

ETC



The Tightrope Between Art and Reality

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Number 18, Spring 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35887ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Molter, M. (1992). The Tightrope Between Art and Reality. *ETC*, (18), 41–44.

THE TIGHTROPE BETWEEN ART AND REALITY

The existential concerns that come into play as the artist meets the entrepreneur and the entrepreneur the artist are also concerns of institutions of contemporary art. These are measured in part through the interchange with directors, selection committees and curators, in the exhibition and the promotion of contemporary art.

The problem becomes even greater as one attempts to make one's way through the "ins" and the "outs" of the select, and the elitism within the local and the international post avant-garde "cutting-edge" of contemporary art representation. It is the ensemble of these relationships working together and at cross purposes that largely determine what we see of Canadian art inside and outside Canada.

Annie Molin Vasseur cites at least five qualities that she believes are important in approaching the question of aesthetic evaluation – a concern that should not be ignored in this discussion of the contemporary art market:

- the work should be reflecting a coherent personalized structure;
- it should be of historical importance, reflecting the time in which it is produced;
- it should reflect the geographical place of its creation;
- it should have a transcendent quality beyond aesthetics, ethics or politics, and be of philosophical value;
- it should have its own aura, and stand on its own, not owing its existence to anything that it may refer to.¹

The Role of the Market

Yet, even if we accept certain rather general standards, it is often the exception that makes a work exceptional outside of its time and in terms of the international art market long after history and art historians decide the relative importance of an artist to his or her period. Consider the recent sales of work by Vincent Van Gogh, an artist supported by an art dealer sibling, unable to sell paintings that today are considered out of the reach of public museums. Colin Gleadow refers to sales at Sotheby's in London in May 1990, in which two paintings, Van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* and Renoir's *Au Moulin de la Gallette*, were sold to a Japanese paper manufacturer for a combined total of \$160.5 million U.S. As Gleadow goes on to note, this does not indicate a strong market. On the contrary, while more money is being spent, it is being spent on less art.²



J. W. Stewart, *The Self-Made Man*, 1990. Techniques mixtes; 173 x 107 cm.
Waddington & Gorge, Montréal.

Baudrillard states: "All forms and styles are now elevated indiscriminately in the same way to the transaesthetic field of simulation... Just as aesthetic runs mad without any rules to govern it, the art market slides unchecked into wild speculation in the absence of laws governing value." He concludes: "Both Capitalism and Communism are coming to an end due to a consensus that is, in fact, quite comparable, and that I think is like a total epidemic or, if you will, like a total investment... Since value is universally shared, it is the same everywhere, therefore no value exists". In his final analysis in this interview he adds: "It is a form of speculation, and yet speculation is missing in that the individual really doesn't control things. No one even makes a 'profit'; profit isn't even the object any longer."³

Henri Cueno, in *Le Monde*, suggests that through speculation, we see the erosion of art's spiritual value, and clearly must question the neutrality of a market that

systematically continues to ignore the work of artists of the Third World. At the same time, he states that the imposition of this international market system demonstrates that the painting has replaced gold as a shelter of relative stability, while art work in general very rarely reaches such unlimited value.⁴

Robitaille suggests that speculation on artists at an early stage in a career may be extremely hazardous, but that profits can be explosive to the point that one may speak of drug money laundering in the art sales rooms. Robitaille also notes that since Paris's bid and enormous investment to re-enter the international contemporary art market on a serious level at the 1990 Foire Internationale de l'art contemporain, no fewer than 24 of the 155 galleries represented are from New York.⁵

This influence on contemporary art in the 1980s and its reflection in current international standards is deplored by Yves Robillard who remarks: "Aujourd'hui j'ai l'impression qu'on a noyé les artistes québécois dans le bain de l'art américain".⁶

In *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe describes the financial strength reflected in the move of the international art market to New York and how it was controlled through lean times by critics like Clement Greenberg, while a structure was set up to manipulate the market until a revolving system of fashion and trend was in place. In a chapter titled: "The public is not invited (and never has been)", he states that the public are no more a part in the decision as to what is promoted by the market than are the artists, and that these decisions are made by fewer than some 10,000 from the elite in the art world of Rome, Milan, Paris, London, Berlin, Munich, Dusseldorf and New York and not even a thousand from all other locations throughout the globe. In "All the Art that's fit to Show", Hans Hacke (in translation) concludes: "Artists, as much as their enemies, no matter of what ideological coloration, are unwitting partners in the art syndrome and relate to each other dialectically. They participate in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological makeup of their society. They work within that frame, set the frame and are being framed."⁷

