The
Visual Arts in Canada

The Twentieth Century
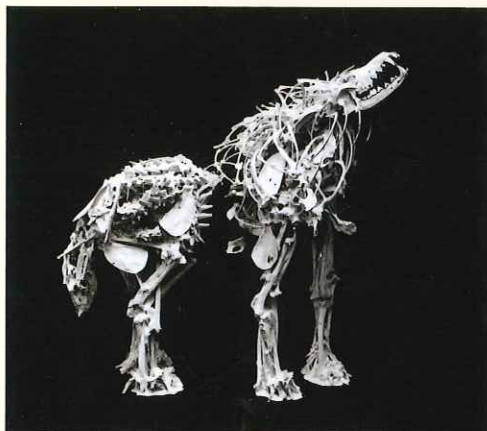
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Front cover
Edward Poitras, *Coyote*, 1986, photo: Don Hall (top left). Emily Carr, *Old Time Coast Village*, 1929–30, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery (top right). Jack Bush, *Zig-zag*, 1967, Collection Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, A 68 1 P 1, photo: MACM. Credit: © Jack Bush Estate / SODRAC (2009) (bottom left). John Max, Untitled, from the series *Open Passport*, 1972, photo © Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography; Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa. Credit: © John Max, courtesy the artist. (bottom right).

Back cover
Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*, 1916–17, photo © National Gallery of Canada; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (left). Victoria Mamnguqsualuk, *Qiviuq's Bird Wife*, 1993, photo © National Gallery of Canada; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (bottom right). Custom Modern chairs on display at the Design Centre, Ottawa, 1953. National Film Board of Canada. Photothèque / Library and Archives Canada, PA-211054 (top right).

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Chapter 16
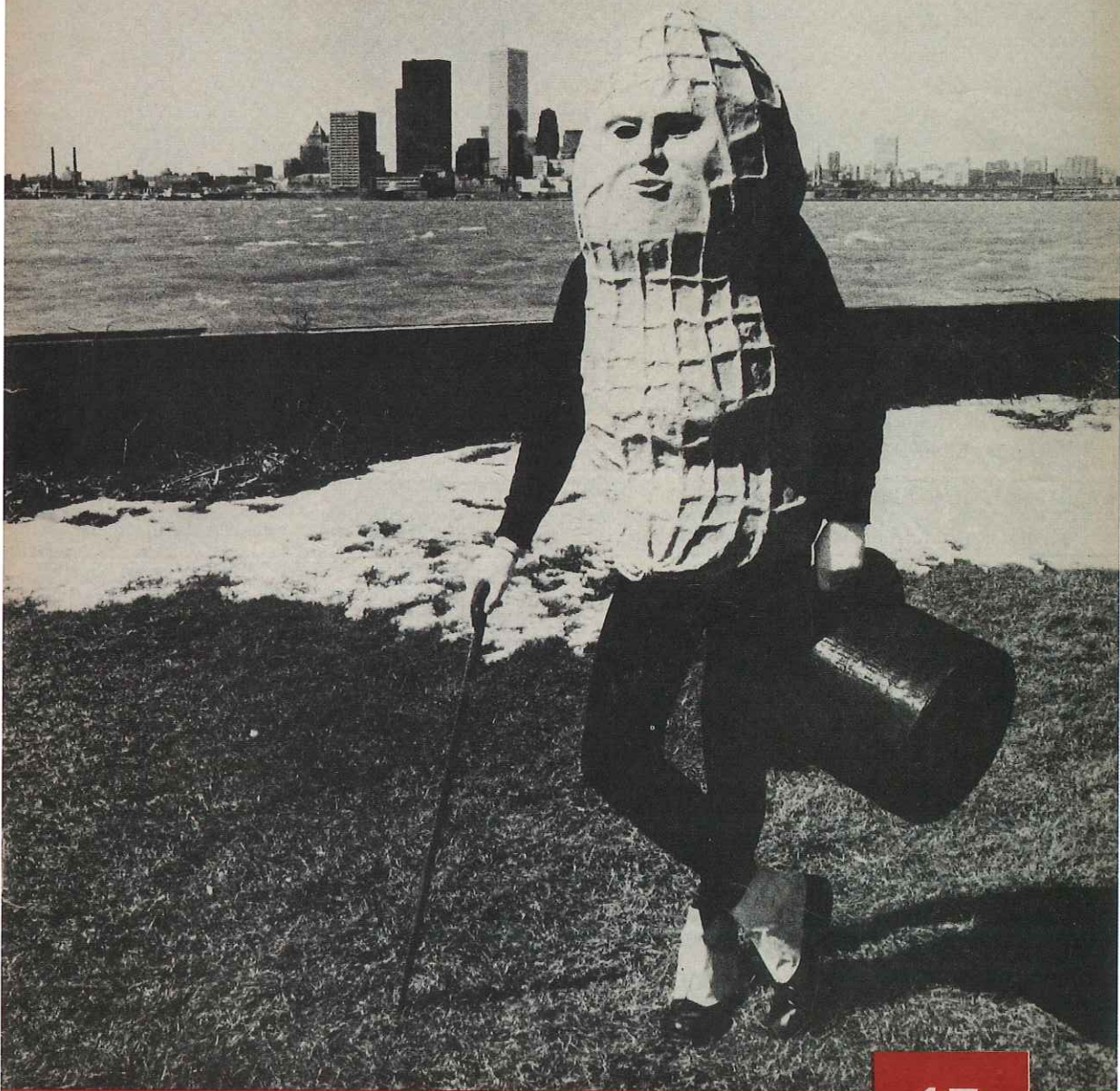
Conceptual Art in Canada: Capitals, Peripheries, and Capitalism

