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IAIN BAXTER& and N.E. THING CO.: A Study in Pop-Inflected Conceptual Art

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IAIN BAXTER& and N.E. THING CO.: A Study in Pop-Inflected Conceptual Art

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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IAIN BAXTER& AND N.E. THING CO.: A CASE STUDY IN POP-INFLECTED
CONCEPTUAL ART

By Dennis Wyatt Durham, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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       The Canadian artist IAIN BAXTER&, known before 2005 as Iain Baxter, created
an innovative Conceptual Art practice in the mid-60s that continues to make important
contributions even today. He has maintained a strong collaborative element in his art, as
witnessed by his role in the short-lived group IT (1965) and N.E. THING CO. (1966-
1978)--an actual incorporated company consisting of BAXTER& and his first wife,
Ingrid Baxter as chief officers--and by the addition of an ampersand to his legal name in
2005 to signify the open-ended quality of his work that relies on viewers' contributions to
help determine its meaning.
       This dissertation introduces the term "Pop-inflected Conceptual Art" to describe
how BAXTER& merges his use of information technologies, modern and ubiquitous
materials, and pedestrian activities with a desire to question the received role and purpose
of art through an epistemological approach. By presenting BAXTER&'s key
influences—Zen Buddhism, as described by D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, and the
communications theory of Marshall McLuhan—this study describes five underlying
principles that inform BAXTER&'s work individually and in unison. These principles
are: his preference for foregrounding the banal; creation of the "infoscape" that merges
the natural world and the constant stream of information within North American culture;
proclivity for experimenting with such unlikely media as plastics and telecommunication
media; understanding of art's kinship with language; and usage of pseudonyms.

This study describes the core terms of McLuhan's theory in order to analyze this thinker's significance for BAXTER&'s work; moreover, it presents how the above five principles are evident throughout the three main divisions in BAXTER&'s artistic career: before, during, and after his tenure with N.E. THING CO. Through an analysis of key examples of many of this artist's works, this study also determines affinities to both established Pop artists and his Conceptual Art peers, while distinguishing how his Zen and McLuhanesque hybrid approach, which includes a consistent reliance on humor to communicate definitively his ideas, sets him apart from these groups of artists and foregrounds his role as the precursor to such younger Vancouver photoconceptual artists as Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, and Stan Douglas.

Introduction

       The Canadian artist IAIN BAXTER&, known before 2005 as Iain Baxter,

developed a Pop-inflected Conceptual Art practice through his work under the name N.E.

THING CO. (1966–1978) and through subsequent work that has extended the parameters

of Conceptual Art.[1] As one of the premier artists in Canada, BAXTER& has exhibited in

over 75 solo exhibitions across North America and Europe, been included in over 180

group exhibitions, and been the subject of four retrospective exhibitions. Moreover, he is

the only artist to have been awarded two provincial Orders (The Order of British

Columbia and The Order of Ontario) as well as appointed Officer to The Order of

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[1] IAIN BAXTER& was born in 1936 in Middlesborough, UK, to Annie and Andrew Baxter, a mechanical engineer. His family relocated to Calgary, Alberta, in 1937. He added the ampersand to his legal name in 2005 to reflect his artistic philosophy, and declared in 2009 that his name be spelled with all capital letters. The ampersand is a device the artist has assumed to reflect the collaborative impulse he has expressed throughout his career, including not only the groups he founded (IT and N.E. THING CO.) and his work with his current wife, Louise Chance Baxter, but also his conception of art as an exchange between artists and their viewers. In a November 8, 2008, interview with the author, BAXTER& states, "the word 'and' is really interesting because it's a conjunction, it ties things together, it leaves questions.… I started thinking about it as a kind of philosophy, as a way of thinking." N.E. THING CO. was a collaboration begun with his first wife, Ingrid (born Elaine Ingrid Hieber, in Spokane, Washington, 1938) in 1966, officially incorporated in 1969 and dissolved in 1978, along with the divorce of the copresidents IAIN and Ingrid. N.E. THING CO. will also be referred to in this study as NETCO or the company. This study recognizes the conceptual significance behind BAXTER&'s name by using this current spelling when referring to the artist in the historical present, as in this introduction, but will use the original spelling (Baxter) when referring to IAIN and Ingrid Baxter together (i.e., the Baxters), or to IAIN and Louise Chance Baxter, as well as when citing texts that predate the name change.

Canada, this nation's highest civilian honor.[2] He is recognized as the first Canadian artist

to develop a Conceptual Art practice,[3] and should be regarded as the initiator of the

"Vancouver School of Photoconceptualism," a loosely defined group of artists working

out of a Conceptual Art heritage, largely in the media of film and photography, whose

members include such major artists as Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, and Rodney

Graham.[4] Yet surprisingly, this is the first monographic study of IAIN BAXTER&.

Conceptual Art, an advanced, international art movement that dates from the mid-

1960s to late 1970s, was developed by artists working independently and in groups

whose common goals were to challenge object-based definitions of art in order to view

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[2] BAXTER& received the Order of Canada in 2003, the rank of Companion to the Order of Ontario in 2004, and the rank of Companion to the Order of British Columbia in 2007. These Orders are ranked in three levels: Companion, Officer, and Member.

[3] A reasonable argument could be made that Toronto- and New York–based artist Michael Snow was the first Canadian to develop a conceptual practice, as witnessed by his early films, including *Wavelength* (1966), or the development of his *Walking Woman* series that includes the early manifestation *Carla Bey* (1965). The debate between whether BAXTER& or Snow was first is a worthwhile enterprise for a later time, and many thanks to David Moos for initiating this question. This study does however acknowledge Michael Snow's early work and his many contributions to conceptualist film, but notes that Snow moved to New York during the mid-1960s, while BAXTER& has maintained a Canadian address since his first teaching appointment at the University of British Columbia in 1964.

[4] The origins of the name "The Vancouver School of Photoconceptualism" are somewhat murky, largely due to the fact that many of the artists who have been deemed members have reacted against its usage. As an example, searching for a reference to this name throughout exhibition reviews and critical essays on Jeff Wall dating from the 1980s and 1990s, the period when this label originally developed currency, is akin to searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack. The earliest reference found is artist and critic Bill Jones' introduction to his interview with Wall ("False Documents: A Conversation with Jeff Wall," *Arts Magazine* 64 [May 1990]: 50–55), which begins: "In Europe there is talk of a Vancouver School of neo-pictorialist photography based on the recent success of a small group of artists active throughout the 1970s and 1980s in Western Canada…" (p. 51). Yet Jones' usage here suggests a preexisting, albeit unidentified, currency for this label. Ian Wallace uses the term "photoconceptualism" in his essay "Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver," which forms his contribution to the edition *13 Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990). This essay credits BAXTER& as the first Vancouver artist to produce photoconceptual art and clarifies the differences between the supposed members of the photoconceptual school. Even dissertations published since 2000 that focus explicitly on "The Vancouver School" fail to note its origins, let alone explain its meaning.

the concept as the work itself; to engage viewers not as passive recipients, but as active participants in determining a work's meaning; and to call attention to and critique the legitimating structures governing the realm of fine art, including galleries, museums, and the art press.[5] Rather than focusing on an ontological approach to the production of art, Conceptual Art practitioners engaged an epistemological model in order to investigate how art might be defined, produced, and displayed. The terms "conceptualism" and "conceptual" have been used from the 1980s to the present to describe artists and their works who predate Conceptual Art (Marcel Duchamp being the most cited), those artists working within the 1960s and 1970s period of Conceptual Art, as well as art practices coming after this historical tendency that retains its epistemological character while reasserting the role of the art object. While Conceptual Art is a historical movement despite scholarly disagreements over definition and dating, "conceptual" describes a mode of practice that may extend beyond this period.[6]

Traditionally, this art movement has been discussed as the successor of the intellectually rigorous approach found in Minimalism, a self-reflexive, literalist art developed largely from 1963 to 1968 by such New York–based artists as Donald Judd,

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[5] The use of capital letters in the spelling of Conceptual Art is presented here to signify a historical movement and coordinates with the practice of two of the preeminent scholars of this era, Charles Harrison and Benjamin Buchloh.

[6] The clearest presentation of conceptualism as a practice beyond historical limitations comes from artist and art historian Luis Camnitzer and curators Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss in their essay "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s," which serves as the foreword to the exhibition catalog for *Global Conceptualism* (1999), the seminal representation of Conceptual Art as a global phenomenon.

Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Dan Flavin.[7] The tendency to view

Conceptual Art as a descendant of Minimalism remains appropriate to the study of

several New York and British artists.[8] However, a new model is proposed here for

examining BAXTER&'s Conceptual Art practice as Pop-inflected due to his frequent

reference to mass-culture idioms and reliance on everyday environs, preference for media

used for telecommunications or advertising purposes, and consistent infusion of ribald

wit and satire that differentiate him from his more austere Conceptual Art peers. Based

on these three factors, BAXTER&'s work cannot be viewed as an heir to a Minimalist

program. Instead, Pop Art's humor and attempts to engage the viewer in a dialectical

merging of the concept of popular culture with that of fine art should be viewed as the

actual antecedents to this work.[9] Although the focus of this study is BAXTER&'s art, it

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[7] This study relies on the enormous contributions toward a wider understanding of Minimalism made by art historian James Meyer in his seminal study, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). The roster of artists included in Minimalism above comes from Meyer's book, which also includes the Washington, D.C., based artist Anne Truitt. Minimalism is capitalized here as a convenience and accepted convention, yet does so in full recognition of Meyer's' approach to Minimalism as a diverse field of practice. Meyer uses the lowercase, which he presents throughout his study in order to suggest that "We come closer to the truth in viewing minimalism not as a movement with a coherent platform, but as a field of contiguity and conflict, of proximity and difference." See Meyer, 2001, pp. 2–3.

[8] Conceptual artists that either worked in an originally minimalist style or exhibited alongside Minimal artists include: Lawrence Weiner, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Mel Bochner, Dan Graham, and Hans Haacke.

[9] Pop Art is an art movement with two recognized beginnings. The first manifestation began in Great Britain with the artists and architects of the Independent Group and dates from around 1957. The North American face is commonly dated from 1962, the date by which such New York–based artists as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, and James Rosenquist had major gallery showings. Their Pop practice began slightly earlier, but 1962 has become the conventional starting date for this movement. While the New York face of Pop Art remains the most widely studied, this movement's focus on subject matter derived from popular culture and its satirical critique of the commonalities and differences between high art and mass culture were assumed by artists in the American West, Canada, and elsewhere. The French manifestation of this movement is known under the rubric "The New Realists," a term that critics had applied to the American Pop artists before the designation "Pop" became the norm.

intends to provide a new framework to discuss broader conceptualist practice that engages the realm of the everyday and relies as well on mass media in its epistemological examination on the limits and potential for visual art as Pop-inflected.

Beginning with his work prior to the incorporation of NETCO and continuing with art from the time of N.E. THING CO. to the present, this study will examine the major generative principles of BAXTER&'s art in order to demonstrate and analyze how his innovations both correlate with established views of Conceptual Art and go beyond them. Five underlying principles recur in BAXTER&'s artistic life before, during and after N.E. THING CO.'s existence.

First, BAXTER& found in Buddhism a connection to his emerging interest in fine art that he transposed into an investigation of sub-aesthetic materials and situations. His interest in Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism as described by widely published Zen scholars and theologians Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, catalyzed a desire to connect the historically sheltered realm of fine art to that of the everyday. The development of a sub-aesthetic, a preference for banal subjects and their non-artful presentation, is a significant component of the majority of Conceptual Art works, although the impetus for other artists is not necessarily Buddhism. Second, BAXTER& developed a new way of thinking about the landscape as a natural realm and infoscape, his term for a theoretical space predicated on the information translated and presented by both people and objects. He devised the concept of the infoscape through his understanding of Buddhism, close reading of communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, and training in comparative biology. The idea of the infoscape goes beyond the scope of most Conceptual Art through

its merging of the sensorial experience of the external environment and the realization of the natural processes and interactions inherent to it. The third principle is BAXTER&'s study of McLuhan, which led him to experiment with a wide array of media, both artistic and technological. Media experimentation became central to much Conceptual Art practice, but BAXTER&'s reliance on such telecommunications media as telephone, television, and radio is indicative of his desire to employ popular culture as a means for critiquing normative definitions of art and allies his work with previously existing Pop Art ideals. Beyond McLuhan's theories on how a technological medium inflects the information channeled through it, BAXTER& revised current definitions of art to reflect its transmissive power and kinship with verbal and written language. This fourth principle, the relationship between language and visual art, will be examined in order to express how the artist inflects this common Conceptual Art mode with an ironic humor that is more closely allied to Buddhism and Pop Art. And lastly, the fifth principle will be BAXTER&'s use of pseudonyms and other strategies to critique the traditional role or model of the fine artist as individual genius.

Although these five principles are present in some combination throughout his entire body of work, they demand to be treated individually. This study will therefore show how each is distinct throughout BAXTER&'s art and will demonstrate how these themes are at times interrelated. Furthermore, it will compare BAXTER&'s art to that of his contemporaries, particularly Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner, to ascertain how his Conceptual Art parallels, expands, and diverges from that of more recognized and more widely studied Conceptual artists who were based in New York.

This study will also acknowledge BAXTER&'s consistent use of humor as one of the primary differences between his and many of his contemporaries' approaches. Conceptual Art is regarded typically as a sober and intellectually rigorous mode of analytical presentation of ideas. However, a number of Conceptual artists, including West Coast–based John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman, as well as the British collaboration Gilbert & George, have injected a wry humor in their approach. BAXTER&'s frequently overt humor will be presented here as part of his desire to make his work accessible to a broader base of viewers that may find a dryer presentation intimidating. Within the scope of BAXTER&'s art production, humor is used in varying ways, from the deadpan humor of NETCO's cliché ad pieces to his more overtly jocular use of toys in many of his *Bagged Landscapes* (fig. 1) and *Animal Preserve* (fig. 2) works, and from the satirical expressions of such extension pieces as *Pneumatic Judd* (fig. 3) to his consistently punning approach in such works as the NETCO *ART* (fig. 4) and *ACT* (fig. 5) series.

Any study such as this requires sufficient background to understand its scope. Before looking at BAXTER&'s work, a number of questions must be addressed: What is Conceptual Art, and how is it currently understood? How has it been connected to art movements that precede it—especially Minimalism and Pop Art? How are IAIN BAXTER& and NETCO currently viewed in art history and criticism? These issues will be examined in the next section in order to set in relief the new information this study will contribute.

Conceptual Art and the Challenge of Definitions

Two things become apparent when looking at the wealth of critical writings on Conceptual Art: (1) it originated as an art of resistance and challenge, and (2) Conceptual artists' struggles to define this art are mirrored by those critics who, even now, attempt to further the understanding of this movement. The question of how Conceptual Art may be defined and dated has been and continues to be a source of debate among artists, critics, and art historians. Many of the views offered have greatly expanded the understanding of this international art, yet there are some surprising absences that need to be addressed in order to flesh out an extended understanding of what Conceptual Art has been and still can be. As an example, the Vancouver-based Conceptual Art collective N.E. THING CO. is typically not included in revisionist histories of this movement, despite its inclusion in such seminal exhibitions of Conceptual Art as *577, 087* (Seattle Art Museum, 1969), *Conceptual Art/Conceptual Aspects* (New York Cultural Center, 1970), *Concept Art-Arte Povera-Land Art* (Turin, 1970), *Information* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970), and *Software* (Jewish Museum, New York, 1970) and several exhibitions organized by American dealer and noted Conceptual Art curator Seth Siegelaub.[10] Additionally, NETCO works were featured by two periodicals that included important looks at Conceptual Art: on the cover of the June 1969 issue of *Art in America* and the frontispiece for noted journalist and cultural historian Barbara Goldsmith's essay "Where

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[10] Siegelaub's exhibitions that include NETCO are *March* and *Summer Show* (both 1969), which were conceived as catalogs that served as exhibitions, *May 19–June 19*, the 1969 exhibition at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, that was co-curated by Siegelaub and BAXTER&, and the *Studio International* exhibition of Conceptual Art in its July–August 1970 issue.

is the Art?" featured in the May 1970 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*. Although more than a

dozen critical examinations of N.E. THING CO. exist, they are typically limited in scope

due to their role as essays for exhibition catalogs. Despite the wealth of information they

provide, none has successfully placed NETCO among the forefront of Conceptual Art.

No single analysis can be expected to answer fully all the questions raised by the

origins and definitions of the Conceptual Art movement, yet the present study seeks to

address a number of issues related to the developing view of Conceptual Art's definitions

and current significance. In so doing, it will examine a few seminal critical analyses of

Conceptual Art to determine their authors' main arguments, contributions, and

limitations. Then it will widen the parameters of the field to include the work of N.E.

THING CO. so that the current understanding of both this Canadian art collective (and its

founder, BAXTER&) and Conceptual Art can be enhanced and more clearly understood.

A Question of What and When

In responding to the question of what Conceptual Art is, most accounts start with

its origins. In the mid-1960s, a number of artists began to establish a metaphorical space

within the current art discourse in which to create new work, unfettered by the then

prescriptive and dogmatic tenets of late modernist criticism.[11] These artists understood

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[11] The term "late modernist criticism" refers to the critical positions espoused by Clement
Greenberg during the early to mid-1960s. Greenberg devised a new means of looking at advanced art
beginning with his essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939), which he expanded and revised through such
subsequent essays as "Towards a Newer Laöcoon," (1940), "'American-Type' Painting" (1955),

the polemical positions of such formative critics as Clement Greenberg as describing a

path for new, advanced art, yet deemed this direction repetitive or unappealingly rigid.

