

CONSTELLATION & CORRESPONDENCES

NETWORKING BETWEEN ARTISTS

1970–1980

THE PRINTED MATERIAL INCLUDED IN THIS EXHIBITION REPRESENTS A SMALL SELECTION OF A VAST OUTPUT OF PUBLISHING BY CANADIAN ARTISTS THAT PARALLELED EXPERIMENTATION IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA, SUCH AS VIDEO, FROM 1970 TO 1980. AT THE END OF THE 1960S, ARTISTS ACROSS CANADA FORMED COLLECTIVES TO WORK WITH OTHERS IN A WAY THAT CHALLENGED THE BOUNDARIES OF TRADITIONAL STUDIO PRACTICES AND THE LIMITATIONS OF MUSEUMS AND COMMERCIAL GALLERIES. PRACTICES WERE INCREASINGLY EPHEMERAL AND PERFORMATIVE, MOVING AWAY FROM PAINTING AND SCULPTURE TO THE REALM OF ACTIONS AND IDEAS. AS ART AND ART MAKING WERE NO LONGER TIED TO A PHYSICAL PLACE, A KEY CONCERN OF THESE PRACTICES BECAME DISTRIBUTION. THUS THE TRANSFER OF INFORMATION BETWEEN ARTISTS GAINED IMPORTANCE AND WAS ACHIEVED THROUGH DOCUMENTS (CORRESPONDENCE, NEWSLETTERS, MAGAZINES, AND ARTISTS' BOOKS), THE TRAVEL OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-MANAGED EXHIBITION AND PRODUCTION SPACES. THROUGH THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS AND OTHER FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL FUNDING PROGRAMS, THESE INITIATIVES WOULD GRADUALLY EVOLVE INTO THE PARALLEL GALLERY SYSTEM, NOW KNOWN AS ARTIST-RUN CENTRES, THAT SUPPORTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF MANY ARTISTS, CURATORS, AND CULTURAL WORKERS TODAY.

This exhibition is a pragmatic assemblage of AA Bronson's mythic narrative of publishing as a "connective tissue" within a developing trans-Canada art scene. Although the geography of the country could be characterized as linear, with major cities spaced widely apart and most of the population concentrated against the American border, the pattern of message delivery through publishing is one of dispersal and diffusion reaching far beyond national borders. This pattern was often described as a network by participating artists who took control of the means of production and media representation, publishing to create relationships and new publics. One could ask, what drew together this constellation of disparate elements that corresponded through space and time?

The decade of the 1970s brought with it a growing awareness of space travel, the Vietnam War, the oil crisis, the rise of feminism, and the civil rights movements. The specific Canadian context reflected the effects of the Centennial Celebrations, rising unemployment, the October Crisis, a changing media environment, and a historically underdeveloped cultural infrastructure—denounced in Marshall McLuhan's *Counterblast* [1]. At a time when technological innovation intersected with utopian ideals of social transformation, this changing cultural context prompted artists' adoption of commercial printing technologies (such as photocopies, mimeograph duplication, or offset printing) as an alternative mode of production. McLuhan's positioning of media as an extension of our minds, bodies, and senses, and the transformative social effects of new technologies had a significant impact on expanding artistic practices across the country. Often identified as a point of origin of Canada's artist-run culture, the Intermedia Society (1967) and their *Newsletter* [2] grew out of a series of formative experiences in Vancouver that transcended disciplinary boundaries, putting McLuhan's communications theories to practical use. Alongside other experimental media, printed matter was also a means for artists to communicate complex questions regarding the relationship of art to politics and to culture, and the role of the artist's voice in social transformation. The *Refus Global* (1948), the manifesto of Montreal's Automatistes who denounced Quebec's conservative Catholicism in favour of the imagination, serves as an earlier example in this genre.

