

## TRAFFIC: CONCEPTUAL ART IN CANADA 1965–1980

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University of  
Toronto Art Galleries

The territory covered by *Traffic* is best illustrated by Bill Vazan's *Canada Line*, 1969–70: a network of lines taped on gallery floors across the country according to precise coordinates, designed to follow a proposed common trajectory from coast to coast. This line, transcribed on a map, cements both the linear connection and the vast distances that exist in between. In *Traffic*, each discrete location within Canada is positioned not as a centre, but as one point among many on an international horizon.

Presented by the University of Toronto's four galleries across three cities, *Traffic* compiles a definitive survey of early conceptual practices in Canada along geographic lines that provide the experiential effect of traversing the nation with each shift in venue. Within each site, however, the intense accumulation of documented gestures and words that often defied an

institutional context challenges the visual expectations of the gallery setting.

Consequently, publications and assorted ephemera are displayed in banks of vitrines at all four venues; in Blackwood Gallery's Halifax installation, these dominate the space, conspiring with a dense hanging of prints from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design's progressive Lithography Workshop to present an archive that demands patient reading. Careful study is rewarded in the revelation of many prolific conceptualists of the period, from Vito Acconci to Sol LeWitt, who produced key works at NSCAD during this period. This influx of international artists into Canada's remote institutions was a strategy that mirrored conceptual art's interest in pedagogical strategies that transmit art via written instructions.

Conceptual art's immaterial qualities eased communication between Canadian artists and cities, allowing new ideas to flourish in otherwise isolated locations. Following from the mail-based practices widely represented throughout *Traffic*, projects like N.E. Thing Co.'s experiments with Telex transmissions are valuable precursors to web-based practices in which the duplication of an image from one location to the next is written into the ideological fibre of the work.

Ontario-based practices shown at the University of Toronto Art Centre and Doris McCarthy Gallery take this prescience closer to contemporary uses of social media, from Arnaud Maggs' serial portraits of students to the self-reflective filming of daily lives. Marshall McLuhan's increasingly prevalent ideas can be traced in General Idea's popular media tactics towards a trans-Canadian art movement, as well as Vincent Trasov's participation in the theatre of

Vancouver's 1974 Mayoral race in the guise of Mr Peanut. These expositions of the self accelerate through the timeline of *Traffic*, such that Lisa Steele's 'Internal Pornography', 1975, with its blank recitation of provocative sexual acts, anticipates a time when the broadcasting of desire will empty these words of titillation and return their content to the realm of pure idea.

Autobiographical actions return this Canadian history of conceptual art to the separate localities that informed the lives and works of these artists, be it the impact of the Quiet Revolution on Montreal artists' choice of English or French, or Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge's fiercely political indictments of Toronto's gallery system. Vancouver's conceptual responses to an exceptional natural environment, such as Rodney Graham's meditative 'Camera Obscura', 1979, contain pastoral echoes that fuel *Traffic*'s more poetic passages. The recurring motif of the road trip situates the artist in an environment of constant transition best captured in the breadth of Roy Kiyooka's photographic series 'Long Beach to Peggy's Cove', 1971.

This sweeping vision aside, the deployment of cities to forge a national history falters in *Traffic*'s central installation at UTAC, where Toronto and Vancouver's combined might stifle the smaller pockets of conceptual activity represented in Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg. Rather than revealing some unique part of the wider narrative, these minor inclusions visibly marginalise these cities within the story of conceptual art – perhaps, properly so, given the alternative threads of visual research happening across the prairies in these decades. Similarly, the curatorial attempt to incorporate the fullness of 'the Arctic', via the scant results of a three-day expedition to Inuvik initiated by the Edmonton Art Gallery in 1969, is especially problematic for its cursory glance at a region that demands further critical insight.

Rather than detracting from the overall strength of *Traffic* as a historical survey of Canadian conceptual art, these questions present valuable starting points for future research that will hopefully emerge from the exhibition's related conference and its subsequent tour to other Canadian venues over the next two years. The entry points created by these gaps in understanding will keep the process of conceptual inquiry alive and well in Canada for decades to come.

*Stephanie Vagh* is an artist and writer living in Ontario

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Courtesy Vape, Toronto. Photo Toni Hafkenschheid



Lisa Steele, 'Internal Pornography', 1975–76, three channel video transferred to DVD