Thus they viewed the progression of advanced art not as linear, but as a two- or three-

dimensional area in which they could chart new directions for themselves. Challenges to

Greenberg's demands for an optical, reductive and formalist art had begun earlier in 1962

with the New York Pop artists and Minimalists. Pop Art's use of popular culture imagery

derived from commercial sources and an inescapable focus on subject matter were

considered by Greenberg as kitsch, an anathema to serious art. Minimalism, however,

appeared to accept and extend Greenberg's calls for a formal reduction through literalist,

three-dimensional pieces comprising such industrial materials as steel, Plexiglas, and

plywood in straightforward geometric forms. Greenberg and the like-minded critic

Michael Fried felt, however, that the Minimalist object failed to fulfill their requirements

for serious art—for them, it did not look enough like art to be accepted as such.[12] By the

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"Modernist Painting" (1960), "Post-Painterly Abstraction" (1964), and "Recentness in Sculpture" (1967). Briefly stated, Greenberg argued for a high art that is abstract and eschews the popular appeal of mass culture to focus instead on the defining characteristics of a single medium. In Greenberg's approach, for example, painting is understood as first and foremost a flat surface and thus should reinforce that flatness. Greenberg was allied with New Criticism, a formalist trend in literary criticism popular from the 1920s to 1960s that took the position that all meaning resides in a work of art, which is whole, autonomous, and self-sufficient. Greenberg, along with fellow critics Harold Rosenberg and Leo Steinberg, became a leading interpreter of Abstract Expressionism from the 1940s through the 1960s. A selection of his essays has been collected in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), yet these essays have been, in many cases, severely redacted by Greenberg. The more recent, four-volume collection edited by John O'Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–1993) is more valuable for its inclusiveness and its attempts to preserve the original text. Major criticisms of Greenberg's formalist theories, which are here described as "Modernist" as distinct from "modernist," an all-encompassing descriptor of numerous bodies of thought on Modern Art dating from the mid-nineteenth century to today, include the early critique by Robert Hobbs and Barbara Cavaliere, "Against a Newer Laöcoon," *ARTS* 51 (April 1977): 110–117.

[12] Greenberg treated Minimalist sculpture in his essay "Recentness in Sculpture," first published in the exhibition catalog Maurice Tuchman, ed. *American Sculpture of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles

mid-1960s both Pop Art and Minimalism seemed incomplete in their challenges to

formalism to some younger artists who were looking for a more dramatic offense against

the reductive formalist teleology called for in Greenberg's and Fried's criticism. Due to

Pop Art's use of easily recognized images of consumer products, advertisements, and

pulp cartoons, the movement received enormous popular support, which gave it the

appearance of being insufficiently rigorous for some young artists looking for a new

direction. Mass culture's ready acceptance of Pop Art and its relatively superficial

appreciation of this art's irony is likely the main reason why it has been overlooked for its

connections with Conceptual Art. Conversely, Minimalism was too closed and rational a

system for other artists to follow. While many of these younger artists, including Joseph

Kosuth, Dan Graham, and Robert Barry, began working in either a neo-Dada or

Minimalist style, they felt a need to shift their direction away from an ontological, object-

centered approach toward an epistemological one that systematically examined both the

nature of the act of art-making and the processes that governed its display.

 Art historian Alexander Alberro notes in "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–

1977" (1999) that, regardless of how Conceptual Art has been defined:

> the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and
> materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definitions of
> artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and

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County Museum of Art, 1967). Michael Fried, a student of Greenberg, originally professed his acceptance of the Minimalist painter Frank Stella in his essay "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," *Artforum* 5 (November 1966): 18–27. However, Fried later developed a new critical stance against such Minimalists as Morris and Judd in his essay "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23, which condemns Minimalism as theater due to Fried's belief that these works are essentially objects (something art should strive to surpass) and thus exist for an audience. Fried sees these works essentially as props for a performance.

context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution.[13]

This definition neatly draws together four fundamental premises shared by the majority of Conceptual artists: a challenge to the assumed necessity of locating the work of art in the production of objects as well as the need for a strictly visual art, a desire to insert the displayed work into its display environment and make it inseparable from this context, as well as an interest in expanding their work's reception to a wider audience than allowed through the limitations of time and viewership of a standard gallery showing. Alberro also offers well-reasoned generalizations about an art movement that has been embroiled in a debate about its definition and roster of contributors since its inception in the mid-1960s.

He recognizes the problems of attempting to draw together the varied styles and approaches taken up by such emerging Conceptual artists as Kosuth, Graham, Weiner and Mel Bochner. He follows his broad, generalized definition with the observation that "conceptualism during the mid to late 1960s was a contested field of multiple and opposing practices, rather than a single, unified artistic discourse and theory."[14] The phrase "contested field of multiple and opposing practices," which reflects an appreciation of the conflicts and distances comprising Conceptual Art, is the key element that begins to open the door for N.E. THING CO.'s rightful inclusion as a significant

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[13] Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), p. xvii.

[14] Alberro, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, p. xvii.

contributor to the overall development of Conceptual Art since it warns against the use of a single model for analyzing varied approaches. As this study will show, the tendency to view Conceptual Art through the critical language of Minimalism has a long history and remains a useful model for examining works that maintain a separation from popular culture. Yet an opposing artistic practice exists that sought to fold the assumed irreverence and popular culture connections of a Pop Art framework into a Conceptual Art mode of inquiry. Because Conceptual Art is not a label describing a formal style, it cannot be viewed as a monolithic entity. Instead, it must be considered a field of artistic activities and inquiries that can be loosely drawn together by a common desire to challenge the primacy or necessity of the art object and the ways it can be defined and displayed.

Like other revisionists, Alberro proposes a series of potential models that define some of these multiple practices: one based on linguistics, another developed through process, a third promoting an institutional critique, and a fourth that was both overtly political and sought to relate art directly to mass culture. "Linguistic conceptualism" (his term) defines what he considers to be the dominant form of conceptualist practice and includes such artists as Kosuth, Art & Language, and Christine Koslov. Alberro notes how these artists refute the need to view Conceptual Art objects in terms of a visual morphology or formalist study because they are rethinking visual art as a form of linguistic activity that can comprise written or verbal language or be explained by it. Alberro locates his second, process-based model in a constellation that includes Bochner, Hanne Darboven, and Sol LeWitt due to their attempt to remove the subjective

inscription of the artist from the work. Rather than creating a work that involves a succession of decisions throughout its making, the artists in this category devise a system at the outset that defines, characterizes, or produces the work. Thus, all decision-making processes involved in this type of art occur when a system is initially conceived. LeWitt refers to this generative phase as "a machine that makes the art."[15] Alberro's third group contains such artists as Weiner, Douglas Huebler, and Hans Haacke. He connects these artists in terms of their "attempt[s] to democratize the production and reception of art."[16] Alberro views these artists as choosing to defer to the art institutions and their public for the final manifestation of art's meaning, rather than retaining this role for themselves. Although he does not include BAXTER& or NETCO in his discussion, N.E. THING CO. clearly fits with this grouping. Alberro's fourth category consists of overtly political Latin American Conceptualists such as Hélio Oititica, Cildo Meireles, and the authors of the manifesto "Tucumán Burns" (1968).[17] He understands the need for defining a multiplicity of practical models, and his proposed groupings are well conceived even though his roster, by his own admission, is not inclusive. Although Alberro's intent in this essay is not to characterize the relationship between Conceptual Art and its

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[15] Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 12.

[16] Alberro, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. xxii

[17] See Alberro, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, pp. xxv–xxviii, and note 34, pp. xxxv–xxxvi, for more on the individual characteristics of these varied artists, especially how the political climate of the region participated in the overtly radical nature of these artists' approaches. Alberro and Stimson include a number of Latin American Conceptual Art manifestos in their anthology.

predecessors, his otherwise important groupings do not offer a place for the Pop-inflected Conceptual Art investigated in this study.

Alberro's recognition of the need for multiple definitions or models no doubt derives from his understanding of art historian and Art & Language group member Charles Harrison, who warns in his essay "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," "It is in the nature of Conceptual Art that attempts to distinguish relevant enterprises on conventional stylistic grounds are doomed to failure or to insignificance." Harrison follows this caveat by suggesting that:

> A more appropriate approach is to consider the various forms of critical, intellectual and imaginative activity which the various candidate forms of avant-garde practice enable or direct; in other words, to consider what kind of disposition they presuppose on the part of what kind of spectator.[18]

Harrison concedes that his approach is not inclusive because his main subject throughout the collection that includes this essay is the largely British Art & Language group, of which he was an active member. Still, both his piece and Alberro's offer pertinent insights into the challenges of defining Conceptual Art, demonstrating the need to open the field to wider investigation.[19]

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[18] Charles Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," *Essays on Art & Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 30.

