

# Entertainment

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## HOWELL ON HOWL

James Franco an offbeat choice for Beat poet, **E7**

## ART OF IDEAS

Murray Whyte wades into heavy Traffic and comes out impressed, **E8**



E8 • TORONTO STAR • THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2010

## ENTERTAINMENT

### GALLERIES

# Traffic worth the trip

Our critic gives the green light to ambitious survey of Canadian conceptualism at U of T

MURRAY WHYTE  
VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

Today, we'll be talking about the history of conceptual art in Canada.

Still here? Good. I was afraid I'd lost you. Fair enough. Since the early 1960s, when smarty-pants Minimalists like Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd decided it was time for some pushback on an art market gorged on multi-million-dollar Abstract Expressionists, conceptualism's gotten a bit of a bad rap. How many times have you heard it? Conceptualism is dry. Conceptualism is boring. Conceptualism is a theoretically dense quagmire of intellectual pretense too calcified to ever drill through.

To all of that, *Traffic*, a survey of conceptualism in Canada from 1965 to 1980, offers a simple retort: As if. Whatever paths art may have taken since those early days — admittedly not all of them good, several of them guilty of those aforementioned sins — *Traffic*, with its 500-plus works by hundreds of artists, is at turns hilarious, clever, riveting, mind-bending, poignant, impish, sweet, violent, visceral, subversive and, yes, now and then a little dull.

But this is only to say that if conceptualism had a single mission, it was to broaden the notion of art to be any and all of those things. In a rigid, market-driven moment insisting on an aesthetic continuum reaching its end-of-days scenario with abstraction, this was a radical notion indeed. Artists like LeWitt and Carl Andre made work from cinder blocks, or drew prescribed geometric patterns with instructions on how they could be repeated; Lawrence Weiner offered only instructions, with a telling condition: "The artist need not make the work," he said, for it to be considered his art. Idea was everything: objects — those things you sell — were byproduct, and ideally nonexistent.

*Traffic* may be a history, but it feels remarkably present. "Conceptual" is a historical term, but it remains penetratingly radioactive. If you were at Nuit Blanche last weekend, you might have seen Micah Lexier and Martin Arnold's hand-folded take on Erik Satie's *Vexations*, or Gerald Ferguson's pile of a million pennies; Chris Shepherd's commitment to move 15 tons of cinder blocks from one place to the next and back again; Dave Dymant's "Day for Night," a major slowdown of the Beatles film *Hard Day's Night*. Process, increment, endurance, performance, workaday materials (and in Shepherd's case, just work) and a notable commitment to creating experiences, not objects — all of these were hallmarks of the early conceptual era, and its main tenets, liberation and possibility, remain as infectious today as ever.

But that's now. What about then? One of the things you'll encounter in *Traffic* is, unfortunately, traffic,



COURTESY OF AA BRONSON

General Idea's "Light On" (1972) at Hart House's Barnicke Gallery.

as you'll need to log freeway time to see all of it. Hosted by University of Toronto galleries all over town, *Traffic* means to represent conceptualism from sea to shining sea, and it's been broken down by region: The east coast, in particular the

conceptual hothouse at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), at Blackwood at U of T Mississauga; Southern Ontario, including Toronto, at U of T Scarborough; Western Canada, including early works by west coast super-

