Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980

Meghan Bissonnette

In Artforum (1967), Sol LeWitt defined Conceptual Art as that in which “the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work, all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.”

Out of this came a variety of practices, typically involving less painting and photo-based works, which must have been shocking to the art world, then dominated by the large paintings of saturated colour or energetic brushstrokes done by Jackson Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists. Conceptual artists used materials not traditionally associated with high-art—index cards, photographs, books, typescript on paper, charts, diagrams, maps, and slips—and declared that art could be almost anything: a walk, photographs of a trip, a set of instructions, or a line placed on the gallery floor.

Conceptual Art was a global phenomenon and seemed to arise under very similar circumstances almost simultaneously around the world; however, no major survey of Conceptual Art in Canada exists. Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980, an exhibition currently shown at the four University of Toronto art galleries (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto Art Centre, Doris McCarthy Gallery, and Blackwood Gallery), aims to address this. Part of a larger project that includes a database, conference, and exhibition catalogue, it is the result of a collaboration between five curators from across the country: Barbara Fischer (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery), Jayne Wark (NSCAD University), Michelle Theriault (Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University), Catherine Cromston (Art Gallery of Alberta), and Grant Arnold (Vancouver Art Gallery).

Ambitious in scale and scope with over 400 works and objects by approximately a hundred artists, this project aims to document and understand Canada’s contribution to this movement and the specific conditions that led numerous artists to turn to conceptual practices across the country during this period. When initially approached to write a review, I felt hesitant given that I have worked on the project both as a research assistant and as a curatorial assistant. I hope that here I am able to provide an insider’s look at the show based on my experience.

Traffic contains many of the major works of Conceptual Art done in Canada by both Canadian and international artists. There are also many early works by artists who, then less known, are now advertising in ironic and satirical ways. For example, Vancouver-based N.E. Thing Co. was a registered corporation comprised of then husband and wife Ian and Ingrid Hangklum. They ran their art practice as if it was a business, and many of the resulting products can be found in the exhibition. Others from their Eye Scream restaurant, the photographs of the pee wee hockey team they sponsored, and documentation of their activities on company letterhead with official seals and signatures.

Calgary-based Paul Woodrow started the Bureau of Imaginary Objects in 1970. They distributed questionnaires that were published as well as photographs of their office. His Imaginarie Travel poster, an advertisement for a fake travel company, promotes the ability of the imagination to take you anywhere.

In the initial phase of Conceptual Art, many works were text-based, but as it developed, artists began using their own bodies as the basis of their works. Toronto-based Lisa Steele’s video Birthday Suit is an example where the artist points out various scars accumulated over her life on the video itself. Conversely, in 1976, Sol LeWitt’s Old Canada, a lithograph created by pressing her lips on the lithograph stone while moulting the words of the national anthem, were both part of a developing attention to feminism in the art practices of the 1970s.

Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980 will be at the University of Toronto Art Galleries Sep. 11-Nov. 28, 2010.