COLLABORATING ON CONCEPTUAL ART: AN AESTHETICS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

BY LEAH MODIGLIANI

2010 appears to have been the year of conceptual art history in Canada. In a move to redress the exclusion of Canadians from an art history dominated by writing about artists from elsewhere, last November a large group of art historians, critics and artists gathered at the University of Toronto over three days to participate in the first major conference dedicated to unpacking the history of Canadian conceptual art: *Traffic, Conceptualism in Canada*. No doubt art history is as susceptible as any other discipline to the power dynamics intrinsic to the goal of establishing specific individuals as generative or authoritative within the larger field of players. As Jayne Wark reminds us by way of quoting William Wood, conceptual art had a "territorial agenda," as well as an iconoclastic one.[1] These two scholars' reflections, roughly 20 years apart, testify to historians' ongoing interest and concern with the revisions of art history in relation to conceptual art and its geographies.

Writing in a 1993 catalogue accompanying an exhibition of N.E. Thing Co., Wood asks, "Did conceptual art represent a suspension of the rule of the centre?" He is in dialogue with what we might now, in a kind of shorthand, call the "centre–periphery" debate: whether or not the "dematerialized" nature of conceptual art constituted an assault on the economic dominance of an art world grounded in capital cities, or if cities like New York in fact remained the generative loci of a conceptualist practice that was more easily able to travel into the far reaches of the world as information. In her essay on conceptual art for a new textbook on Canadian visual art, Wark revisits Wood's question with the purpose of reminding us that the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) was both an integral player in facilitating conceptual art in general, and an early example of the ways conceptual art was implicated in commercial culture through the sales generated by its Lithography Workshop.[2] This latter point—conceptual art's use of commercial business culture to sustain itself economically without relying on sales of traditional art objects—is a corollary to the centre-periphery debate because sales of contracts, prints, instructions and ideas could travel easily across borders.

As a "dematerialized" art of ideas that often involved open-ended statements, instructions and propositions, conceptual art has lived on through the secondary forms of catalogues, oral narratives and texts. As such, it has a particularly precarious relationship to art history, as these ambiguous narratives lend themselves easily to arbitrary contextualization and political appropriation. Writing in 1998 about Susan Kealey's artwork, John Marriott alludes to this situation by stating, "Claims of conceptualist radicalism clash with the reality that conceptualist approaches made for an increased reliance upon an art context, which enhanced the role of institutions in defining and sustaining art."[3] Therefore, while it is not a new observation, it is important to remember that art history has been deeply embedded in the process of institutionalizing art, and as a discipline ordered around the rational and objective analyses of texts, it is, and has always been, implicated in the creation of conceptual art. In fact, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler remarked upon this as early as 1967:

> If the object becomes obsolete, objective distance becomes obsolete. Sometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well as for the artist to be a writer. There will still be scholars and historians of art, but the contemporary critic may have to choose between creative originality and explanatory historicism.[4]

Thus, it strikes me that while not the only factor, the motivating force underlying contemporary scholars' concerns with conceptual art's historical revisions is the self-conscious recognition that such revisions are happening in front of their eyes, during their lifetimes, and in view of the still-living artists who are able and willing to offer up contradictory accounts of their work and motivations. This is a kind of shared authorship between artists and historians, although it is rarely acknowledged as such, and is susceptible to the same disagreements, compromises and concerns for legacy that accompany other sorts of creative collaborations. The territorial agenda of conceptual art has therefore also been the agenda of those partisans, whether artists or historians, who are vested in arguing for or against the relevance of specific artists within art history.

The territorial agenda(s) of both conceptual artists and their historians did indeed emerge as a significant aspect of last November's *Traffic, Conceptualism in Canada* conference, which accompanied the tour-de-force exhibition *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada c. 1965–1980* that was on display at four university art galleries in Toronto simultaneously.[5] By most accounts, the event was a success with a large number of papers, presentations, personal narratives and art performances offering a window through which to reflect on the developing historiography of the artworks seen in the corresponding exhibition.