Jayne Wark

Introduction: Definitions, Problems, and Revisions

In conceptual art, which emerged around 1967 in New York and elsewhere, an artwork's idea or concept was the most important thing. The execution, which was secondary, typically took the form of language-based propositions, photographic documentation, or some other ephemeral manifestation. Conceptual art aimed to challenge the way modernist art had emphasized the visual, emotional, and sensual aspects over the intellectual, and to produce dematerialized art in order to resist commodification. The vagueness of both the term and the aims of conceptual art have, however, led to many debates about exactly what it is, what artists it encompasses, and where and when it happened. In the context of Canada, these questions are further complicated because the study of conceptual art in this country is still a work in progress: a work whose history has been almost entirely left out of the growing international attention that conceptual art has garnered since 1990. This chapter begins to address the situation by outlining how the critical fortunes of conceptual art in Canada have fared in relation to current analyses of this type of art in general, and by considering specific aspects of conceptual art as they were manifested by the Vancouver and Toronto collectives known as N.E. Thing Co. (NETCO; 1966–78), General Idea (1969–94), and at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Discussion of these three entities will be grounded in themes that had a distinctive resonance for conceptual art in this country: the relationships between geographic centres and peripheries, and between Conceptualism and capitalism.

Canada's almost complete absence from the many histories of conceptual art that have been produced since 1990 is not due just to a lack of published literature on the subject. As William Wood argued in a 1993 essay on NETCO, the study of conceptual art since the early 1990s has been driven by motivations to establish authority and hierarchy, and these criteria tend to ignore the fact that conceptual art had a "territorial agenda" as well as an iconoclastic one.[1] In other words, while a geographic decentring of the art world was a key priority of conceptual art, current writings have imposed the claim that the art world's major cities were the central loci for its production. This revisionism has subsequently developed by way of no fewer than 16 important exhibitions and publications that have conferred primary status on a select group of artists living and working in the art world's traditional "capital" cities. As a result, the history of conceptual art in Canada is largely missing in action. This was the case even in the 1999 Queen's Museum of Art (New York) exhibition Global Conceptualism, the catalogue for which confidently stated that the exhibition was "a bold and groundbreaking attempt to document conceptualism in art as a worldwide phenomenon originating independently in many places in response to specific local conditions."[2] The explicit intention—to refute the view of conceptual art

...IT'S STILL PRIVILEGED ART.

as the domain of a select coterie of American and Western European artists—is evident in the worldwide geographic range covered in the exhibition and catalogue, which featured some 136 individual artists and groups. Yet the show included only four works by Canadian artists: two by Michael Snow (b.1928; see also Figures 14.7 and 15.1), one by Joyce Wieland (1931–98), and one by Carole Condé (b.1940) and Karl Beveridge (b.1945). Peter Wollen's catalogue essay on North American production did not much improve on this representation of Canadian artists in the exhibition itself. Wollen acknowledged the dominance of New York while also addressing the exhibition's theme of decentring and internationalism. But in addition to brief mentions of Snow, Wieland, and Condé and Beveridge (*It's Still Privileged Art*, 1976, private collection; Figure 16.2), as well as N.E. Thing Co., he made only one reference to Canadian artists: a

single sentence citing Les Levine (b.1935), Vincent Trasov (b.1947), and General Idea. What their art was like and how it related to conceptual art went unexamined.

Having effectively left out of the North American picture Canada and Mexico—the latter covered by another author in a separate chapter on Latin American art—Wollen's strategy for dealing with the dominance of New York was to focus on terminology distinctions between *conceptual art* and *Conceptualism*. He ascribes the former to the activities of a "very vocal and productive phalanx of [New York] artists," and the latter to a broad and genuinely global form of artmaking based on "art ideas," cultural critique, and political activity shaped by local characteristics and concerns.[3] This distinction might initially seem useful, but it is also deeply problematic, at least from a Canadian perspective. While Wollen acknowledges that these broader tendencies decentred New York's
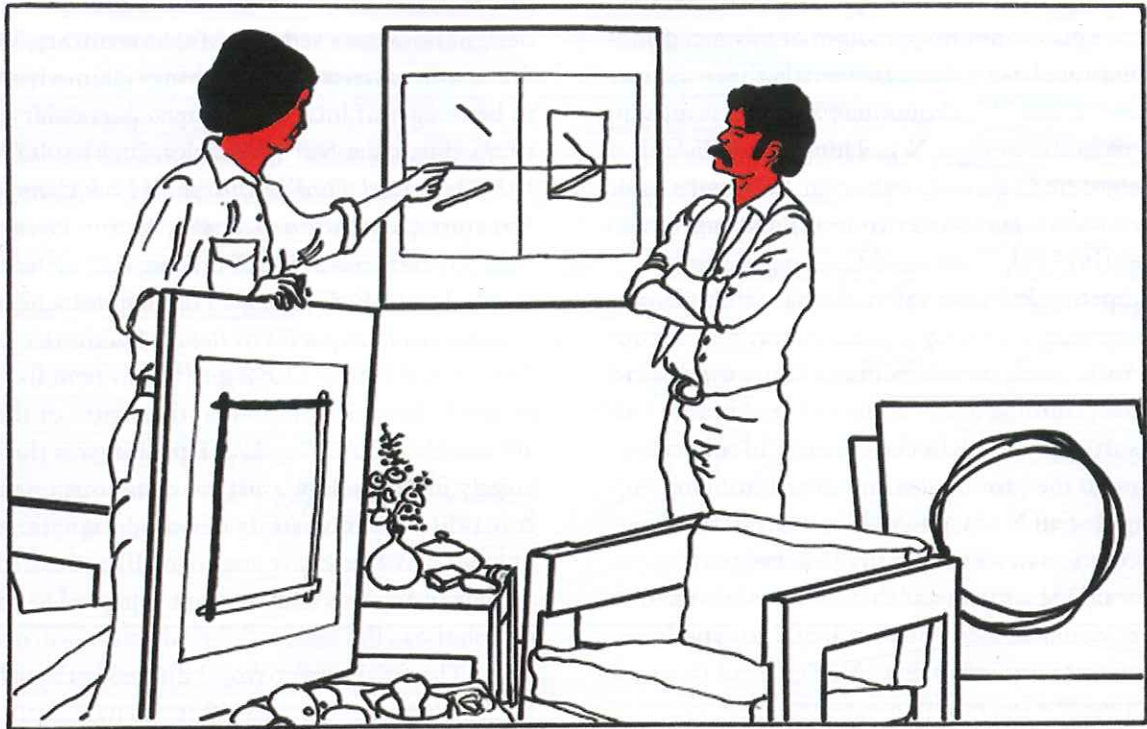
A Curator has called to say he is coming over. Carole and Karl rush about to set up work. Each has their individual identity to establish. Each must fight for 'their' space, 'their' time.