Pierre Gaudibert suggests that this, in effect, has the negative impact of an imposed aesthetic norm, both restrictive and in constant fluctuation, which engenders the conformity of a pretended perpetual modernity and a rule by an insidious terrorism, leading to a refusal of all real confrontation and pluralism, and to the relegation of all others to oblivion or marginalization. Certain

art forms and research are not admitted to the market or into the institutions, and as a result, are neither seen nor recognized. Artists active at the periphery of the large centres are thus relegated to a cultural Third World.⁸

In an analysis of the art market, Robillard describes the control of the art market by fewer than 50 individuals of a sort of international cartel. He claims that Canadian institutions bought into the concept represented by American art and collectors in Toronto opted for the resale value of American artists' work. According to his account, the "international" market is made up of three countries. Those countries not represented are part of a cultural and economic Third World.⁹

In a desperate attempt to become part of this culturati, we see situations where Canadian art is relegated to second place and acquisition budgets of institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art are squandered on less art, mostly from other countries. The insignificance felt by artists and the public is fostered by the indifference of galleries and curators that bow to international trends in the race for the "cutting edge" and for recognition in an exclusive and lucrative international club. A round table held in conjunction with the summer exhibition "L'été libre de l'art contemporain", 9 June 1990, titled "The development of contemporary art galleries in Montreal", noted that although some galleries will and do take calculated risks, the market for Canadian art inevitably conforms to international standards imposed. It also noted that little is given in the way of support by government agencies or by serious media coverage. It concluded that cultural institutions and contemporary art curators need to be more concerned with the defence and promotion of Canadian art and acknowledge rather than succumb to pressures from the international market.

The Centre international de l'art contemporain (CIAC) has undertaken much of the presentation of contemporary art in a recent series of mostly annual events, yet it has little in the way of a secure budget or independent status. Operating at an almost marginal level through redirection of unemployment and welfare benefits in training programs, the CIAC is constantly regrouping and searches for funds as director Claude Gosselin is obliged to continually train new members of the ever-changing wave of staff. While such determination is laudable, surely it is the object and responsibility of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as the Musée du

Québec, to present Canadian art and trends. Underfunded bodies with their near underground conditions should not be expected to fill the role of the museums – theirs is, at best, a complementary role.

Claire Gravel points out that since 1987, the Museum of Contemporary Art has organized only one retrospective of a Quebec artist, while several summer group exhibitions without thematic content give the impression that Quebec art merits only superficial treatment. She suggests the situation is further aggravated by the lethargy with which our museums promote local art abroad. Among the centres she credits with promotion and diffusion of contemporary Quebec art are the Galerie de l'UQAM, the Concordia Art Gallery, the CIAC, the Saidye Bronfman Centre and the Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe.¹⁰

At the same time, in review of an exhibiton at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, James Patten suggested that the recent acquisition exhibition demonstrates that the unquestioned authority of the art object and the donation habits of the rich continue to dictate the collection habits of the historical departments. These, he implies, will continue to consume money and space that could be used to support artists and the valid curatorial initiatives of the contemporary department.¹¹

An examination of the Montreal market in relation to that of Toronto shows its relative importance to be reflected in the relative economic transfer of activity over the last two decades. In terms of a world market, both are all but invisible, although two collectors from Toronto, David Mirvish and Lord Thompson of Fleet, and one collector from Montreal, Peter Winkworth, are noted in the insert magazine *Vernissage* on "Art and Power" in *The Art Newspaper*, October 1990.

Further reference to government support of contemporary art is indicated in a comparative study by David Cwi, in a report cited by Jeannie Kamins; comparing government sponsorship in the Netherlands, West Germany, France, Sweden, Italy, Great Britain, Canada and the United States, Canada ranks second last.¹²

Representation of Canadian Art on the International Market

Quebec's leading artists are thought to be French or American on the world market, depending on the location of the gallery representing them, and Canadian artists are often indistinguishable from Americans, even

in Britain. Apart from the international affiliation of a gallery such as Waddington & Gorce, or the presentation by such artists as Genevieve Cadieux or Michel Goulet at the Venice Biennale, or the exceptional presentation of Michael Snow at Beaubourg, or a rather disastrous "Oh Kanada" in Berlin, Canada is little known in the present international contemporary art market.

