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VISUAL ARTS REVIEW

It's worth it to navigate through Traffic

Rooms may appear cold and over-calculated at first, but with some effort, a thoughtful world emerges

Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980
At the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto Art Centre, Blackwood Gallery and Doris McCarthy Gallery

REVIEWED BY
R.M. VAUGHAN

Five years in the making, assembled by a football team's worth of curators, archivists and art-history students, featuring dozens of early works by stars such as Suzy Lake and General

Idea and divided among the University of Toronto's four main galleries (two in downtown Toronto, one in Scarborough and one in Mississauga), Traffic is not an exhibition one casually takes in between brunch dates.

Indeed, you would be wise to bring an orientation kit and a pup tent, and not just because the show is so massive. There's more than one way to get stuck in Traffic.

As the subtitle tells us, the exhibition focuses on the early years of conceptual art in Canada (all of Canada, from Halifax to

Vancouver), and conceptual art is always a hard sell because it focuses on ideas, not objects, on the process behind the art, not a shiny finished commodity.

Subsequently, many of Traffic's rooms at first may appear cold and over-calculated, lacking in colour and dynamism and looking more like a math exam than an art exhibition. But that's only the surface. Take a bit of time with the various shows, read the didactics, and an entire world of thoughtful, and often comical, works emerge.

Traffic, Page 2

Suzy Lake as Gary William Smith, 1974, is on exhibit in Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ISAAC APPLEBAUM

Hitching a shameless ride on Lady Gaga's star machine



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I don't know this Camille chick but....
Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

On Sept. 10, London's Sunday Times published an article by Camille Paglia about Lady Gaga entitled "The Death of Sex."

If one searches the once-controversial, superstar critic's name, it is now linked everywhere (think tick, think tiger) to the singer-songwriter Lady Gaga's name and image.

Search for Lady Gaga alone, and find, from moment to moment, breaking news: about her sweeping the MTV Europe Music Awards in Madrid on Sunday, winning best pop, best female and best song (for *Bad Romance*); about a course being taught about her at the University of Southern California; about a wax figure of the "gay icon" soon to be unveiled; about her appearing in London wearing one half of a tuxedo.

The same can't be said of Paglia, who is now, fleetingly, hot for hating Gaga, "the gangly marionette or plasticized android," and her "insipid" music. She hates her for wearing sunglasses ("rudely") during interviews; she hates her failure to put forward "Madonna's valiant life force."

Crosbie, Page 2

FROM PAGE 1

Traffic: 'The context of our media culture has changed the perceptual horizon'

» For instance, one intriguing thread apparent in *Traffic*, a thread perhaps only people who grew up in the transition years between dial telephones and iPods can fully appreciate, is the desire among artists to play with (and mock) modes of communication and information sharing: from letters and index cards to map-making, early videography, mail art, photocopying and telegrams/telegrams.

Methods of connection-making, especially over long distances, were of special interest to artists as the digital age dawned, partly out of nostalgia for more direct, personalized forms of communication and partly as a last resort prior to full automation. Tethers and lines – of rope tied to people, or pencilled across maps or blank pages, of chalk on pavement, of horizons photographed, and even lines created by sharp edges of reflected light – crisscross *Traffic* like, well, so many tangled highways.

Although *Traffic* is a classic “archival,” historical exhibition (and there is a phone book-high stack of text accompanying the shows, both on the walls and in preserved magazines and other ephemera), it is also a forward-looking, predictive exhibition. The first, hesitant shoots of our current non-stop media reality are buried in these yellowing stacks of passed-around paper.

Early tinges of digital ennui, of the isolation of the virtual age (and of the concerted efforts to fight back by making art that was both tangible and theoretical) resound in *Traffic*. Anxiety for the future is, after all, as old as the future itself. Your BlackBerry-driven agenda and its attendant worries (and, to be fair, its joys and flirtations) have ancestors in this exhibition. They just happen to run on index cards and VHS tapes, not microchips and mpeg files.

To help sort out *Traffic*'s many paths, I consulted Barbara Fischer, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery's executive director and also *Traffic*'s chief co-ordinator during its Toronto stay (the exhibition will tour the country over the next few years).



Ian Carr-Harris creates a textual archive with an installation called *Nancy Higgins, 1949*. TONI HAFKENSCHIED

Fischer's enthusiasm for her projects is legendary, but *Traffic* has struck a particular chord, largely because many of the works on display have never before been shown together or in Toronto, despite their historical importance.

And if anyone can pitch this cache of pensive, time-consuming art to a campus full of distracted twentysomethings (not to mention the rest of us), it's the bubbly Fischer.

Conceptual art, especially the more rigorous, academic brand, can be very alienating. How would you advise viewers to approach *Traffic*?

It's interesting that you say the term “conceptual art” might scare people off, because even back when conceptual art was pioneered, it already had a reputation for being a hard nut to crack and, as a result, was read as somewhat remote.

But I think that there are two things going on.

For me, it was never that. I grew

up in it, and it's part of what I first enjoyed about art, because it opened the horizon of what constituted art: sound art, film art, performance, experiments with the telephone and the telegram as a medium for thinking about what art might be or could be between communities, etc.

Secondly, I think that people have grown into this art because the culture around us has changed so dramatically, in terms of access to new media. The language in which culture manifests itself has changed, just as the artists in the early conceptual area predicted. The context of our media culture has changed the perceptual horizon, for everyone, completely. The explosion in the many ways we can produce meaning has already been acculturated.

So, our postmodern idea that any vehicle or venue is valid for producing or presenting art comes from this 1970s movement?

Yes, definitely. That was a really

big moment. Of course, Fluxus and Dada already opened this door, but it certainly came into prominence in the 1970s. Also, the question of how you make meaning separated itself from the exclusivity of painting. The idea that you can even make meaning by producing something that is immaterial is itself a possibility that was inaccessible to painting.

For instance, a lot of these works use telephones and telegrams, and so the realization that telecommunications could make something imaginable, make art, even though you can't literally see it, became a way to make meaning, became a medium.

One of the clichés about Canada is that we are the first technology-formed country. Is there something uniquely Canadian about the conceptual movement, with its emphasis on communication technology?

Hmm. I think it is tricky to say “uniquely Canadian,” but there was definitely a huge interest in

communications media in Canada, and the spatial expanse of the country spurred that interest.

Canadian artists were very much aware of the question of isolation, and whether it was possible, or not, to become an artist in a place that would have been off the map in ways that New York or Paris would not have been. But a lot of countries were dealing with this at the time, especially during the cold war, which kept many artists under siege.

Now, we are realizing that artists were much more in touch with each other than was thought, because the new media created a potential for artists to travel, if not physically. There was a huge culture around ephemera, around portable printed matter, and around works that could be done by instruction only, that you would send to an artist on the other side of the world. The visibility didn't need to be located in a big, bombastic object.

These works ask, “Is meaning necessarily more meaningful if it is in an object?” And it's not very hard to make the leap from that question to the virtual world that predominates now.

Were these artists predicting the future?

Hmm. Maybe not predicting, but imagining. It's funny, I have found that the younger generation approaches *Traffic* with a profound sense of recognition.

Finally, there's a lot of text to absorb in *Traffic*. How does one get through the show without eye strain?

Ha! There is a lot of text. I haven't read it all yet myself. I think what people can do is look around and when something catches the eye, stop and read what was being attempted. You don't have to read every single didactic panel.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980 runs in Toronto until Nov. 28.