Figure 16.2
Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *It's Still Privileged Art*, 1976
left (book cover): c-print photograph, 10.16 x 15.24 cm
right (interior): india ink on paper, 10.16 x 15.24 cm
private collection

hegemony, he also states they did so by drawing their impetus from the form of conceptual art that had already been established by New York artists. In other words, the dominance of New York was not so much challenged as reinforced by the extension of the influence of that city's artists throughout North America in a kind of cultural imperialism.

Capitals and Capitalism: N.E. Thing Co.

To begin to redress what Wood calls the "territorial forgetfulness"[4] of conceptual art's revisers, it is important to take into account the notions of capitals and capitalism. I have already touched on one aspect of the former with respect to conceptual art's decentring from capital cities to peripheries. As for capitalism, one of the most widely accepted beliefs about conceptual art is that it opposed both the commodity status of art, and capitalism in general. Indeed, this premise was central to Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973), the touchstone publication documenting conceptual art.

Careful consideration of the activities of conceptual art practitioners shows, however, that this belief is more problematic than initially appears to be the case, and that conceptual art

actually became aligned simultaneously with the politicized cultural critique of the late 1960s *and* the new economic paradigm of advanced, multinational capitalism. In Canada the alignment with this economic paradigm is most evident in the work of N.E. Thing Co., which was registered as a corporation in 1969 by its co-presidents, Iain Baxter (b.1936) and Ingrid Baxter (b.1938). Their activities ranged from participating in major international exhibitions, to being represented by dealers in Toronto and New York, being members of the Vancouver Board of Trade, running a photo lab and restaurant, sponsoring a peewee hockey team, and otherwise dealing in the production and distribution of "things" of all kinds. As Wood notes, NETCO's participation in all these activities under a corporate identity meant that "the business and the art were not merely coincidental to artistic continuance but intrinsic to NETCO and its objectives."[5]

Wood has also noted, however, that NETCO's capitalist activities were linked to the Baxters' ironic treatment of geographic capitals and peripheries, pointing out in particular the registration of their suburban Vancouver home as their corporate headquarters. This contradicted the usual model of the artist as a single urban male, and blurred distinctions between the commercial and the domestic. Many of N.E. Thing Co.'s works were made within a framework of family leisure activities, including the road trips that furnished the photographic subjects of *Portfolio of Piles,* for example. In addition, the geographic specificity of these activities located NETCO at a periphery far from the art world's capital cities.

Wood sees this identification with the geographic margins as fundamental to NETCO's enterprise, especially in relation to its ACT and ART departments. These departments had official corporate seals and issued certificates designating "Aesthetically Claimed Things" and "Aesthetically Rejected Things," based on "Visual Sensitivity Information" (VSI) criteria. But although the designations may seem erratic or arbitrary, Wood discerns a pattern whereby things claimed tend to be images of local phenomena particular to northwestern North America, such as *ACT #48–Dave Buck Ford's Flourescent Pink Canopy Structure Over Cars and Trucks, Marine Drive, Near 1st Narrows Bridge, N. Vanc. B.C. (1968)* (1968, MHBAG; Figure 16.3). In contrast, things rejected, such as *ART #16 Robert Smithson's "Non-Sites" (1968)* (1968–69, NGC) tend to be works by artists located at the centre of the art world. The ACT and ART project was thus largely motivated by a critical consciousness and constituted ironic parody of how designations of what constitutes art are normally produced in art-world capitals and are then exported to the peripheries.

The final aspect Wood discusses regarding NETCO's geographic specificity is its use of media to move across time and space. This strategy drew on the currency in the 1960s of Marshall McLuhan's theories of modern communications systems dissolving traditional power hierarchies and creating a global village by allowing the margins to speak both to the centre and to one another. McLuhan's theories were important to many prominent conceptual artists other than N.E. Thing Co.: an importance that can be measured by the degree to which McLuhanism permeated the seminal Information exhibition of conceptual art, held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1970. In NETCO's case, McLuhan's influence is most evident in the many works that use telex and telecopier, such as *Telexed Triangle* (1969; collection of N.E. Thing Co.). *Telexed Triangle* was part of a series of documents made in September 1969 during a two-day trip to Inuvik with American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, writer and curator Lucy Lippard, and Edmonton artist Harry Savage (b.1938) under

the auspices of the Place and Process exhibition organized by the Edmonton Art Gallery. As historian Charity Mewburn has demonstrated, this trip must be seen in relation to myths about the North, especially as they have been perpetuated in Canadian art and art history. Yet far from representing a mythically exotic and sublime landscape, NETCO's photographs of the scrubby terrain around Inuvik—an instant town run up by the federal government as its northern administrative centre—are deadpan and banal. They allude not to the picturesque tropes of art but to the instrumental models of charting and mapping that are so crucial to Canadian claims to Arctic sovereignty: models reinforced by the typically bureaucratic format of NETCO "information" sheets such as *Telexed Triangle*.