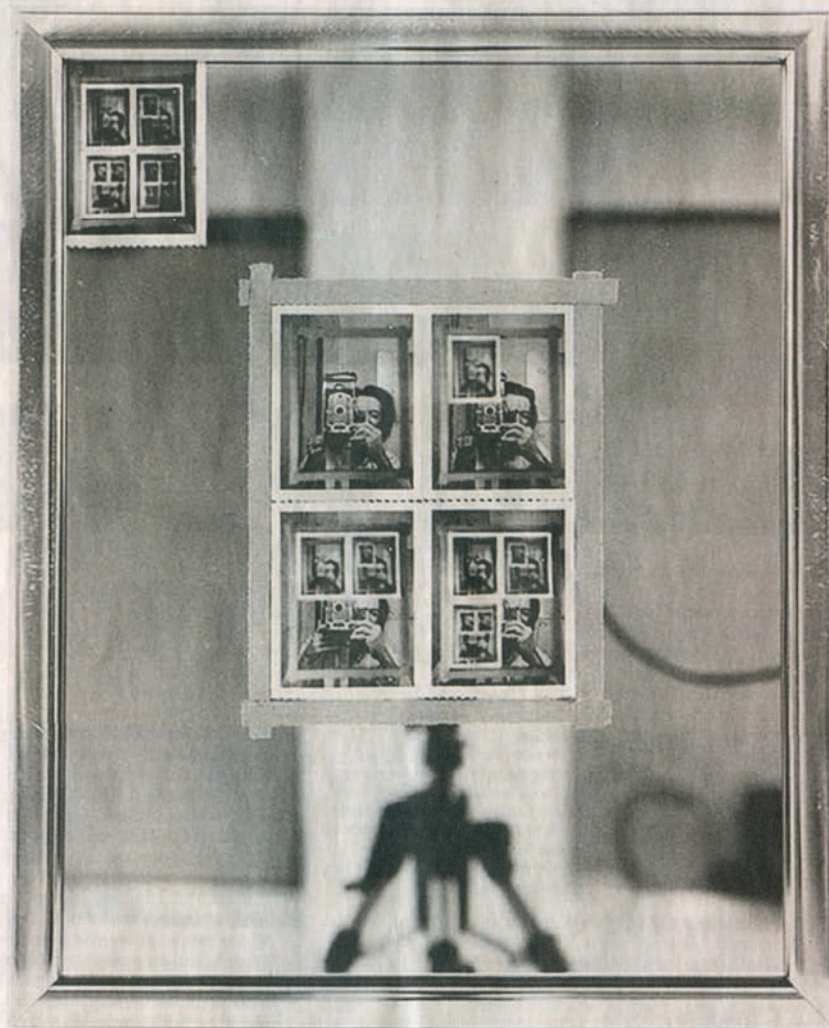


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COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

"Authorization" (1969): a photographic record of Michael Snow building a photographic record of himself.

stars Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham, at UTAC; and Quebec at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House.

Logistics aside, though, the show, the product of a collaboration between curators in every corner of Canada, is huge, exhaustive, overwhelming, completist, connective, important and a ridiculous amount of fun.

Conceptualism's emergence alongside the social and political upheavals of the late '60s and early '70s is no coincidence, and at Blackwood, there's a surge of feelgood anti-establishment liberation in the reams of scribbled notes, typed pages, ridiculously obsessive sets of instructions, edicts and aphorisms. "LES LEVINE COPIES EVERY-ONE," in white block letters on black background, epitomizes the break: Once an admonishment, here it's a badge of honour.

The Blackwood portion both establishes NSCAD as Canada's early ground zero for conceptualism, thanks to the forethought of the school's prescient, dialled-in curator, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, and significantly, exposes Canadian

art's entry into the growing international conversation.

Vanguard conceptual artists like John Baldessari, Vito Acconci and Weiner did some of the earliest work in collaboration with NSCAD, and their presence there helped to establish it as a magnetic north for artists across Canada straining to find their conceptual tribe. Iain and Ingrid Baxter's Vancouver-based N.E. Thing Co., Toronto's Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow all worked with NSCAD to produce works, cross-fertilizing with Weiner, Baldessari, LeWitt, Ferguson, Dan Graham and far too many others to count. Baldessari, a visiting luminary from New York, maybe said it best in a project to be executed by NSCAD students: "I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art," with instructions that it be written out, by hand, on the gallery walls.

Doubtless, *Traffic's* marquee draw will be at UTAC, where big-name Vancouverites like Wall, Graham, Ken Lum, Ian Wallace and the N.E. Thing Co. are clustered; across the way at Barnicke is the Montreal portion where the thinnest representation of conceptualism — never so much a force in a culture where painting, thanks to the Automatistes, was a social revolutionary force itself — is placed.

Running out of road on *Traffic* — inevitable for a show so sprawling and so good — my last words are an

**Huge, overwhelming, important and a ridiculous amount of fun**

urging to visit Scarborough for the Southern Ontario portion. There's both greatest hits — General Idea's *Miss General Idea Pavilion* — and revelations here. You'll find great works by Greg Curnoe, Michael Snow, Lisa Steele and tons more.

There's also an abject lesson in the fragile idealism of any movement, and its inevitable splintering: Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, part of the Toronto conceptual vanguard, chafed early on with the movement's politically agnostic — and, they'd say, introspectively elitist — ways.

"Art about art," they wrote in their self-published *Fox* magazine, on display here, "without social relations or a social ideology, is bullsh--." That this, not to mention their infamous Art Gallery of Ontario show of 1976, *It's Still Privileged Art*, is seeing the institutional light of day for the first time in decades, tells you all you need to know about what the growing conceptual hegemony thought about that.

That's the beauty of *Traffic*: It's a long walk through conceptualism's irrepressibly playful, radical optimism on through its eventual dilution through fractured political and intellectual intent and into its final phase as a dominant narrative that art not engaged with its history struggled to penetrate.

Things have changed, as home-spun practices like figure drawing, radical craft movements and even abstract painting can now all seem equally valid. Nothing lasts forever, they say. But *Traffic*, I think, begs to differ.

Conceptual strategies may shift and change, but its core contribution, that anything is possible, will never leave us. Heaven help us if it does.