish, the “notes,” on the musical staffs delineated on each side of the aquarium. (Tadpoles are no longer available for sale).

The delight and suspense of listening to the piece, which sounded mostly like music, is that no one — artist, musicians, audience — knows what will happen next. For its 15-minute duration, we were transported back to the ’70s. This was the decade in which conceptual art came to Calgary, as discussed at another AGA event held here, a panel that included Woodrow, Rita McKeough, Ron Moppett, this writer, and Catherine Crowston, the AGA’s deputy director and chief curator.

Crowston is one of Traffic’s six curators and its initiator with Barbara Fischer, director/chief curator of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery of the University of Toronto.

Seven years in the making, Traffic breaks ground with its research on the movement in Canada as a whole. The show traces the circulation of ideas among artists in Canada, the U.S. and Europe and among artists in Canadian cities where conceptualism took hold: primarily Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, London, Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver. In the U.S., mainstream conceptualism is dated from 1965 to 1976. But ideas don’t arrive at and depart from all destinations at the same speed. Traffic dates the first Canadian conceptualism from 1965 to 1980.

Conceptualism was spread by people. In most parts of Canada, it arrived late and lingered. The exceptions would be Vancouver and Toronto, where it began in the mid 1960s. Halifax, through the programs of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, became the hotbed of conceptualism in Canada, with strong ties to the U.S., after 1969.

That year the first conceptual art exhibition in Canada, Place and Process, concurrent with the show Air Art, was held at the Edmonton Art Gallery (reborn as the Art Gallery of Alberta last year) because of then EAG director Bill Kirby. Artists Les Levine, Hans Haacke and the N.E. Thing Co. did performances. After the opening Lippard, Iain and Ingrid Baxter (N.E. Thing Co.) and Lawrence Weiner flew to the Arctic to execute Weiner’s work, An abridgement of an abutment to or near or about the Arctic Circle (1969). After Kirby left in 1971, the gallery was realigned under director Terry Fenton who moved it towards what many conceptualists were reacting against, the formalist esthetics of New York art critic Clement Greenberg.

Iain Baxter, who founded N.E. Thing Co. with his wife Ingrid in Vancouver in 1966, was from Calgary. But things didn’t get going here until 1971 when Woodrow arrived to teach at the University of Calgary. “I was told in Montreal, ‘Don’t go there. Nothing happens there,’ ” he recalls. But, conceptualists made their own opportunities. Woodrow joined up with Clive Robertson, who arrived the same year, and together these transplanted Englishmen founded W.O.R.K.S. an international performance and publishing collaborative. The anagram name stands affirmatively for “We ourselves roughly know something.”

Hindsight says it's little wonder that in 1971, in an isolated city of fewer than 500,000 people, ambitious outward-looking artists would turn to networking and available forms of mass communication like radio, TV, video and publishing, both audio recordings and a magazine, to get their ideas out. But such was the DIY spirit of conceptual art. In 1972 and '73, W.O.R.K.S. organized World Festivals and artists from around the world responded with instructions for performances, happenings and actions.

"Fly to where you are . . ." is the legend on Woodrow's poster for Imaginair Travel, which features a photograph of himself, looking pensively into the distance. He also founded the Bureau of Imaginary Exchange, a "para-bureaucratic organization" set up to investigate the relationship between art and social values.

Traffic's Calgary section features collaborative and independent works by Robertson, Woodrow, performance and video artist Marcella Bienvenue, Chuck State Enterprizes-founder Don Mabie, Brian Dyson and Jeffrey Spalding, who first came to Calgary in 1978. A Black Painting from 1973-75 and a Diary Painting from 1978, two works that point to his connections with Halifax and the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, represent the latter. He and Eric Cameron, another artist associated with both Halifax and Calgary, are the only two artists in the show who are represented by paintings, albeit conceptual ones.

Crossovers and connections and continuing debates over what constitutes conceptual art make sorting it to everyone's satisfaction a messy business. Spalding would characterize almost all the art made in Canada in this period as post-conceptual, including his own. But, he says, everyone who was there has his own version of the story and remembers things differently. The show's inclusiveness points to the continuing influence of conceptual art in contemporary practice.

An undertaking this enormous, hashed out among six points of view, is sure to toss up bones of contention. A viewer from Calgary might find that section a bit cramped. In the London section, there's Greg Curnoe: a conceptual artist? Perhaps not, but his *Names of Boys I Grew Up With* (1962) predates Garry Neill Kennedy's *My Fourth Grade Class* (1972), a conceptual classic by 10 years. As Lippard has commented, ideas were in the air.

By any measure, Traffic should be seen as a spectacular achievement and a significant contribution to the history of art in Canada. Every student of Canadian art, and every Canadian art student, should see it. A catalogue is coming soon.

SpotlightTraffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980, a travelling exhibition on view at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, through Sept. 25.

Exhaustive exhibition on view in Edmonton

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