Printed matter and its distribution through the postal system provided a means to circumvent Canada's peripheral position to international art centres, such as New York, and to reach out from isolated local scenes, beyond regional or national borders. Communications technologies were rapidly diversifying, as can be seen in N.E. Thing Company's installation of Teletype and Telecopier units at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design as part of David Askevold's *Projects Class* (1969). The letter and the postal system, however, remained paramount in the transfer of ideas and affinities across time and geographic space. Michael Morris, an artist involved in Intermedia, received a letter from Ray Johnson, an artist whose New York Correspondence School consisted of sending collage and text-based works in the mail. This contact provided an entry point into international correspondence art networks. Fluxus artist Robert Filliou and his concept of the Eternal Network, in which all artists should be in communication at all times, also influenced artists' understanding of their activities based in egalitarian ideals of communication, participation, and exchange. In this spirit, Michael Morris (Marcel Dot), Vincent Trasov (Mr. Peanut), and Gary Lee-Nova (Art Rat) created the Image Bank in 1969, producing projects in the form of mailings collected and redistributed through Request Lists comprising the addresses of international contributors. The *Image Bank Annual Report* [4] is an example of material shared between network participants. As their list of contacts grew, Image Bank published the *International Image Exchange Directory* [14], and from 1972 to 1974, the Request Lists became a regular feature in *FILE Magazine* [15].

General Idea (AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal), the Toronto collective behind *FILE*, and later, Art Metropole (1973), also formed in 1969. Collaborations between Image Bank and General Idea began when Michael Morris won the *1971 Miss General Idea Beauty Pageant* [6] and expanded to an international-scale awards ceremony with the *Decca Dance* in 1974 [9-10]. The event, organized in conjunction with *Avalanche* magazine's Willoughby

Sharp and San Francisco artist Lowell Darling, brought together eight hundred participants from the network at the Elks Club in Hollywood, where the Sphinx d'Or awards were distributed [8]. *IS* magazine [12], edited by Victor Coleman (Vic d'Or), reproduced *Mondo Artie Episode No. 1681*, a script compiled by Glenn Lewis (Flakey Rose Hips) with contributions from other performers. The *Mondo Artie* episode served as the script for the ceremony, as well as for *Art Stars in Hollywood: The Decca Dance* [7], a video documentary created through the collective efforts of Chip Lord (of Ant Farm) and Megan Williams (of TTVV), among others. In the correspondence network, artists functioned with pseudonyms and alter egos to engender a fluidity of identity. After the demise of Intermedia, Lewis and his New York Corres-Sponge-Dance School of Vancouver joined Image Bank and others in founding the Western Front Lodge (1973) as an integrated living and working environment. Following the *Decca Dance*, there were transformations of artistic personalities recorded in Opal L. Nations' magazine of experimental fiction and graphics, *Strange Faeces, No. 17: All Canadian Edition* [13], published with the assistance of the Western Front.

The adoption of mass-printing technologies by visual artists blended with that of counterculture small presses that used independent publishing as a means of cultural transformation. The visual and the textual were combined in bill bissett's *blewointment* magazine (1963-72). In the *poverty isshow* [5], the works of Intermedia poet Maxine Gadd, or artist Gary Lee-Nova, are published and bound together with masking tape, alongside writers such as George Bowering, Alfred Earle Birney, b. p. nichol, and Michael Ondaatje. Victor Coleman, editor at Coach House Press from 1966 to 1974, encouraged an ongoing Vancouver-Toronto nexus through the publishing of experimental poetry, such as Judith Copithorne's *Runes* [23], and was instrumental in bringing together the artists of General Idea and Image Bank. Coleman's influence persisted when he later assumed directorship of A Space (founded in 1971) and encouraged the artist as writer or critic in the pages of *Proof Only* [20], which became *Only Paper Today* [21]. Visually oriented writers of the Talonbooks-Coach House Press connection also informed a younger generation of poets who gathered at Véhicule Art (1972) in Montreal, making use of its press and available space for readings. Allan Bealy and his *davinci* magazine [28] linked the interests of the visual artists and poets of Véhicule Art.

Printed matter documented time-based events such as performances or exchanges between artists. Painter and poet Roy Kiyooka's *Transcanada Letters* [24] is a compilation of his correspondence from 1966 to 1974. Among the activities recorded is a *Halifax/Vancouver: Exchange* (1972), which he organized as a means of interfacing ideas between artists active around Intermedia in Vancouver, and NSCAD in Halifax, underlining diverging philosophies and aesthetics. As a West Coast participant, Carole Itter's *The Log's Log* [22], produced with the help of poet Gerry Gilbert (who used the pseudonym Canada's National Magazine), attests to a playful linkage of one coast to the other through the transportation of a log as luggage on a trans-Canada train journey. This mischievous challenge to luggage regulations contrasts the austerity of pure information applied in East Coast conceptual practices. This reduction of information to its intrinsic qualities is evident in *Askevold, Dubé, Ferguson, Jarden, Kelly, McNamara, Murray, Robertson, Waterman, Young & Zuck* [26], a catalogue produced a year earlier for the inaugural exhibition of A Space that also had its basis in exchange.