Although such works as *Telexed Triangle* look artless, they do refer strategically to the history of art in Canada and especially to relations between art history and geography. As Mewburn has argued, NETCO's Arctic project is both an echo and a parody of the expansionist move northward into Canada made by such prominent New York modernists as Barnett Newman and Clement Greenberg when they took up residency in the late 1950s and early 1960s at the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops in Saskatchewan: a move that many in Canada saw as an instance of American cultural imperialism. This is most evident in *Territorial Claim—Urination* (1969, MHBAG; Figure 16.4), which documents Iain Baxter urinating on a sheet of ice above the Arctic Circle. Baxter turned this action into an abstract expressionist painting through a scatological gesture that both insulted the heroes of New York School modernism and demonstrated conceptual art's antagonism toward them.

Ultimately, however, Mewburn questions whether this Arctic junket really disrupted assumptions and attitudes behind the modernists' colonization of the North or whether it extended that colonization and reaffirmed the art world's centrism. She notes that Lippard's journal records how disappointed she and Weiner were by the discrepancy between their preconceptions of the "Far North" and the reality of Inuvik as what they saw as a bureaucratic slum where the indigenous people lived under deplorable conditions. As Mewburn sees it, "'the North' was an exploitable commodity" for the Canadians and Americans alike.[6] The group's touristic activities in Inuvik were valuable only as a way of extracting cultural capital that would have currency in art-world capitals "down south," even if, as Mewburn suggests, the Canadians were unlikely to harbour any utopian ideas about changing the American-driven commodity system in which their work circulated and which it also critiqued. This simultaneous circulation in and critique of the forms of advanced capitalism bring us back to the importance of Marshall McLuhan for NETCO and other conceptual artists since the mid-1960s. Many prominent artists and writers criticized McLuhan's work on the grounds that it turned art into the handmaiden of corporate capitalism. Lippard, for example, though enthusiastic about N.E. Thing Co.'s activities and supportive of global connectedness as crucial to conceptual art, also later stated that NETCO's corporate aspect "always gave me pause because it was ultimately not a critical stance.… NETCO's jovial embrace of capitalism was (slyly) naive, enthusiastic, apolitical. The Baxters *liked* corporate structures."[7]

Culture as Capitalist Virus: General Idea

In Canada, N.E. Thing Co. was not alone in using geographic peripheries to deal with the relationships among art, capitalism, and globalization. Another exemplary model was

Figure 16.3

N.E. Thing Co., *ACT #48–Dave Buck Ford's Flourescent Pink Canopy Structure Over Cars and Trucks, Marine Drive, Near 1st Narrows Bridge, N. Vanc. B.C. (1968)*, 1968
gelatin silver print, ink, and foil seal on paper, 33 x 49.5 cm
Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

General Idea, which was formed in 1969 in Toronto, a city that at the time was very much on the international cultural margins. General Idea initially began as a loose collective of collaborators, but the core group consisted of three members who adopted the pseudonyms AA Bronson (Michael Tims, b.1946), Felix Partz (Ronald Gabe, 1945–94), and Jorge Zontal (Slobodan Saia-Levy, 1944–94). Unlike N.E. Thing Co., General Idea did not adopt an explicitly corporate identity. Nonetheless, its privileging of the collective over its constitutive individuals was in keeping with McLuhan's beliefs about the form that art would take in the new media age.

General Idea has not often been discussed within the context of conceptual art. In part, this is because it has perhaps become best known for its Miss General Idea pageants, which appear to fall more under the parameters of performance art. General Idea's preoccupation with camp and glamour also seemed to align it more with an Andy Warholian Pop axis than to the asceticism associated with conceptual art. Moreover, the queer and often fetishistic sensibility that tinged its work was utterly alien to the dominant

aesthetic of conceptual art as established by the New York coterie. But if General Idea's work ran against the conceptual grain in important ways, this should not preclude considerations of it in that context. For one thing, General Idea's early work was fully in keeping with the dematerialized practices documented by Lippard in *Six Years*. For another, it accords with conceptual art's objective of analyzing the ideas that underlie the creation and reception of art by means of a self-reflexive interrogation.

General Idea, like N.E. Thing Co., drew much of its inspiration from McLuhan's preoccupations with how media were transforming culture. AA Bronson came into direct contact with these ideas in 1967 when he visited Vancouver and met Iain Baxter and Jorge Zontal. Through them, Bronson was exposed to the experimental activities of the Intermedia Society artists' collective, which had been created that same year and was steeped in the media culture of McLuhanism. As Bronson has emphasized, however, it was William Burroughs, the Beat poet and author of *Naked Lunch* (1959), who galvanized General Idea's thinking with his metaphor of the virus as a mutating form capable of invading the dominant culture. As Bronson put it in his 1997 essay "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus," this viral method enabled General Idea to utilize "the distribution and communication forms of mass media and specifically of the cultural world ... [to] infect the mainstream with our mutations and stretch that social fabric."[8]

One of the earliest examples of the viral method was a series of phony displays installed in the storefront window of the house where Bronson, Partz, and Zontal lived. These included "Frocks by Jacques," decorated dolls, costume jewellery on black velvet, and a sidewalk sales bin of nurse-romance paperbacks. However, a locked door and a permanent sign reading "Back in 5 minutes" deflected any prospective customers. In addition to these forays into consumerism, General Idea

produced language- and proposition-based works that aimed to provoke social interaction. Some, such as the 1969 *Event Series*, bore an affinity to Fluxus "event scores," which typically consisted of extremely brief directives for performative actions that the group called "events." Others took the form of chain letters with instructions for completing and circulating the letters. By 1970 General Idea had also begun to infiltrate and use mass media in its work. *Line Project*, done for the Concept 70 exhibition in Toronto, was announced on CHUM-FM radio. Listeners were invited to participate in what General Idea called a "conceptual art project"[9] by telephoning the collective's headquarters. Seventy-five people responded, but only the 10 who were at home when visited by the artists the next day actually participated. Those 10 people followed a set of instructions for documenting themselves and their locations with two Polaroid photographs. Their identities and locations were then marked on a map of Toronto and a line was drawn to connect them. At the opening of Concept 70 this line was recreated in chalk on the street outside the gallery as well as in a "Rope-holding Event" in which each participant held onto a point on a rope, the point corresponding to his or her geographic location in the city.