[19] Another essay that provides valuable insight on Conceptual Art by presenting it as a range of approaches is Michael Corris' "An Invisible Collage in an Anglo-American World," which serves as the introduction to his edition of essays by numerous contributors, *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth , and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–18. The vast majority of advanced critical approaches to this art come in essay form, although single-author books exist, including Robert Morgan's *Conceptual Art: An American Perspective* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc, 1994).

Having expressed the problems inherent in definitions of Conceptual Art, the next section of this introduction on BAXTER& will address two lines of questioning central to its critical discourse: can Conceptual Art be considered as modernist, and why is Minimalism given pride of place as the predecessor of Conceptual Art strategies? Answering these two questions will begin to establish a basis for showing how this art, despite its rarefied self-contemplation, can be redirected to Pop Art and popular culture, as IAIN BAXTER& does, without losing its rigorous, intellectual nature.

Conceptual Art, Modernism, and the Lauded Minimalism Connection

The question of Conceptual Art's relation to modernism is easier to unfold than its relation to Minimalism. Harrison has most clearly realized the connection between Conceptual Art and modernism in his essay "A Kind of Context." Relying on a careful consideration of the interrelation of art criticism and cultural ideology, [20] Harrison proposes a modernism that comprises two distinct voices:

> The first voice tends to suppose that the "creative" is distinct from the
> "critical," that artistic practice is governed by intuition and that the
> production of art is always prior to theory. The value of art is seen to lie in
> its disinterestedness, its spirituality and its unlikeness to language.... The
> second voice perceives these distinctions and priorities not as true

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[20] Harrison's main purpose in this essay is to illustrate Art & Language's ties to modernism, as he declares on page 2, "I am suggesting that the practical, theoretical, psychological and even organizational problems which have preoccupied or beset Art & Language over the past twenty years and more may be identified with the benefit of hindsight as problems constitutive of modern art." The key phrase here is "with the benefit of hindsight," a statement that clarifies Harrison's intent to discredit claims that Art & Language is a product of some postmodern condition.

reflections of the *nature* of art but as forms of organization of the *culture* of art.[21]

These two positions are the result of the ideological formation of modernism yet are not equally weighted throughout its history. Harrison finds that the first voice relies on the notion of art's distance from language and criticism and its association "with the affirmation of liberal humanism and with the willful and triumphant self-expression of individual free spirits."[22] He believes that it became the predominant understanding of what constituted modernism, beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the 1960s. He claims that the domination of this first voice over the second one, which rightly accords art the ability to act as a critical agent, was the result of ideological coercion that such critics as Greenberg originated as well as of the co-option of American Modernism by the forces controlling business capital. According to Harrison, these two agents did not act in collusion—they were quite independent—but their combined effect resulted in art's connection to language—its ability to speak beyond emotional force—largely being silenced from 1940 to the mid-1960s. While U.S. Pop artists as well as those Americans involved in Minimalism did move fine art beyond expressionism, it took Conceptual Art to reconnect it with language.

Similarly, art historian Stephen Bann notes the affinities between Conceptual Art and modernism in his introductory essay for the exhibition catalog *Global Conceptualism* (1999). Bann and other contributors to this catalog seem to waver at times on this

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[21] Charles Harrison, "A Kind of Context," *Essays on Art & Language*, 1991, p. 6.

[22] Harrison, "A Kind of Context," p. 9.

connection, and this hesitation may result from the cultural power of ideology that

Harrison notes throughout "A Kind of Context" by distinguishing two competing voices

within modern art. Simply stated, the situation is the following: Greenberg's co-opting of

the term "modernism," as opposed to "modern art," is so pervasive that no other potential

meanings for the term can be assumed beside one that is closely identified with formalist

theories. The key statement in Bann's essay that clarifies Conceptual Art's connection

with a more broadly defined modernism and also provides a rationale for the present

critique of the over-emphasized connection between Conceptual Art and Minimalism is

as follows:

> Conceptualism derives its special currency and vitality from the fact that it
> is both a critique and a continuation of modernism: it consolidates
> precisely the critique of the institutions and discourses of Western post-
> Renaissance art commenced by modernism, while shifting its own
> discursive strategy from a material-based to a concept-based approach.[23]

Bann argues that Conceptual Art continues the cultural critique inherent in modernism, in

the broadest sense of this term, yet extends this critique of art and its place within its

culture to include a critique of itself by challenging the traditional morphological

condition of art. The shift to a "concept-based approach" can be pinpointed as precisely

the difference between Minimalism and Conceptual Art.

    The challenges associated with defining Conceptual Art lead to questions of the

relevancy of traditional critical language, the frequent bouts of competitiveness and in-

fighting among groups of associated artists and critics, and even the indeterminacy of

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[23] Stephen Bann, "Introduction," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (Queens, New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. 6.

language itself. This last problem is particularly ironic given the attempts by many artists considered "Conceptual" to reassert the primacy of language as art's function, even to the point of making art from language such as occurs with Weiner's directive statements, Art & Language members' discussions or articles, or Dan Graham's *Schema* pieces where language becomes an object (fig. 6). Regardless of these difficulties, it is clear that those artists pursuing work now termed "Conceptual Art" did so partly as a means to deflate the new and elevated role of the critic and the importance this position held during the mid- to late 1960s.[24]

But this shift developed not only from artists' struggles to define themselves and their work, but also from their efforts to bring about a shift from the passive viewing practices of the late-modernist beholder to the more active participant in the regulation and production of a Conceptual work's meaning. This shift is the most likely cause for regarding Conceptual Art's primary precedent as Minimalism. Those artists responsible for developing Conceptual Art did rely on Minimalism's re-characterization of late-modernist abstraction's focus on the art object as the locus of interaction with the viewer, and they moved toward a broader understanding of art objects as loci for interactions between viewers and sites of display themselves. Some Minimalists, notably Robert Morris, constructed mute, non-transcendent works that were site-referential in order to suggest that the art objects were no longer necessarily subject to visual inspection alone

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[24] Greenberg was not the only large figure in art criticism. He and others such as his contemporary Harold Rosenberg, and his students such as Fried and Rosalind Krauss, as well as his fellow critics such as Barbara Rose, Lucy Lippard, and curators acting as critics such as Alfred H. Barr of the Museum of Modern Art (hereafter MoMA) significantly colored the art-going public's perception of art and new artists even though they were also responsible for granting the kind of publicity that allowed these artists a measure of exposure and even success.

but were open to the larger experiential activity of mobile spectators. Using elements

derived from French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of*

Perception, Morris created works that appeared to have nothing to say in order to prompt

viewers to consider the aesthetic experience of looking at these objects as active

processes requiring them to shift from the object to the installation space and to their own

bodies in a temporally unfolding framework. This conception is radically different from

the more traditional notion of looking at art as a passive experience divorced from any

recognition of the art and viewer's shared space and time frame.

The other significant contribution of Minimalism that set the stage for later

Conceptual artists' challenge to traditional notions of composition as a product of the

subjective decision-making processes of the artist-genius is the focus on systemic or

serial strategies undertaken by such artists as Judd and LeWitt. Both of these artists relied

on mathematical systems, such as the Fibonacci series and natural number progression,

respectively, as a means for arriving at their geometric structures and as a way to subvert

traditional compositional development by substituting a rational, external logic for a

traditional, subjective method.

Harrison suggests that the connection between Minimalism and Conceptual Art

lies in notions of the linear historical progression of the avant-garde. He finds Minimal

Art's

> intervention in the discourse of Modernism did have two powerful
> consequences. The first was due largely to the distinctive form of its

historicism and of that fixation with artistic succession which the Minimalists also shared with the Abstractionists.[25]

Harrison explains that Conceptual Art, coming on the heels of Minimalism, is tied to an inherent progression of self-criticism that moves from the quantitative form of reduction found in abstractionist-formalist theories to the qualitative yet epistemological one found in Minimalist objects.[26] Conceptual Art does share a sense of self-criticality with abstractionist modernism and Minimalism, yet the self-reflexiveness of abstractionism lies in its ontological revision or clarification of the nature of an individual medium, such as painting. It is mediumistic and morphological in its limited focus. The nature of Minimalism's self-referentiality lies in its reaction against the mediumistic formalism of late-modernist abstraction. Defined and presented as an object, the minimalist work also criticized the notion of an immobile beholder by opening the work to the world and the possibility of the mental and physical processes involved in viewing art. The self-criticality of Conceptual Art develops out of this ongoing epistemological revision of what may be defined as art. However, it carries and extends this inquiry by asking whether the piece placed before the audience may count as "art" or "document," and

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[25] Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," 1991, p. 43. In the present context, historicism describes how a young artist or group of artists contrives a new direction that maintains an older aesthetic tradition while altering it to fit their purposes. Harrison is arguing here that Minimalism's focus on the limits of art through a re-characterization of it as object emerges as a revision of late modernist abstraction's focus on an art that defines itself through an exploration of a given medium's limits. He furthermore declares that, "in their American forms at least—'Conceptual Art' and 'Dematerialization' were secondary historicist consequences of the qualitative shift which Minimalism represented" (pp. 44–45).