In the many papers and presentations given by a range of artists and historians over three days, the already referenced "centre vs. periphery" debate proved as resilient as ever, as did historians' continued interest in conceptual artists' use of networking and mapping. More relevant to this essay, however, was the notable self-conscious awareness of a younger generation of art historians that their subjects—the artists themselves, who are now in their late sixties and early seventies—were there in the audience to hear themselves spoken about, and if necessary, to offer an alternative version to those being proffered by their junior peers.[6] That the latter was a subtext of the whole event is evident in the abstract of a talk given by artist Paul Woodrow, which addressed the ethical stakes of "getting things 'right'": "Writing about the past becomes an aesthetic of the impossible since representation inevitably fails to represent those who were present in the past."[7] Woodrow went on to characterize his recollections of his participation in the 70s art scene of Calgary as those based on faulty memories and a privileged and biased point of view—recollections that thereby contribute to what he called "the creation of a fiction."[8]

Brenda Haddon, George Firlotte, Donny Gullison, *Live Random Airborne Systems (Hans Haacke) remake*, 1975
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF BRENDA HADDON

Considering that Woodrow was an active participant in the heyday of Canada's conceptual art movement and should be depended upon to "get things right," his characterization of himself as an unreliable resource is interesting. In the context of Wark and Wood's concerns with the revisions of history, and in light of the language Woodrow uses, his provocation suggests two questions worth asking: Is the historiography of conceptual art an aesthetics of the impossible? And, is there room in the discipline for acknowledging the fictions that contribute to developing art histories?

The idea of conceptual art as an aesthetics of the impossible emerged in the late 60s and would certainly have been known by Canadian conceptual artists of Woodrow's generation, along with their American peers. The May–June 1969 Art in America issue that featured cover art by N.E. Thing Co. contained two feature articles by Thomas M. Messer and David L. Shirley collectively titled "Impossible Art."[9] As a kind of introduction to his essay, Shirley provides a long list of all the ways that the new art forms were impossible for an older art establishment to deal with: works that existed only as ideas; works that were only completed with the participation of viewers who interacted with them; works that disregarded traditional form, harmony or proportion; works that were impermanent and not easily collectable. Shirley's list continues, detailing numerous individual artists now regularly associated with minimalism, earthworks, art and language, and performance. Along with descriptions of somewhat more tangible conceptual artworks like Michael Heizer's massive "negative objects," and Dennis Oppenheim's works made of cut ice at outdoor sites in northern New York State, Shirley describes projects that are more accurately impossible, such as James Lee Byars' "twenty-five-pound pink satin airplane, a hundred feet long by a hundred feet wide," and Ian Wilson's visualized art as everyday speech.[10]

The attractive ridiculousness of Byars' imaginary airplane is revealed in a number of projects and events of this era, so much so that it is not at all clear what is real, or even if such a distinction matters. Consider Robert Barry's 1969 "common idea" piece for the Project Class at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Yoko Ono's *Snow piece* (c. 1963) and Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* (1967–68).[11] How do the geographies of the "centre–periphery" debate intersect with such forms of impossible art? One can begin to answer this question by way of a narrative segue that superficially includes the mystical and well-travelled artist Byars himself. In April 1969, after a long sojourn in Japan, Byars (along with artist Rex Lau) was one of the first two American artists to visit the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to lead projects with students in newly hired David Askevold's foundation art class. While there, Byars led students in the performances

The Universe House as photographed in the late 1970s
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF BRENDA HADDON

James Lee Byars, *twenty-five-pound pink satin airplane, a hundred feet long by a hundred feet wide*, 1969
PHOTO: ROBERT A. POPPER; IMAGE COURTESY OF *ART IN AMERICA*

for which he later became well known: those involving large fabric dresses that could be worn by many people at once.[12] Based on the success of the spring visits by Byars, Lau, and later Lawrence Weiner, Askevold was able to program his now-famous Projects Class into the following school year's curriculum (1969–70).[13]