The *Line Project*'s focus on making connections between community members was related to General Idea's developing interest in mail art. The mail art network included such key figures as New York's Ray Johnson and Vancouver's Michael Morris (b.1942; Figure 11.10) and Vincent Trasov, the latter two becoming the creators in 1969 of the Image Bank as a repository and distribution centre for visuals culled from the mass media. By 1970 Morris, Trasov, and many other artists in Canada and abroad were circulating mail art among themselves in what they envisioned as a project linking artists to one another across dispersed geographies. It was also a way to distribute art

Figure 16.4
N.E. Thing Co., *Territorial Claim—Urination*, 1969
c-prints, typewritten text, labels, offset lithography, paper, and foil seal, 44 × 44 cm
Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

outside the established gallery system. Some of General Idea's contributions to the mail art network included the *Orgasm Energy Chart* (1970) and *Manipulating the Self* (1974; Figure 16.5). The first of these invited respondents to record the time and location of their orgasms over a one-month period and return the chart to General Idea to be collated into one master chart, while the second asked them to photograph themselves with one arm wrapped around the head in a pose that ostensibly suggested that the mind and body are separate.

By late 1971 General Idea's headquarters were being deluged with correspondence. This led to a plan to consolidate the material into a mail art magazine. The three artists obtained a $17,000 federal grant, incorporated themselves as Art Official Inc., and published the first issue of *FILE Magazine* in April 1972, featuring Vincent Trasov as Mr. Peanut on the cover (Figure 16.1). *FILE* was one of General Idea's most important and remarkable activities. Run by artists for artists, it was a medium through which participants could operate outside established gallery and museum systems. In keeping with General Idea's viral methods, its format was parasitical upon America's most popular photo-journalism magazine, *LIFE*. Furthermore, until *FILE*'s demise in 1989, it was sustained by a modus operandi that enabled the group to participate in capitalism and mass media on their own terms, through a clever combination of grants, subscriptions, sales, and advertising.

Publishing *FILE* also laid the groundwork for what would become General Idea's most enduring viral intervention into the world of capitalism: the founding of Art Metropole in 1973. Although it initially included an artist-run centre, Art Metropole's primary mandate was to collect, document, and distribute all forms of media-based and ephemeral art as well as artists' books and multiples. Art Metropole was a shop, a collection, a document archive, and a publishing house. It participated fully in the capitalism of the art world, including running commercial booths at international art fairs, but for the purpose of promoting the work of living artists rather than for speculation or profit. In a perfectly symmetrical blend of General Idea's deft negotiations between capitalism and ethics, Art Metropole's entire collection of 13,000 objects was sold in 1999 to a collector named Jay Smith, on the condition that he donate it to the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, where it is now housed.

Capitalizing on Conceptualism: The NSCAD Lithography Workshop

Unlike N.E. Thing Co. and General Idea, the third manifestation of conceptual art in Canada to be discussed here was not an artists' group or collective, but a printmaking program at an art institution, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. The history of this program and institution provides a particularly salient example of the complex ways in which the relations between art-world capitals and peripheries, and between Conceptualism and capitalism, could and did resonate in the Canadian context. Despite its important international stature in the 1960s and 1970s, NSCAD has been as thoroughly excised from recent revisions of the history of conceptual art as have N.E. Thing Co. and General Idea. The sole exception to this is Tony Godfrey's mention of NSCAD in his 1998 book *Conceptual Art* as one of the key art schools that supplied a non-commercial context for fervent argument and discussion about conceptual art. It is precisely this assumption about NSCAD's non-commercialism that I wish to analyze, with specific reference to the Lithography Workshop.

The formation of the Lithography Workshop (1969–75) was a central element of

MANIPULATING THE SELF
(Phase 1 - A Borderline Case)

The head is separate; the hand is separate. Body and mind are separate.

The hand is a mirror for the mind - wrap your arm over your head, lodging your elbow behind and grabbing your chin with your hand. The act is now complete. Held, you are holding. You are object and subject, viewed and voyeur.

Please send photos of yourself in this position to General Idea, 87 Yonge St., Toronto, Canada. Fill out and enclose this form and further information will be forwarded to you.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

DATE _____

the radical transformation NSCAD underwent when Garry Neill Kennedy (b.1935) was hired as the College's president in 1967. Although Kennedy's formidable administrative duties initially demanded his full-time attention, by the mid-1970s he was producing works that entailed conceptual investigations of the processes and materials of painting. Kennedy has subsequently expanded this trajectory into wider investigations of the intersections between art and its institutional, social, and political frameworks, as in his recent work *The Colours of Citizen Arar* (2007; Figure 16.6). But back in the 1960s, as part of his wide-ranging attempts to bring the antiquated and provincial school up to date, Kennedy implemented an active visiting artists program and established a professional-quality printmaking facility. The Lithography Workshop operated in tandem with the visiting artists program because one of its main purposes was to offer each artist the opportunity to produce, with the assistance of a master printer, a limited edition of 50 prints. Each edition was split between the artist and NSCAD, with the intention of generating income through sales of the prints.