[26] See Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," 1999, pp. 43–44.

whether prevailing notions of art's definition are still relevant in the face of this seemingly new and revolutionary challenge.

Despite Harrison's attempts to discredit the work of the Minimalists Judd and Morris,[27] he nevertheless maintains Minimalism's preeminent position as the most likely, or convenient, precursor of Conceptual Art. He acknowledges that the Neo-Dadaist tendencies found in Happenings and Pop Art, the European activities occurring in Fluxus and Yves Klein, and the anti-retinal work featured in Marcel Duchamp's art should be allowed as potential precedents. But he argues that "Minimalist theory was the most coherent and the most powerful avant-garde discourse of the mid-1960s, and that this was largely so because of its cultural *adjacency* to the discourse of Abstractionism."[28] Thus, Harrison notes how other similar pursuits need to be labeled as developments growing out of a Minimalist practice.

Harrison is not the only one to connect Conceptual Art to Minimalism. Critic Lucy Lippard, an early champion of emerging conceptual trends, articulates a connection between Minimalism and Conceptual Art while noting how the two movements diverge in their focus. In her essay "Escape Attempts" (1995), which contains nostalgic yet informative recollections of her connections with Conceptual Art in the late 1960s and 1970s, she states:

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[27] See Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," 1999, pp. 37–43, especially the following phrase on p. 42: "Behind the ludicrously epochal character of Morris's claims, as behind the quixotic face of Judd's pronouncements, there lay a concern not to overthrow but to reformulate and to revalue Modernism so as to validate their own artistic practice."

[28] Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," 1999, p. 45.

Although Conceptual Art emerged from Minimalism, its basic principles
were very different, stressing the acceptively open-ended in contrast to
Minimalism's rejectively self-contained. If Minimalism formally
expressed 'less is more,' Conceptual Art was about saying more with less.
It represented an opening up after Minimalism closed down on
expressionist and Pop excesses.[29]

Lippard conceives of Conceptual Art as different from Minimalism. But she also

argues that it relies on the latter's reductive, literalist program that redraws the

lines of the modernist search away from an art about medium or subjectively

expressive content, the two critical approaches to mid-century abstract painting, to

an art about art.

The trend to view Minimalism as the likely antecedent of Conceptual Art derives

from the theoretical underpinnings of each of these two art practices, yet the question of

artistic lineage is inseparable from the potential political ramifications of such a

connection. No artist wants to be seen as merely rehashing the past, and no historian or

critic attempting to distinguish an artist or group of artists is willing to reduce their

contributions to mere repetition. While critics may have used the language of

Minimalism to describe emerging Conceptual artists, as Harrison claims, because it was

the most advanced and rigorous critical language then available, Conceptual artists

tended to use this language in the pejorative to separate their work from others. Kosuth,

for example, described his work in relation to linguistics and logical positivism and used

the Minimalism label to describe the work of others in order to foreground his approach

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[29] Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art* (Los Angeles: The
Museum of Contemporary Art, in association with MIT Press, 1995), p. 27.

as above and beyond questions of a reductivist telos. Harrison's essay "Suppression of the Beholder" engages in a similar strategy in order to posit the Art & Language group's approach to art as linguistic discourse as a more intellectualized approach than what this group deemed a post-Minimal strategy of "de-materialization,"[30] a revision of the morphological approach of Minimal Art.

Despite critics' and artists' appropriation of Minimalism's critical language to characterize Conceptual Art's aims, these two art practices exhibit fundamental differences. As Harrison suggests, there were a number of American Conceptual artists who developed their mode of inquiry out of their earlier minimalist position, with Sol LeWitt being the most obvious example. But this list is rather small when viewed against the much larger roster of international Conceptual artists, most of whom, like IAIN BAXTER& and N.E. THING CO., never went through what may be termed a "minimalist phase." Yet the most clear-cut reason for noting a difference between Minimalism and Conceptual Art is their contrasting focus on the role and status of the art object itself. For the majority of minimalists, the art object still held a significant place in the creation of art. To be sure, the art object, particularly in Morris' work, was frequently

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[30] The seminal essay in which the term "dematerialization" was coined is Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12 (February 1968): 31–36. Lippard and Chandler are to be commended for this early critical investigation of the new art, which continues to offer some useful insights when viewed as a historical document. It has been the source for many disagreements and debates that originated soon after its first publication (see, for example, Terry Atkinson's letter "Concerning the Article 'The Dematerialization of Art," addressed to Lippard in March 1968, published in abridged formats both in Lippard, *Six Years*, 1973, pp. 43–44, and in Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, pp. 52–58). The characterization of Conceptual Art's focus as "dematerialization" has become for many art historians and critics an unfortunate shorthand generalization. While the term remains a succinct descriptor of some Conceptual Art practices, it needs to be part of a more complete description that recognizes the desire of many Conceptual artists not simply to reduce the materiality of the art object as an end itself but as a means to critique the efficacy of object-based definitions of art.

intended to operate as a phenomenological mirror for viewers to realize their experience of interacting with both the object and the site of display. The minimalist object was imbued with a special status by artists such as Judd and Morris, regardless of how specific or literal their work may be. The object was the locus of both the art and the interaction with art.

In Conceptual Art, however, the object is in most cases not art's sole locus. Rather, it operates as the signpost informing the spectator that such art exists and serves as a mode of transmission for an informational and intellectual exchange with the viewer. It is not circumscribed by a set number of responses and interpretations like the minimalist object but instead constitutes an open-ended reference point for an ongoing debate that requires more interaction on the viewer's part. This is not to say, however, that Conceptual Art was determined to "de-materialize" the object of art, as first claimed by critics Lippard and Chandler. It is instead an emendation, an elucidation, and an interrogation of the rules governing the means of production and display of the object of art.

Conceptual Art's ties to Dada and Pop Art

Having explained the potential pitfalls of art criticism's tendency to view Minimalism as Conceptual Art's predecessor, this study will now investigate Dada's significance as a precursor and propose Pop Art as a logical antecedent for not only BAXTER&'s art practice but also any Conceptual artist investigating mass culture

through his or her art.[31] This study proposes that while efforts to view Minimalism as the most obvious precursor to Conceptual Art do have merit, the varied approaches taken by these later artists prevent assuming such a singular vantage point. The themes and approaches of Pop artists have been largely overlooked in critical and historical determinations of Conceptual Art's origins. The reasons for this omission are assuredly many, ranging from critical responses to Pop Art to actual analysis, or lack thereof, of Pop artists' objectives and works, but a brief survey of how this art movement was viewed at the moment of Conceptual Art's genesis allows us to see why the Pop-Conceptual connection has not been comprehensively analyzed. Two main themes of this survey are Pop Art's connection with Dada, particularly this movement's other designation as "neo-Dada," and critics' attempts to define Pop Art in terms of subject matter, aesthetics, and artistic objectives.

The unwillingness of such Conceptual artists as Kosuth, Barry, and Bochner to have their work characterized as an extension of Minimal art is similar to an equal if not greater concern by the same artists to distance themselves from a Dadaist or neo-Dadaist label. Critics' tendency to insinuate a new work's potentially retrogressive Dadaist tendencies in order to render it more familiar to the mainstream is a documentable thread in twentieth-century art criticism. This historical use of the "Dada" label as either an apparent pejorative or as a shortcut to understanding an artist's work clearly frames the hesitancy of those artists developing a Conceptual Art framework in the mid-1960s to

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[31] A list of Pop-inflected Conceptual artists should include such names as John Baldessari, Les Levine, the Toronto-based group General Idea, and the San Francisco group Antfarm, to name but a few.

allow themselves to be so easily defined, labeled, and therefore digested. Yet many artists, especially Kosuth, John Baldessari, and BAXTER&, developed a Conceptual Art that nevertheless assumes aspects of Dada and transforms them into new hybrids.

Dada lacked a clear, monovalent program since it comprised a collection of poets and artists working in independent cells in such cities and Zurich, Cologne, Berlin, and Paris.[32] The main commonality of these artists from the mid-1910s to the late 1920s can be described as an idealistic belief in pursuing antirational modes in their non-art or anti-art forms of visual art and poetry in order to instigate a social awakening and reform the European cultural and political climate that led to the First World War. Slightly before the Zurich naming of the phenomenon in 1916, Duchamp's 1915 arrival in New York and the development of his friendships with Francis Picabia and Man Ray led to a New York wing of Dada, a largely apolitical manifestation of this art movement, which was frequently reactionary, especially with the overtly politicized content of much of the Hannover and Berlin Dada collages.[33] The significant connections between Dada and Conceptual Art are the following: Dada's tendency to foreground a ribald humor and

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[32] Hans Richter's accounts in his *Dada: Art and Anti-art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) is one of the most thorough looks at each group, and certainly the most comprehensive examination of Dada for its time. Abstract expressionist painter and art historian Robert Motherwell published the first English language anthology of Dada texts, manifestoes, and essays in his edition *Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1951). Art historians have questioned whether emerging Conceptual Artists had reasonable access to Motherwell's anthology, but this text was reprinted in 1967 (a second edition was published in 1981 by G.K. Hall, Boston, and a paperback edition of the Hall edition was published by Belknap Press of Harvard University in 1989). The most recent and thorough reexamination of Dada is Leah Dickerman, ed. *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, in association with D.A.P., Distributed Art Publishers, New York, 2005).