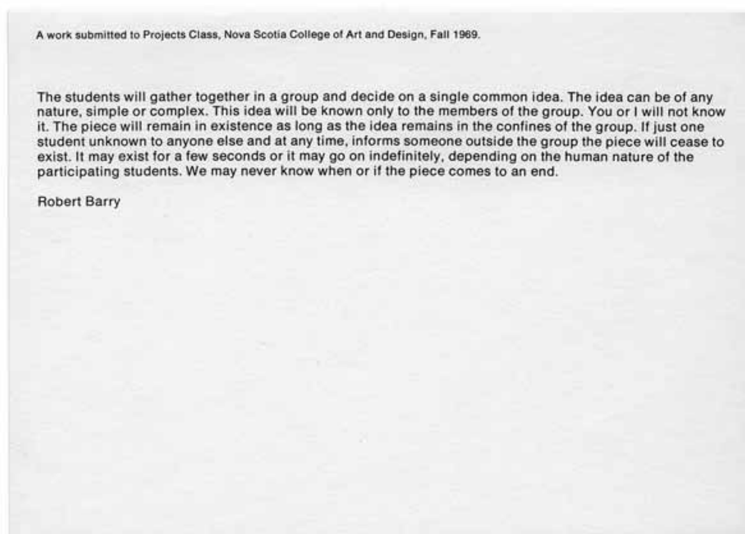
Clearly the number of well-known Canadian and American artists, like Byars, who travelled to Halifax to create innovative new artworks in NSCAD's Lithography Workshop, Askevold's Projects Class, and for exhibitions in the Anna Leonowens Gallery and Mezzanine Gallery helped establish an international identity for a geographical location far from the major centres of the art world.[14] Considering the centrality of Halifax in the production of conceptual art in Canada in the early 70s, it is surprising that so little is known historically about conceptual art practice in other parts of Atlantic Canada. Surely students came from all over the region to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, yet few, if any, histories of conceptual art practice outside of Halifax appear to have either existed or to have sustained the interest of scholars since then.[15] So, while Halifax remained on the periphery of the art scenes of larger North American cities, it remained the centre of art in the Maritimes, and the success of NSCAD's reputation as a progressive and avant-garde institution perhaps worked to draw conceptually minded artists away from smaller Atlantic communities, artists who did not return home.

It was with some surprise then to hear at the *Traffic* conference artist Simon Brown's lecture about his discovery of a previously unknown group of conceptual artists from the tiny community of Charlotte County, New Brunswick. Centered around several idiosyncratic individuals living in the Whistle Cove Commune of Grand Manan Island in the mid-70s, Brown's more-entertaining-than-normal lecture recounted a series of collaborations and actions that may or may not be considered art, and which he characterized as a "para-marginal milieu" within the context of art history.[16]

According to Brown, Randy and Donny Gullison, Brenda Haddon, George Firlotte and Laird Hamilton (not to be confused with the famous surfer), created a number of ephemeral artworks in between reading the philosophy of Herbert Marcuse, smoking pot, harvesting seaweed and building a wooden geodesic dome-like headquarters called "The Universe House." To use Brown's words, this "movement *per se*" was fuelled by a chance meeting between then-janitor Randy Gullison and New York conceptual artist Robert Barry in St. Stephen, New Brunswick's Busy Bee Motel, where Barry stopped for the night on his way to NSCAD in the fall of 1969. It is possible that this encounter was in fact—in true Barry style—telepathic, or on the part of Gullison, a memory compromised by smoking too much weed, as there is no clear evidence that Barry ever went to NSCAD.[17] In any case, according to Brown, subsequent aesthetic achievements of the group included *Pissing in the River Series #1* (George Firlotte; 1972), *Introduction of a Foreign Body Piece* (Brenda Haddon; 1973), which introduced silestone imitation granite into a granite quarry; a remake of Hans Haacke's *Live Random Airborne Systems* (multiple artists, 1975) that resulted in an undocumented image of seagulls over a garbage dump; and *Inside Joke Piece* (multiple artists, 1975), which was a private joke circulated amongst themselves.[18]