The NSCAD Lithography Workshop was originally conceived under the influence of the printmaking renaissance initiated by the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles in 1960. Some spectacular technical achievements occurred during the Halifax project's first year of production, including a suite of 10 lithographs by Greg Curnoe (1936–92; see also Figure 13.3) imitating a writing pad with typed notes recounting his visit to Halifax in February 1970. That same year, however, the Lithography Workshop took a decidedly different turn under the direction of faculty member Gerald Ferguson (1937–2009), who reinforced the school's conceptual orientation through his

selection of artists to take part in the program. This presents an interesting paradox because lithography was a pre-eminently traditional, artisan-based, labour-intensive, and commercially oriented medium, while conceptual art was dedicated to the radical questioning of these and all other aspects of the production, reception, and commodification of art. What was unique about the NSCAD Lithography Workshop was its demonstration of how even such a traditional and inherently commercial medium as printmaking could become a vehicle for the articulation of conceptual art ideas and practices.

One of the first such prints was made in 1970 by N.E. Thing Co. This lithograph incorporated a previous NETCO project—a cover design for a 1969 issue of *Art in America*—which reproduced 16 slides documenting images of things NETCO had claimed under its ACT department. The NSCAD print compounded this sequence of transformations in a characteristically conceptual procedure of self-reflexiveness. As indicated by its title, $P + L + P + L + P = VSI$ (where P stands for Photograph, L for Lithograph and *VSI* for Visual Sensitivity Information), what began in a photographic format (the slides) became an offset lithograph for *Art in America*. That lithograph was then photographed for printing on a metal lithographic plate. The final transformation took place after the edition was completed, when all 50 prints were crumpled onto the floor and photographed. Purchasers of the work received a flattened-out print as well as a title card and a slide of the pile of crumpled prints.

This self-reflexiveness was the basis of many Lithography Workshop prints from this period. These works manipulated the printmaking process, often in ways that, as Eric Cameron (b.1935) remarked in 1982, would be considered a "travesty" of Tamarind's ideals.[10] One such print

Figure 16.5
General Idea, *Manipulating the Self (Phase I – A Borderline Case)*, c.1974
colour offset photolithograph on wove paper, 73.8 × 58.5 cm; image: 52 × 47 cm
private collection

Figure 16.6
Garry Neill Kennedy, *The Colours of Citizen Arar*, 2007
latex paint on gallery walls, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

is Joyce Wieland's *O Canada* (1969; Figure 16.7), which the artist produced by applying her lipsticked mouth to the litho stone to form the words of the Canadian national anthem. The idea-driven premise of *O Canada*, and the economy of means by which it was produced, were fully commensurate with the de-aestheticizing tenets of conceptual art. At the same time, however, the work subverted those tenets in its blatantly patriotic content and in its embodied and explicitly feminine erotic connotations. These ran counter not only to conceptual art's denigration of embodied or performative practices, but also to the entrenched masculinism of NSCAD's conceptual art coterie.

Overall, this kind of self-reflexive work from the Lithography Workshop was concerned less with

exploring the nature of the printmaking medium than with testing conceptual art's fundamental premise that the idea itself has primacy over the object. As American artist Sol LeWitt had famously asserted in his 1967 essay "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," "When an artist uses a conceptual form in art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."[11] Accordingly, LeWitt's 1971 project with the Lithography Workshop proposed a set of 10 prints based on instructions sent by him through the mail. Execution of the first seven prints was handed over to students, who followed LeWitt's open-ended directions. The latter included statements such as, "Within a twenty-inch square area, using a black, hard crayon, draw ten thousand
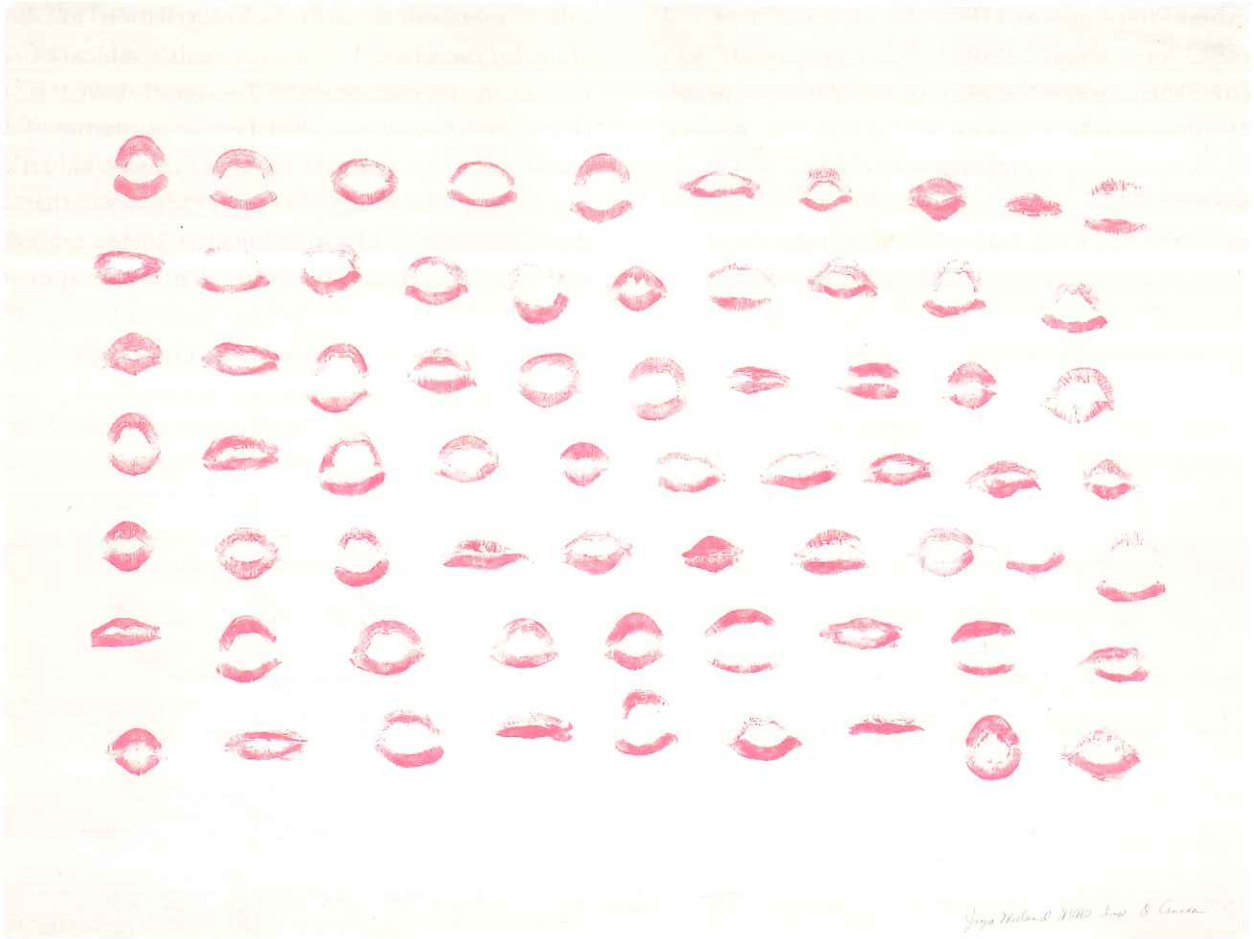
Figure 16.7
Joyce Wieland, *O Canada*, 1969
lithograph in red on wove paper, 57.4 × 76.4 cm
printed by Robert Rogers
National Gallery of Canada