[33] See, for instance, Carl Belz, "Man Ray and New York Dada," *Art Journal* 23 (Spring 1964): 207–213.

deadpan satire, the freedom and challenge of Duchamp's innovation of the readymade,

and the importance of his working notes that were published in various collections in the

mid-1960s and later.[34]

Duchamp's creation of the readymade has been one of the most significant avant-

garde moments since the French military metaphor was first applied to art in the form of

literature in 1830.[35] By selecting a mass-produced object and placing it in the sphere of

art, Duchamp attacked both a formal and a conceptual definition of art. Duchamp's

decision to place a bicycle wheel attached to a common stool or a bottle rack in an art

context can be seen as a statement that challenges a medium's formal limits. However,

both these readymades and his *Fountain* (1917), a urinal placed on its back bearing the

signature "R. Mutt," should be examined more for their challenge to preconceptions of

art's definition, and the artist's responsibilities to the art object according to this

definition, if the readymade is to provide a better understanding of Duchamp's (and

Dada's) potential ancestry or precedent for Conceptual Art.

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[34] Duchamp's personal notes pertaining to his work generally and his *Large Glass* specifically were published in a variety of formats. The first collection, *Box of 1914*, consists of 16 individually photographed notes placed in a box for glass photographic plates. As such, it was produced as a very limited edition. *The Green Box* of 1934, so titled due to the color of the 84 notes' container, has become successively mined by artists and art historians alike. Art historian Craig Adcock, in his dissertation *Marcel Duchamp's Notes from the Large Glass: An N-Dimensional Analysis* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983), p. 9, notes, "The *Large Glass* would have no iconography if it were not for the notes. In other words, the iconography is in the notes, not in the *Large Glass*." Other collections exist, such as the 1966 *White Box* and the posthumous edition of 289 notes published in 1980 by The Centre Georges Pompidou, titled *Notes*. rThe significance of these notes to Conceptual artists has been much discussed in such works as the Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon edition, *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), and is frequently highlighted in Conceptual Art histories.

[35] See Paul Wood, ed., *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 36ff, for more on Henri Saint-Simon and his original political usage of the term.

Duchamp was attempting to redefine the boundary of the art object by selecting a banal, mass-produced consumable and inserting it in the realm of art (the gallery) in order to allow for a dialogue to ensue between the artist and the audience through the object. Duchamp never really intended his readymades to be viewed as art, yet these works provide his most intellectual conception of the nature of meaning in art and the nature of the artist. As noted in several studies of the artist, Duchamp believed that viewers were equally if not more complicit with the artist in determining meaning in art.[36] Duchamp was attempting simultaneously to individualize and de-deify the artist-genius, but he was also attempting to open the process of discerning a work's meaning to a larger, more public space than the artist's interior self, both of which would become important positions for the later Conceptual Art movement.[37]

Kosuth's understanding of the artist's nomination of a pre-existing object as the true nature of art ("art as idea") reflects his trafficking with the Duchampian readymade. While works that pursue this vein, such as *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* (1966) (fig. 7), can be seen formally as extending the Greenbergian view of modernism as reductive, this reading is shortsighted, for it (like most formal readings) glosses over the manner in which Kosuth extends a definition of the nature of art.[38] In this work, where a definition of the word "water" is taken from a dictionary and Photostatted, Kosuth is actively

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[36] See, for example, Adcock, 1983, p. 34.

[37] Marcel Duchamp, interview with Francis Roberts, *ARTNews* 67 (December 1968): 46–47.

[38] One example of a careful consideration of the rejection of any Greenbergian formalist connection to Conceptual Art is Frances Colpitt's essay "The Formalist Connection and Originary Myths of Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 2004, pp. 28–39.

engaging with the readymade concept in his investigation of this art term's definition by locating the actual "work" of the piece in his nomination of the definition. The clipped-out definition, a product of selection by the artist, becomes the work, whereas the Photostat displayed in the gallery is merely the documentation that art has taken place. Kosuth thus trumps Duchamp by appropriating the idea of nomination as art practice while disallowing the actual "work" of the artist to be the displayed product. In doing so, he furthermore creates a space between himself as artist and the gallery as a field of art-culture hegemony. The gallery is a culturally constructed site for display of works of art. However, by using it to display only the documentation of a work carried out through a revised definition of art, Kosuth denies the gallery its conventional function while simultaneously calling attention to it.

This distance between artist and art world (though unsteady, as Kosuth was very vocal in the art press, including criticisms written under his pseudonym, Arthur R. Rose, that references Duchamp's own pseudonym, R. Rose Sélavy) is mirrored in the distance between artist and art production as seen in Baldessari's 1972 singing performance of LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art." Baldessari utilizes the nomination practice of Duchamp's readymade by humorously acting out LeWitt's prescriptive assessment of Conceptual Art. This performance can be viewed as assuming the anti-retinal qualities Duchamp argued for in his work since Baldessari is singing, not producing a visual art.[39]

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[39] The work of this piece is Baldessari's performance, which is primarily vocal. But it can be argued that since he chose video rather than audiotape to document this performance, the visual component is an integral part. Regardless, this study contends that either reading of the Baldessari work must recognize the larger implication of how the artist assumed and emended Duchamp's appropriative strategies.

This relation is, however, minimally coincidental. Instead, a reading should take i.nto

account Baldessari's appropriation and extension of the concept of the readymade to

produce a work reinforcing the potential significance of LeWitt's writing while disarming

its seriousness through its engagingly humorous antics and extemporaneous quality. This

work relies on the Duchampian legacy of the readymade and the droll humor of the Dada

performances, but transforms both of these qualities into something new in its

investigation of the limits of visual art.

These two brief glimpses permit an understanding of some of the grounds on

which Conceptual Art may be related to the earlier Dada and Duchampian strategies, but

the differences between Kosuth, Baldessari, and the majority of Conceptual artists, on the

one hand, and Duchamp, Hugo Ball, and the various European manifestations of Dada on

the other, are more relevant to this study's proposal to redirect the critical debate of

artistic genealogy.[40] Specifically, the differences can be summarized as follows: Dada

was concerned with creating an antagonistic stance against an artistic tradition that its

advocates viewed as complicit in the larger sociopolitical turmoil that led to the outbreak

of the First World War. Calling their satirical stance "anti-art," they were actively

attempting to subvert any traditional artistic convention. Conceptual artists, on the other

hand, never assumed an anti-art perspective. Its creators were instead trying to situate

themselves as acting in a broader artistic mode of inquiry than that afforded through the

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[40] This focus on the differences between Conceptual Art and Dada or Conceptual Art and Minimal art relies on the following passage by Charles Harrison: "A more appropriate approach is to consider the various forms of critical, intellectual and imaginative activity which the various candidate forms of avant-garde practice enable or direct; in other words, to consider what kind of disposition they presuppose on the part of what kind of spectator." See Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," 1991, p. 30.

mediumistic focus of late-modernist abstraction. To be sure, there exists an obvious

sociopolitical undercurrent in much Conceptual Art (Hans Haacke is but one example),

but Conceptual artists were more concerned with launching a recursive investigation on

the structure and definition of art in general. The concept of recursion, applied to math

and logic as well as grammar, concerns a function or problem whose results are actually

components of the same function or problem, much like a feedback loop.[41] This idea

proves invaluable for examining Conceptual Art, which strives to define an art mediated

by both art and other, non-art cultural modes, while calling attention to itself as a

potential definition of art. Through this structural engagement, Conceptual works, which

are the result of this investigative process, are presented as frameworks for the processes

that derive them as well as instances of this process. Visual recursion has occurred in art

before, during and after the historical period of Conceptual Art, but clear examples

include Robert Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chamber* (1965), in which mirrors are placed

so that viewers see an infinite recursion of a mirror image of another mirror, and Dan

Graham's finite recursive structures, such as his 1976 *Public Space-2 Audiences*, in

which he constructs rooms separated by two-way mirrors and/or video cameras and

monitors, so that viewers in one room can only see their reflection, while viewers in

successive rooms see both the first room's inhabitants and their own reflections overlaid

on the first room's reflected images. Generally, Conceptual Art is recursive in the more

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[41] *OED s.v.* "Recursive". Recursion has developed as a descriptive term for certain mathematical functions whose successive steps rely on the results of the previous step, and it was used by linguistic theorist Noam Chomsky to describe grammatical functions in his dissertation, *Logical Structures of Linguistic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Library, 1955). This study describes the recursion of Conceptual Art based initially on conversations with Robert Hobbs that date from 2004.

structural or linguistic sense rather than the visual sense because each work is not an

object but a generative procedure that can be run repeatedly to produce specific iterations

of the rule.