Brown illustrated his talk with what one might call classic photos of 70s counter-cultural lifestyles: a close-up snapshot of Brenda Haddon smoking a huge joint, the aforementioned Universe House, and a wooden A-frame in the forest that served as the group's "documentation centre" in later years. These visual choices served to anchor this history in the developing collective memory of the 70s (albeit in a stereotypical way), and made these hippyish activities in a marginal location seem likely as art. While I have not yet been able to verify through primary sources the existence of any artist communes in New Brunswick, let alone this one, they certainly did exist elsewhere. In relation to art-making, two of the best documented were in British Columbia: Singing Sands on the West Coast of Vancouver Island (1935–71), and the well-known Dollarton Beach and Maplewood Mud Flats' squatters' communities in the tidal zones of North Vancouver, which

Brenda Haddon, *Introduction of a foreign body piece*, 1973 (consisting of the introduction of a foreign body [Silestone imitation granite]) at former Lake Utopia Granite Quarry near St. George, N.B.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF BRENDA HADDON



A work submitted to Projects Class, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Fall 1969.

The students will gather together in a group and decide on a single common idea. The idea can be of any nature, simple or complex. This idea will be known only to the members of the group. You or I will not know it. The piece will remain in existence as long as the idea remains in the confines of the group. If just one student unknown to anyone else and at any time, informs someone outside the group the piece will cease to exist. It may exist for a few seconds or it may go on indefinitely, depending on the human nature of the participating students. We may never know when or if the piece comes to an end.

Robert Barry

Robert Barry, a work commissioned by David Askevold for the Projects Class, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, September 1969, offset lithography on card stock, rubber stamp on kraft envelope, 12.5 cm x 18 cm, from the collection of Ian Murray.
PHOTO: IAN MURRAY

Scott Watson has written about in the context of Vancouver's conceptual art scene of the 60s. [19]

What is undeniably real about the Whistle Cove Commune, other communes, and many artists and non-artists of this generation is the preoccupation with traversing all boundaries, spatial or otherwise, and transcending geographical, physical or perceptual limitations. Again and again, conceptual artists appear linked by their desire to resist being pinned down, even at times courting the ridiculous in their attempt to do so. This commonality has not escaped a new generation of interdisciplinary-oriented art historians who have been influenced by critical theory developed around theories of nomadism, space and geography, such as that found in the works of Henri Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari, David Harvey, and others.[20] Such training may explain why art historical accounts of conceptual art occasionally seem to overanalyze the playful and impulsive creations of the 60s and 70s as ground-breaking ontologies—as if the fantasy of a collectively flown pink satin airplane or urinating in the snow near the arctic circle (N.E. Thing Co., *Territorial Claim*, 1969) might constitute a serious and collective challenge to the political economy of capitalism.

I believe it is this, the context of today's consumer-driven world with its almost inescapable demand for profit and productivity, that 50 years later continues to drive historians' desire for both the existence and accounting of an aesthetics of the impossible. Such precocious artworks indicate a culture of hope and possibility, one grounded in a historical moment when artists appear to have had more leisure time than is possible today—the ability to reflect, think and play. Certainly for a younger generation of working-class artists and historians born after 1970, the demands of an increasingly competitive workplace, combined with a decreased standard of living, put a premium on minutes and seconds not already accounted for, and retrospectively elevate in importance the leisure time associated with an aesthetics of the impossible.

