

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 of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair."

Out of this came a variety of practices, typically language 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 slides—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 different 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 showing 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), Michèle Thériault (Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University), Catherine Crowston (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 research, 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 this 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

considered some of the most preeminent artists in Canada: Michael Snow, Ian Carr-Harris, Joyce Wieland, Rodney Graham, Clive Robertson, Bill Vazan, Suzy Lake, and Ian Wallace to name a few. It reads like a who's who of the Canadian art world.

Yet the show is not without its weaknesses. One notable shortcoming is the geographical organization of the exhibition: the Halifax portion of the exhibition is at Blackwood Gallery; Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Winnipeg at the University of Toronto Art Centre; Montreal at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery; and Toronto at the Doris McCarthy Gallery. Common issues that run throughout Conceptual Art practices can be intriguing, but they get lost and overlooked in an exhibition that has a regional framework. In this article I want to focus on a few of these issues.

In Conceptual Art the notion that the idea comes first led to many works that took the form of a set of instructions to be carried out by the artist, assistants, or students. For example, two lithographs by Sol LeWitt on display at Blackwood Gallery were carried out by students at NSCAD's Lithography Workshop based on his instructions. Consisting of short black lines layered to various degrees of density, they are about a visually exciting as a placemat, yet the rejection of the aesthetically beautiful object is fundamental to Conceptual Art.

Lighter in tone is John Baldessari's *I will not make any more boring art*. Not being able to travel to Halifax for his exhibition at NSCAD's Mezzanine Gallery, a small experimental space, he instructed

the director Charlotte Townsend to have students write the statement "I will not make any more boring art" from floor to ceiling on the gallery floors. His "punishment piece" as he called it, no longer exists, and we can only experience this work through Baldessari's letter, a few photographs, and the corresponding lithograph he did for the Lithography Workshop. Because the idea enjoys an elevated status in Conceptual Art, these instructions, whether they are in the form of letters, index cards, or diagrams on paper, become worthy of display in the gallery.

Conceptual artists made works that challenged prevailing beliefs about art. That included taking on subjects important to Canadian art, such as the landscape, and approaching it in new ways. Intriguing and mesmerizing is Vancouver-based Roy Kiyooka's *Long Beach to Peggy's Cove*, made up of panels of small black and white photographs documenting a road trip across Canada. There is nothing extraordinary about any one photograph; in fact they are rather banal—silos, highways, cars, diners, friends—but as a collection the feeling of traveling that they evoke is quite appealing.

Montreal artist Bill Vazan's *Canada Line* project, a complex work which involved placing lines on the floor of various galleries across the country, creating a virtual line across Canada, can now only be experienced through the documentation: a map with photographs of the installed lines.

Also based in Montreal, Françoise Sullivan's *Promenade entre le Musée d'art contemporain et le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal*, is a series of photographs taken along a walk between the two institutions. The photographs are displayed in a line in chronological order, with a map at the end outlining her walk. Despite the fact that the photographs were simply documentation of a process—in this case a walk—the images capture the feeling of the city, its moments of energy broken by moments of calm.

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The relationship between art and capitalism within Conceptual Art is complicated. In the context of the increasing commercialization of the art market in the 1960s and '70s, the use of banal materials not associated with high art such as Polaroid photographs, index cards, and notebook paper, or the creation of works that were completely ephemeral, represented a critique of the art object and a rejection of the art market.

Some artists, such as Hans Haacke, used their works to reveal direct links between art institutions, their funders or boards of directors, and the larger social and political sphere.

Still other artists addressed the relationship between art and capitalism by adopting the practices of businesses, bureaucracies, and

advertising in ironic and satirical ways. For example, Vancouver-based N.E. Thing Co. was a registered corporation comprised of then husband and wife Iain and Ingrid Baxter. They ran their art practice as if it was a business, and many of the resulting products can be seen in this exhibition: dishes from their Eye Scream restaurant, the photograph of the peewee 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 Exchange, and on display are questionnaires that were published as well as photographs of their office. His *Imaginaire Travel* poster, an advertisement for a fake travel company, promotes the ability of the imagination to take you anywhere.

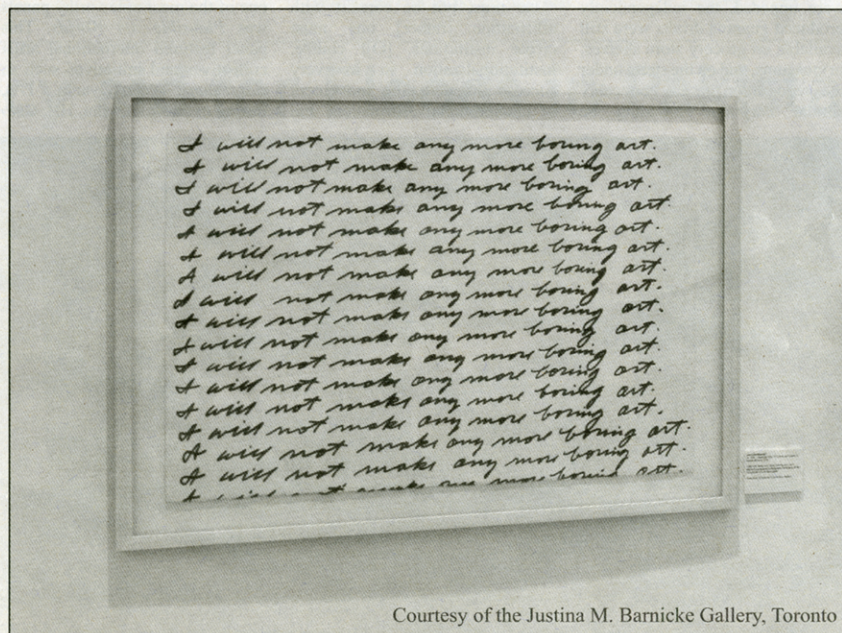
In the initial phase of Conceptual Art, many works were text-based, but as it developed, artists began using their own bodies as the basis

of their works. Toronto-based Lisa Steele's video *Birthday Suit - with scars and defects*, where the artist points out various scars accumulated over her life on the occasion of her birthday, and Joyce Wieland's *Oh Canada*, a lithograph created by pressing her lips on the lithograph stone while mouthing the words of the national anthem, were both part of a developing attention to feminism in the art practices of the 1970s.

Theodore Wan's *Bridine Scrub for General Surgery*, is a series of photographs of the artist's nude body covered in a bridine surgical scrub. Part of a larger body of work that Wan did at the faculties of medicine and dentistry at Dalhousie University, one is not sure if these are meant to be information or art. These photographs also strangely foreshadowed his early death from cancer in the late 1980s.

The exhibition draws attention to artists and works that have been previously overlooked. But despite the comprehensive account of Conceptual Art in Canada that this exhibition aims to provide, we are only able to see the history of this movement in pieces. This is perhaps due to the limitations inherent in the exhibition as a format for conveying knowledge. Text panels help to contextualize these objects, but the historian in me begs for the kind of chronological account provided by a text. The exhibition does however foreground the need for a greater understanding of this period.

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



Courtesy of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto

Installation view, John Baldessari, *I will not make any more boring art*, 1971