Pop Art has been critically aligned with Dada since its varied creation among

similar-minded artists in the early 1960s. The term "neo-Dada," which is still in use

today, was one of the quickly applied labels attached to works that diverged from

abstractionist painting's expressive content, interior subject matter, and mediumistic

focus. Pop Art, a term created by the British critic Lawrence Alloway to describe the

popular art subject matter of the British Independent Group that turned into a label for the

art itself, is but one aspect of all the work that has fallen under the "neo-Dada" label. The

connection between Dada and Pop was a major subject of the 1963 "Symposium on Pop

Art," held at the Museum of Modern Art and led by a number of esteemed critics and

curators of the day. Art historian Peter Selz, who then served as painting curator at

MoMA, explains the use of the term "pop art" in his introduction to the symposium by

stating:

> The term neo-Dada was rejected because it was originally coined in the
> pejorative and because the work in question bears only superficial
> resemblance to Dada, which, it will be remembered, was a revolutionary
> movement primarily intended to change life itself.[42]

Despite this introductory statement differentiating the two movements, Selz brings up the

relation between the two at the end of the symposium. Poet Stanley Kunitz sees a formal

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[42] Peter Selz, in Peter Selz, Henry Geldzahler, Hilton Kramer, Dore Ashton, Leo Steinberg and
Stanely Kunitz, "A Symposium on Pop Art," originally published in *Arts* (April 1963): 35–45. Reprinted in
Steven Henry Madoff, ed. *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.
65.

similarity between Pop and Dada, but he notes that while the latter was a revolution

against bourgeois society, Pop Art "*embraces,* in a sense, the bourgeois symbols. And is

without passion."[43] These differences are augmented by curator Henry Geldzahler's view

that the difference resides between what he sees as the anti-formal program in Dada and

the formal decision-making processes in Pop Art,[44] while critic Hilton Kramer views the

differences as the result of competing ideologies.[45]

Despite these varied viewpoints that nevertheless concur on a separation between

Dada and Pop Art, critic and art historian Edward Kelly returned to this question, and the

symposium's varied viewpoints, in his 1964 essay, "Neo-Dada: A Critique of Pop Art."

In this essay, Kelly attempts to illustrate the connection between Pop and Dada not on the

grounds of subject matter, technique, or lack of affect by the artists, but on the grounds

that Pop Art is aligned with Dada since, as Kelly argues, both are inherently satirical

modes of criticism. Kelly writes:

> Thus we are brought face to face with one of the most insidious problems
> concerning Dada and Neo-Dada. If they are neither art in the purest,
> formalist sense, nor mere personal expression, then what are they? The
> answer to this question lies with the theory of Dada that sees it as biting,
> subversive satire.[46]

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[43] Kunitz, "A Symposium on Pop Art," in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, 1997, p. 80.

[44] Geldzhaler states, "Dada was an anti-formal excitement. Pop art is definitely a formal art. It's an art of decisions and choices and composition." "A Symposium on Pop Art," in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, 1997, p. 80.

[45] "Dada was revolutionary *only* in its ideology, not in its aesthetics. You cannot say that [Kurt] Schwitters broke with Cubism. That's an absurdity. Cubism provided the entire syntax for everything he did." Kramer, "A Symposium on Pop Art," in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, 1997, p. 81.

[46] See Edward Kelly, "Neo-Dada: A Critique of Pop Art," *Art Journal* 23 (Spring 1964): 198. Kelly's ambitious argument fails in his connection between Pop Art and what he terms NO Art (after the similarly titled October 1963 exhibit at Gallery: Gertrude Stein), the more bawdy and morally subversive

One of the most insightful early examinations of Pop Art is the collection of
essays drawn together by Lippard in her 1966 book, *Pop Art*. In her introduction, Lippard
notes connections between Duchamp and Pop Art, yet argues that the use of the label
"neo-Dada" is unwarranted. Lippard summarizes the significance between the younger
artists and the sensibility of both Duchamp and Ferdinand Léger by stating:

> If Ferdinand Leger and Marcel Duchamp did not directly influence the
> younger artists, they helped to mould the aesthetic situation in which Pop
> was possible. Their arts are diametrically opposed, but their bond is their
> supposed lack of, or de-emphasis of, sensitivity.[47]

Lippard's perception of Pop artists' lack of sensitivity toward their subject is
significant for the similarity it suggests between Pop Art and Conceptualism. In both, the
artists establish a separation between themselves and their subject in order to force the
viewer to accept a greater role in defining a given work's meaning. Furthermore, Lippard
points out how each of the five artists she views as New York Pop artists (Roy
Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselmann, Claes Oldenburg, and James Rosenquist)
created a distance between themselves and traditional art medium and production
techniques. Warhol relied on others for his reproductions, Lichtenstein depended on an
enlarger to essentially trace his sketch from the original cartoon, Oldenburg enlisted his

cousin of Pop Art. Connecting such a variety of artists who exhibit such varied artistic effects is a
redeemable oversight due to his essay's scope and length, and the essay remains a valuable resource for its
historiographical significance.

[47] Lucy Lippard, "Introduction," in Lippard, ed. *Pop Art* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966),
pp. 13–14.

wife, Patty Mucha, and later her assistants to produce his works,[48] and Wesselmann

employed a carpenter to complete his works. These strategies are precedents for what

artist Ian Burn calls the "deskilling of the practice of art" in his look at Conceptual Art.[49]

Beyond this, both art movements exhibit an interest in mass-communication modes of

advertising and share the potential for parody or satirical irony—of operating within the

tension created between an object and the reception of its re-presentation. The intent of

this analysis is not to say that Pop Art is in every case a direct precedent of all Conceptual

Art. Clearly there is a difference between Pop Art, which retains a representation of a

subject as an object, and Conceptual Art, which demotes the object to an instrument of

epistemological investigation. Furthermore the latter is typically much drier in its

presentation. Rather, the point is much like Lippard's connection between Duchamp,

Léger, and Pop Art, in that Pop artists "helped mould the aesthetic situation" that made

Conceptual Art possible. As this study will show, Conceptual artists have sought out the

very same subject matter as Pop Art, yet use such items as billboards, advertisements,

and even advertising media as elements through which they can launch investigations

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[48] Oldenburg was married to the artist Patty Mucha, also known as Pat Oldenburg, from 1960 to 1970. He began collaborating with critic and art historian Coosje van Bruggen in the mid-1970s; the two married in 1977.

[49] Ian Burns' commentary, originally published in Burns, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (Or the Memoirs of and Ex-Conceptual Artist)," *Art & Text* 1 (1981): 49–65, was brought to my attention in Corris, "Introduction," in Corris, ed. *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 2004, p. 8. The notion of the "deskilling of the artist" as a strategy inherent to Conceptual Art practice has precedents in both Minimalism and Pop Art. In Minimalism, Judd relied on a fabrication company to manufacture his works, while Flavin used commercially available fluorescent light fixtures. Pop artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol used a combination or layering of hand and mechanical reproduction techniques to complete their works, with the most radical being Warhol's strategy of the use of a silkscreen technique to produce paintings that were frequently not completed by him but by his assistants in his studio, which he called "the Factory" in order to draw attention to his mingling of commercial design techniques and subject matter with fine art.

both within and outside a traditional art mode centered on subject, medium, or site of display and presentation.

Previous Studies of NETCO and IAIN BAXTER&

 Having briefly framed the current approaches for defining Conceptual Art and its potential artistic lineage, and having suggested an alternate approach to the lineage question, what remains before moving into the major themes of BAXTER&'s work is an accounting for the field of critical interpretation of BAXTER& and N.E. THING CO. The current state of an art historical framing of NETCO can be summarized by dividing the available literature in three categories: exhibition catalogs from N.E. THING CO.'s period of production (1966–1978), articles covering these exhibitions, and retrospective exhibitions beginning in the 1990s.

 The exhibition catalogs from the 1960s and 1970s, and the articles written about these exhibitions during this time period, form an integral basis for a historiographic perspective on N.E. THING CO. Several of these catalogs do not include critical essays, however, due to either budget constraints in the production of the catalog, or the desire by BAXTER& to see the catalog as another forum for exhibition, a mode of transmission of "sensitivity information," his McLuhanesque term for aesthetic or sensory experience to be transmitted like data. BAXTER&'s understanding of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan and his reliance on him has not yet been clearly examined, and is one

area that will be presented here to advance the larger understanding of this artist's

production under the N.E. THING CO. name and after.