After remarking that "the utopian flame did not live long," Brown concluded his presentation on the commune's activities by stating that, "the parallel between *Inside Joke Piece* and the 'movement' is evident." By alluding to the communal development of a narrative compromised by misinformation, Brown challenges us to consider the veracity of his/story, and in doing so serves as a rich example of Woodward's "aesthetics of the impossible." Of course, such an aesthetics might simply be called a mythology, which is nothing new in the history of art. Nonetheless, it is the symbolic *promise* of an impossible gesture bound to the rigour, rules and regulations of much conceptual art that continues to offers psychic redemption for creative individuals working today. ×

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ENDNOTES

1 Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art in Canada: Capitals, Peripheries, and Capitalism," in *The Visual Arts in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009), 331. Wark quotes William Wood's essay "Capital and Subsidiary: N.E. Thing Co. and the Revision of Conceptual Art," from *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 Wark, Ibid.

3 John Marriott, "Does Duchamp Make You Sad? (An investigation, with feeling)," in *Susan Kealey: Ordinary Marvel* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998), 53.

4 Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, 1966–1977* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 49. Reprinted there from its original publication in Art International 12, no. 2 (Feb. 1968): 31–36.

5 The exhibition *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada c. 1965–1980* opened in Toronto on September 10, 2010 and ran until November 28, 2010, and will travel to a number of galleries in Halifax, Montreal, Edmonton and Vancouver through 2012. The exhibition(s) were co-curated by Grant Arnold, Catherine Crowston, Barbara Fischer, Michèle Thériault with Vincent Bonin, and Jayne Wark.

6 For example, Michael Snow was present at the conference as were a number of historians presenting papers that analyzed his work.

7 Paul Woodrow, "History is Written Backwards by People Who Weren't There," abstract for his presentation of the same title found in the programme for the *Traffic, Conceptualism in Canada* conference hosted by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, (November 26–28, 2010), 27.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Thomas M. Messer, "Why It Is", and David L. Shirley, "What It Is," in *Art in America* 57, no. 3 (May–June 1969), 30–47.

10 Ibid., 38–41.

11 Barry's "common idea" piece (actually untitled) is documented in David Askevold's complete set of Project Class instructions by a statement that reads, "The students will gather together in a group and decide on a single common idea... This idea will be known only to the members of the group...." Ono's work consisted of a statement that read, "Think that snow is falling. Think that snow is falling everywhere all the time. When you talk with a person, think that snow is falling between you and on the person. Stop conversing when you think the person is covered by snow," and Ramsden's work consisted of a monochrome acrylic painting paired with a Photostat text that read "the content of this painting is invisible, the character and dimensions of the content are to be kept permanently secret known only to the artist." See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966–1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 37, 98. Also Yoko Ono's website accessed April 6, 2011: http://www.a-i-u.net/instructions.html.

12 See: Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art in Canada: The East Coast Story," accessed online on March 31, 2011: http://msvuart.ca/index.php?menid=04/02&mtyp=2&article_id=387

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.* Wark says " ...NSCAD circumvented its geographic isolation and established itself as a key locus for the international production and dissemination of conceptual art."

15 A notable exception to this is the engaged art scene centred around the fine arts program at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick.

16 Simon Brown's public lecture, "Conceptual Practices in Charlotte County, New Brunswick, 1969 to the Present Day: Overview of a Para-Marginal Millieu," presented at the *Traffic, Conceptualism in Canada* conference hosted by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, November 26–28, 2010, and sent to the author as a PDF.

17 I am referring here to Robert Barry's 1969 artwork *Telepathic Piece*.

18 Brown, "Conceptual Practices in Charlotte County."

19 Singing Sands was a 65 acre parcel of waterfront private property near Port Alberni on the West Coast of Vancouver Island owned by Peg Wittington. For thirty-five years she allowed artists to live on the land and to create work there in makeshift studios. Ultimately the land was sold to the Federal and Provincial Governments to make way for a Provincial Park. For an essay on the importance of the mudflats squatters' communities on Vancouver's conceptual art in the 60s see Scott Watson's essay "Urban Renewal: Ghost Traps, Collage, Condos and Squats—Vancouver Art in the Sixties," *Intertidal : Vancouver Art and Artists* (Antwerp: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, 2005), 31-49.

20 I am thinking here of the following, to name a few: Henri Lefebvre, *The Social Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc, 1991); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2006).