free-hand lines, of any length, at random." The master printer executed the last three prints, also based on LeWitt's instructions. The instructions were also typeset at the bottom of each print, allowing for comparison between the idea-machine that had generated the work and the visual results of its "perfunctory" execution. Refusing to submit to the logic of art as being based strictly on the visual, LeWitt's prints shed light on his seemingly paradoxical statement that "conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."[12]

This kind of skeptical questioning of high modernism's privileging of visual effects and sensory gratification was pervasive in conceptual art. As a result, the work often seemed austere, banal, and sensually depleted. Much of it just looked boring. It was precisely this "boring" condition that American artist John Baldessari addressed in his 1971 exhibition at NSCAD and in an associated print made in the Lithography Workshop called *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971; Figure 16.8). In a letter to the director of NSCAD's gallery, Baldessari referred to his

exhibition project as a "Punishment Piece" that called for student "surrogates" and "scapegoats" to cover the gallery walls with the handwritten phrase, "I will not make any more boring art." Afterwards, Baldessari's own sample text was used as the basis for his print.[13]

On one level, Baldessari's statement encapsulates a central problem in conceptual art. By resisting the visual emollients that made art pleasurable and consumable, conceptual art aimed both to demystify aesthetic experience and propose a more rational and democratizing approach. On another level, however, because Baldessari's letter calls in messianic tones for "self-flagellation" to atone for the sins of bad art, it reveals a subtext of mysticism and irrationalism. This recalls LeWitt's characterization of conceptual artists as mystics, and seems to go against the grain of conceptual art's rationalism. However, in her essay "Mystics Rather than Rationalists," historian Johanna Burton argued that this characterization alludes to how conceptual artists could use the play between logic and illogic to focus viewers on the idea rather than on the visual appearance and what LeWitt called the "emotional kick" of art.[14] In this way, conceptual art could undermine the authority of high modernist
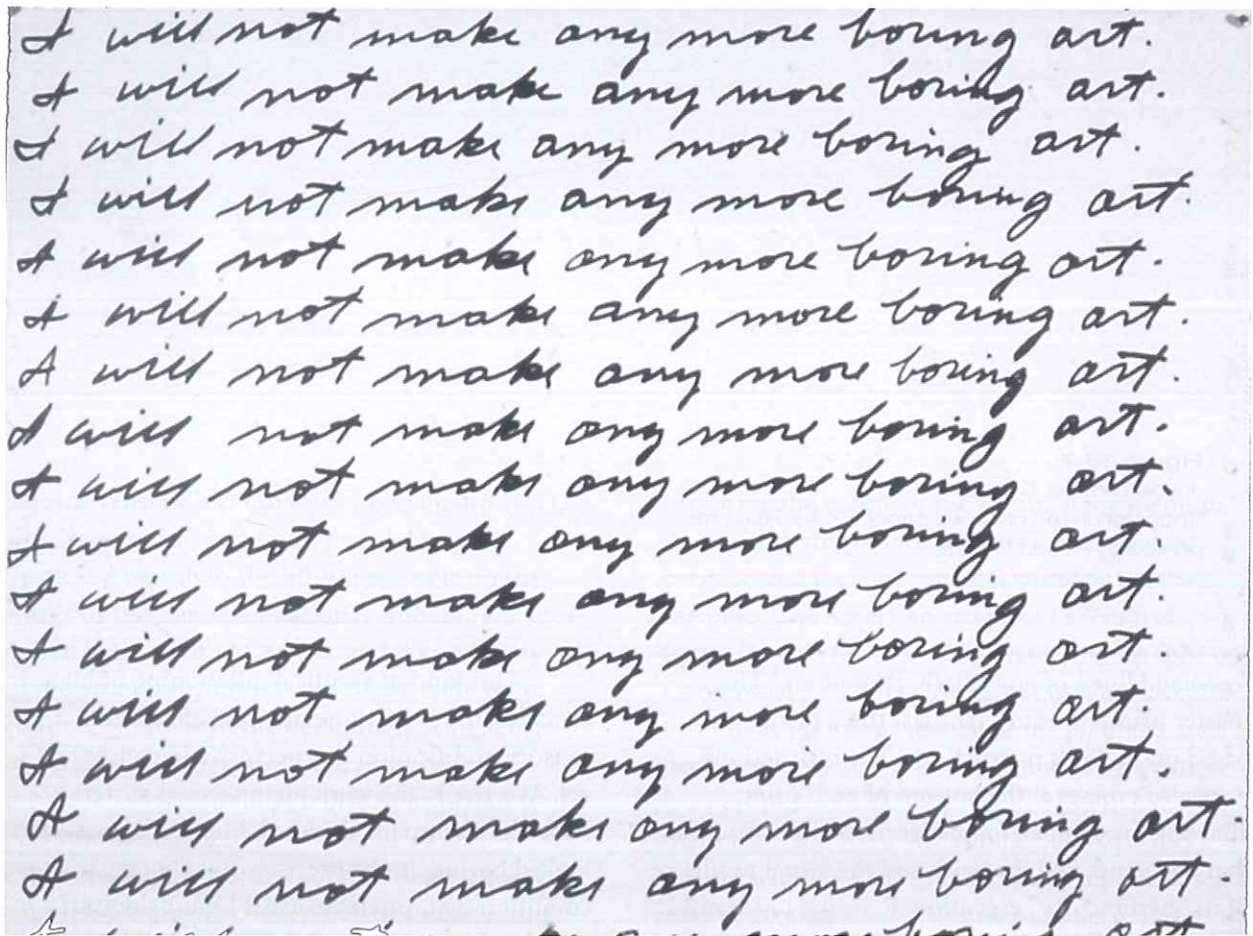
Figure 16.8
John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971
lithograph on Arches paper, 58.4 × 72.1 cm
printed by Robert Rogers
Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University Permanent Collection