An attempt to foster and further promote contemporary art in Canada through a Canadian Biennale of Contemporary Art was initiated in 1989 by the National Gallery of Canada. However, corporate support of the event was withdrawn by the initial sponsors, making it seem that the proposition of corporate association may, unfortunately, have been deemed too risky a business in Canada. This echoes the comment by Diana Nemiroff: "If the concept of a biennial exhibition is resilient enough to be adapted to the conditions we work in now, I think the reason may be a need to perform our own history, a need still felt."¹³

However, the outlook is not entirely dismal. In the sponsorship of the arts in Canada some notable examples, such as the temporary sponsorship of the Canadian Biennale by XEROX, which in itself is the material of discussion, have been undertaken with risk to a corporate image, but with different objectives. Some of these, notably Lavallin and Hydro Québec, have gone far to improve the representation of contemporary Canadian art. Certainly the involvement and interest of collectors such as Bernard Lamarre in the management of public art collections and exhibitions has added to the visibility, marketing potential and interest in contemporary art. Yet here the element of risk and the reality of the outside markets is most revealing in establishing real market values for contemporary art as its investors realign or go under. However, whatever the bottom line, interest by international trade has helped to promote the exhibition of Canadian contemporary art in Australia, Europe and Japan, to give examples of this growing profile.

Moreover, while in certain cases cutbacks are being made throughout the cultural sector, as throughout most sectors in the government, Canada Council has given priority to exhibition proposals from the province of Quebec, funding of the A and B grants available to professional artists has increased and artists in these categories are enjoying added exposure in the Canadian and international markets.

Equally important is the contribution by the Department of External Affairs in its programme for the promotion of Canadian culture, through funding available to promote Canada internationally in a free trade environment. Gallery owners in Montreal in particular, such as René Blouin and Christiane Chassey, are able to travel with their artists in their promotion abroad. Among the more prominent examples are the 1990 showings of Michel Goulet and the outdoor exhibition of his work in Central Park in New York. The increased presence of Canadian artists in the fairs of Los Angeles, Chicago, Frankfurt and Paris, the selection of Rober Racine for the Sydney Biennale, the showing of Evergon at the Centre Pompidou and of Barbara Steinman at the Centre Montmartre, were largely made possible through such programmes as that provided by External Affairs.

The provincial government, in its adoption of Bill 78 in the Quebec legislature, has allowed the emergence of such organizations as the "Regroupement des artistes du Domaine Renommé des Arts Visuels du Québec", (AADRAV), and has recognized the professional status of visual artists. In application of the rights provided by such recognition, improvement with regard to copyright may be seen in the future, although at present it is still a difficult law to apply, as is noted in reference to work by Hélène Gauthier, director of la Société du droit d'auteur en arts visuels (SODAAV), which writes contracts for the various artist-run associations.¹⁴

In an article dealing in part with this situation as seen in 1987, Chantal Pontbriand comments: "Canadian art, which has developed intensely over the last few years and whose quality is indisputable, has not made its mark internationally or even nationally." But she concludes optimistically: "In Canada, fortunately, innovative models are not in short supply; the alternative scene should be able to serve as the impetus of the Canadian museological system, even if there is little evidence of this at the present time."¹⁵

Yet putting the question of quality aside, it does seem, as may be noted through such articles as a Canadian Press release in *La Presse*, Monday, 12 November 1990, titled *Le coût des musées fédéraux a été majoré de 74 p. cent*, that the present economy and lack of control of plans and building expenditures does not bode well for the promotion of the Canadian culture and particularly of contemporary art.

In an article subtitled "Gagner sa Vie", the authors contend that no criteria of durability of an art work exists

to justify art market behaviour, and they deplore the result that such speculation has on the majority of artists, who are the only workers not allowed to expect a living from their work. Market realities, they suggest, mean that an artist can, but is not likely to, live from his or her work – what exists today is censure by profit.¹⁶

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NOTES

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3. Baudrillard, Jean, "Transaesthetics", excerpt in translation, *La Transparence du Mal*, and interview, *Arts International*, New York, autumn, October 1990, pp. 52-57.
4. Cuco, Henri, "La peinture, Dernière valeur-refuge?", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Paris, juin 1989, p. 26.
5. Robitaille, Louis, B., "La Foire monstre qui ramène en force les galeries new-yorkaises", *La Presse*, Montréal, 28 octobre 1990, p. A-2.
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12. Kamins, Jeannie, "Art and Power", *ETC MONTREAL*, n° 12, septembre 1990, p. 9.
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