Publishing was a strategy employed by artists to emulate and infiltrate consumer magazine culture as a means of self-representation. *FILE Magazine* was a parody of *LIFE* magazine and its promotion of postwar consumer culture. *Centerfold* [36] was initially published in Calgary as a newspaper by Parachute Centre for Cultural Affairs (1975). Following a move to Toronto, Clive Robertson, Tom Sherman, and Lisa Steele transformed it into an artist-authored cultural news magazine modeled after *TIME*. For artists such as Tom Sherman, whose practice explored text as art [16], there was an interest in magazines with an open editorial policy to publish the unedited voice of the artist alongside news of cultural networks. In Montreal, under the editorial direction of Normand Thériault, *Médiart* [33] reserved pages in each issue for Véhicule artists such as Tom Dean to use as they wished (see *Martha is Dead* in *Médiart* 13, 1973). This openness echoed the three-volume project of *Québec Underground* [32], which assembled Yves Robillard's collection of press clippings, among other ephemera, on marginal artistic practices that defined the cultural fusion of art and politics during the 1960s in Quebec. *Parachute* magazine [34] grew out of Chantal Pontbriand and France Morin's experience at *Médiart*, emerging with a distinct mission to communicate within international art networks. Within the pages of *Parachute*, artists' writings were published alongside a serious art review context that reached an international audience.

In 1976 the Canada Council for the Arts put a freeze on the funding it provided to the artist-run centres. The number of centres had developed exponentially during the first half of the decade and the funding agency was unable to meet demand. An interview between Clive Robertson and Michael Morris on the Telephone issue of *Voicespendence* [35], an audiotape magazine, reveals concerns regarding the future economic survival of the artists and practices connected through the network. The Association of National Non-Profit Artists Centres (ANNPAC) was formed in response, and through the efforts of many artists already involved in the loosely defined networking of the early 1970s, redirected an interest in information transmission to the service of lobbying and advocacy. Under the editorial direction of Tanya Mars (then Tanya Rosenberg), a founder of Montreal's Powerhouse (1974), *Parallogramme* [38] acted as a medium for consolidation and discussion between ANNPAC's diverse affiliated member organizations.

In the latter half of the 1970s, cultural production became increasingly politicized. Growing concern with the socio-political position of the artist can be read in Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge's contributions to *The Fox* [40], published by the New York branch of Art + Language, or the polemic language of *Strike* [42], published by the Centre for Experimentation in Art and Communications. The essays by artists in ANNPAC's publication *Spaces by Artists* [39] suggest a shift towards the ideological. In the same publication, Philip Monk's analysis of network as "differentiated plurality" foreshadows the preponderance of theory in the following decade – both in writing and artistic practice – as gender, sexuality, and race politics challenged modes of representation.

Felicity Tayler, MLIS

NOTES

THE GUEST CURATOR WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE ARTISTS WHOSE WORK IS REPRESENTED HERE, WITHOUT WHOM THERE WOULD BE NO ESSAY OR EXHIBITION, AND ALSO THE ARTISTS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE KIND ENOUGH TO SHARE THEIR INSIGHTS AND STORIES, INCLUDING TOM DEAN, VINCENT TRASOV, MICHAEL MORRIS, TOM SHERMAN, GLENN LEWIS, VINCENT BONIN, AND MICHAEL TURNER. THANKS ALSO TO JONATHAN FRANKLIN, PETER TREPANIER, AND SARAH D'AURELIO AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES; TO COLLEAGUES AT ARTEXTE, SYLVIE GILBERT, JOHN LATOUR, AND KAREN SPENCER; TO JENNIFER BÉLANGER AND ATELIER D'ESTAMPE IMAGO; AND TO THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS.

CHECKLIST

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