art, the latter seen as a discredited vehicle of crass commercialism.

This critique notwithstanding, the Lithography Workshop prints hardly constituted a repudiation of the commercialization of art. The artists aimed to profit from sales, as did NSCAD. Far from being the non-commercial milieu Tony Godfrey supposed it to be, NSCAD regarded the Workshop productions by prominent international artists as crucial to gaining access to lucrative art markets abroad. In short, NSCAD became a production centre for the generation of cultural capital. However, this capital could be realized only when it was exported to the art world's capital cities, there to undergo a transformation from aesthetic value to exchange value.

Conclusion

As this brief overview has shown, conceptual art in Canada was framed by dual parameters and agendas. On one hand there was the need to negotiate the priorities of a cultural geography that placed Canada at a distinct disadvantage relative to the art world's capital cities. On the other hand this disadvantage enabled—and even required—conceptual art in this country to confront its relationship to capitalism in ways that could otherwise be glossed over by prominent international practitioners.

N.E. Thing Co.'s strategy was to adopt a utopian version of McLuhanism that enabled it to use technology to connect the periphery to the centre while simultaneously inhabiting and parodying the merger McLuhan advocated between art and business. General Idea similarly accepted the reality that art under capitalism is inseparable from the logic of that system; but in defiance of such imperatives, General Idea invaded the system like a virus, both to "infect" it with the group's own cultural priorities and to maximize the parasite's ability to thrive off the vitality of its cultural host. For its part, NSCAD constituted a classic instance of

the premise that conceptual art would decentre art practice from capitals to peripheries. The reality of the Lithography Workshop demonstrates, however, that the decentralization to peripheries such as Halifax happened only at the level of production, leaving the locus of commodification firmly intact in the art world's capitals.

Even Lucy Lippard, who had initially hoped Conceptualism would escape commodification and subvert capitalism, wrote a lament about its failure to do so in a Postface to the 1996 edition of *Six Years*. Yet I would argue that this inability to subvert capitalism should not be seen as the failure of conceptual art. Conceptual art did not propose an escape from capitalism. Rather, it provoked artists and viewers to tone up their intellects and to turn a critical eye on the ways in which art was—and remains—embedded in the logic of capitalism. And in light of the hyper-materialized and commodified practices that dominate the contemporary art world, the failure to do that toning up lies with us.

Notes

1   William Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary: The N.E. Thing Co. and the Revision of Conceptual Art," in *You are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, eds. Nancy Shaw, Scott Watson, and William Wood (Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1993), 11.

2   Marilyn L. Simon, "Acknowledgments," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, ed. Philomena Mariani (New York: Queen's Museum of Art, 1999), vi.

3   Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in *Global Conceptualism*, ed. Mariani, 73, 80.

4   Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary." In Shaw, Watson, and Wood, *N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, 12.

5   Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary." In Shaw, Watson, and Wood, *N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, 13.

6   Charity Mewburn, "Sixteen Hundred Miles North of Denver," in *Sixteen Hundred Miles North of Denver*, ed.

Scott Watson (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1999), 26.

7   Lucy Lippard, "You Are Now in the Middle of a Revisionist History of the N.E. Thing Co." In Shaw, Watson, and Wood, *N.E. Thing Co. Landscape,* 58.

8   AA Bronson, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus: General Idea's Bookshelf 1967–1975," in *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975,* eds. Fern Bayer and Christina Ritchie (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997), 18.

9   Fern Bayer, "The Search for the Spirit," in *The Search for the Spirit,* 41.

10   Eric Cameron, "The Lithography Workshop," in *NSCAD: The Nova Scotia College of Art & Design,* ed. Garry Neill Kennedy (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design / New England Land Grant Universities, 1982), 9.

11   Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 80.

12   Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *0–9,* no. 5 (January 1969): 3.

13   John Baldessari to Charlotte Townsend, February 1 1971. Baldessari file, NSCAD Lithography Workshop Records, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University.

14   Quoted in Johanna Burton, "Mystics Rather than Rationalists," in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970,* ed. Donna de Salvo (London: Tate, 2005), 75.

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