Articles dating from N.E. THING CO.'s existence are varied in both the character

and depth of the critical stances the authors assume. Lippard has written the most articles

and essays about N.E. THING CO., and negotiating her writings about these Vancouver

artists and responding to them is one of the underlying tasks of this study. Lippard largely

champions these artists, seeing them in the 1968 article "Vancouver" as a viable

alternative for Canadian art to follow instead of retaining what she sees as a dead-end

Greenbergian stasis of art in Canada.[50] There are nevertheless discernable shifts in her

critical views. Some of her early essays are largely descriptive rather than interpretive

since a critical language was still being developed to frame the shift in art practices that

are now understood as conceptual. During their existence, N.E. THING CO. was

included in group exhibitions curated by Lippard, including two shows from 1969:

557,087 at the Seattle Museum and *Art Within the Arctic Circle* at the Edmonton Art

Gallery.

While Lippard's writings serve as excellent secondary sources, one of her more

recent essays on N.E. THING CO. impedes consideration of the serious intent of IAIN

and Ingrid Baxter. Included in the 1993 exhibition catalog *You are Now in the Middle of*

an N. E. Thing Co. Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, 1965–1971 is what

Lippard terms a "revisionist history" of N.E. THING CO. One of the more significant

aspects of this essay is Lippard's unwillingness to view the assumption of the corporate

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[50] Lucy Lippard, "Vancouver," *Artnews* 67 (September 1968): 26, 69–71.

identity by the Baxters as an ironic position. Lippard's view, as expressed in this essay, is a position that this study will seek to critique and overturn.[51]

The articles written about N.E. THING CO. and artists working with similar tendencies and approaches generally fall into two camps: those that appreciate or attempt to arrive at an understanding of these works, and those that do not. Within the opposition camp, one of the essays examined here is painter and critic Sidney Tillim's "Earthworks and the New Picturesque," published in the December 1968 *Artforum*. Tillim does not specifically discuss N.E. THING CO.'s works dealing with an interaction or reframing of the landscape, but his attempt to describe Earthworks as a recent, minimalist outgrowth of picturesque theory presents issues that will be examined here. As both a critic and figurative painter, Tillim claims that his position on Earth art is not pejorative, yet his underlying critical agenda suggests otherwise. Tillim argues that these works are formalist, but he only allows for Greenberg's type of formalism. In so doing, Tillim attempts to undermine Earth Art as merely a stylistic endeavor since he has argued elsewhere against Greenberg's view of advanced painting. Tillim suggests that figurative painting, a practice he engaged, rather than Conceptual Art be seen as the new American avant-garde in the wake of the commercial success of Abstract Expressionism since he, as well as many other critics in the early 1960s, believed in the need to locate a new successor in an avant-garde tradition by looking at its polar opposite. Since Tillim's interest in the Picturesque coincides with Robert Smithson's consideration of the theory,

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[51] Lippard has since amended her view of BAXTER&'s corporate strategy as uncritical in her essay "3 Minute Photos," in *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs, 1958–1983* (Windsor, Ontario: Art Gallery of Windsor, 2006), pp. 11–13.

this study will therefore examine the validity of such a theoretical framework when discussing the landscape-based work of N.E. THING CO.

The third category of literature on N.E. THING CO. comprises the retrospective examinations of this work published from the late 1980s to the present. There are three main examples of this type of historical overview, each taking the form of an exhibition catalog: *Baxter^2: Any Choice Works, 1965–1970* (1986), *You Are Now in the Middle of an N.E. THING CO. Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, 1965–1971* (1993), and *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs 1958–1983* (2006).[52]

Curator Marie Fleming's work for *Baxter^2* approaches some of the strategies NETCO utilized in their artistic production and provides a broad and useful framework for understanding their work. Due to its exhibition catalog format and limited time frame, the essay in this publication neither fully examines N.E. THING CO.'s relation to other concept-based artists nor investigates the methods by which the Baxters appropriate the communications theory of Marshall McLuhan.[53] McLuhan figures frequently in discussions of these artists' work, but the comments on his thought usually amount to passing references. Because of this lack of an in-depth examination of McLuhan's

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[52] The full citations for these catalogs are: Marie L. Fleming, *Baxter^2: Any Choice Works, 1965–1970* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1986); Nancy Shaw and William Wood, eds., *You Are Now in the Middle of an N.E. THING CO. Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, 1965–1971* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, 1993); and James Patten, ed., *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs 1958–1983* (Windsor, Ontario: Art Gallery of Windsor, 2006).

[53] Fleming's work is notable for being the first and most complete presentation of Ingrid Baxter's role in N.E. THING CO. Unfortunately, this study cannot fully treat Ingrid's position in this collaboration because of its focus on IAIN BAXTER&'s entire artistic production, but it does recognize her work in its chapters on BAXTER&'s pre-NETCO works and NETCO. The examination of how both IAIN BAXTER& and Ingrid Baxter (now Baxter Oveson, although her preference is to be referred to without her current last name in scholarly publications) subverted traditional gender roles in both artistic production and corporate philosophy demands further study that cannot be adequately undertaken here.

theories, it is necessary to begin this study on BAXTER&'s art by analyzing these theories as a foundation for his work.

The essays included in *You Are Now in the Middle of an N.E. THING CO. Landscape* are similarly useful for their investigations. One example is art historian William Wood's essay, "Capital and Subsidiary: The N.E. THING CO. and the Revision of Conceptual Art." Proposing that his essay addresses the question of whether or not Conceptual Art successfully attacked or subverted the rule of center and periphery in art's institutional power structures, Wood notes that NETCO's role in this attack is conspicuously absent from this debate during the early 1990s. Wood's well-reasoned arguments retain their validity despite the current critical disinterest in relying on the center-periphery model as a means for framing Conceptual Art's special purview.

The catalog for *Passing Through* represents a truly new way of thinking about IAIN BAXTER&'s work both in its focus solely on his photography, including many works that have never or rarely been exhibited, and for the essays art historian Christophe Domino and curator James Patten contribute. Having spent a decade or so writing about BAXTER&'s art, Domino brings a fresh yet well-honed perspective to these works, especially with his main argument that photography for BAXTER& is not a means of making work but a mode of presenting completed works via visual language. In other words, the photograph does not constitute the actual work; it is rather a vehicle or conduit. By focusing exclusively on the photographic works, Patten's essay likewise presents a quick yet thorough biographical sketch of BAXTER&'s use of photography. He is also the first to attempt to place BAXTER& alongside other Conceptual artists by

showing similarities and differences. The present study readily acknowledges the accomplishments of these catalog essays, and by going beyond the scope of the photographic works, it furthers many of the lines of inquiry Domino and Patten suggest in their insightful studies.

These three catalogs serve as the most thorough contributions in the current research on N.E. THING CO. While they significantly advance our understanding, they remain fragmentary and thus do not comprehensively examine IAIN BAXTER&. One of the goals here is therefore to extend the literature on this artist. Another goal is to provide a clear understanding of McLuhan's significance to BAXTER&'s art practice. Other studies on BAXTER& have mentioned this relationship, and McLuhan is often referred to in passing throughout critical examinations on Conceptual Art. Yet, surprisingly, there has been no account of what exactly McLuhan's theory means for Conceptual Art or how its artists have employed it. Because of this lack, an examination of McLuhan's theory must be undertaken before looking at the three basic divisions of BAXTER&'s work.

With this caveat in mind, the first chapter will present the connection between BAXTER& and McLuhan by describing the latter's core theory through his lexicon for technology and communication systems. By describing such terms as "medium," "extension," "mosaic," and "global village," as well as McLuhan's perception of how mass communication modes affect the production of culture, this chapter will provide not only a clear framework for understanding the implications of BAXTER&'s media experimentation but also a new interpretation of BAXTER&'s former corporate pseudonym, N.E. THING CO.

The second chapter will examine how the five core generative principles introduced above are developed in BAXTER&'s work before the genesis of NETCO. By providing a brief biographical sketch that foregrounds his non-art educational background and describes his early works using plastics and vinyl, it will underscore BAXTER&'s process of investigating art through mass-culture modes from an outside-in approach.

The works of BAXTER& and his former wife Ingrid Baxter as N.E. THING CO. form the basis of the third chapter. Because the time of this collaboration (1966–1978) was incredibly productive for the company, this chapter will summarize its art through such formal categories as landscape works; mass communication pieces involving such media as telex, Telecopier, and television; nomination acts; and consultation or corporate productions to describe how they continue the five principles that characterize BAXTER&'s art.

The fourth chapter demonstrates how BAXTER& has continued these basic strategies throughout his post-NETCO work, which he initiated in 1978. The process of reducing the vast array of these pieces into discrete categories will continue in this chapter in order to provide a rationale for understanding and analyzing them.

Finally, the conclusion will summarize the advancements presented here. It will reiterate how BAXTER&'s work describes a model of Pop-inflected Conceptual Art, and it will elucidate the metaphoric conversation his work maintains with the work of such peers as Kosuth, Weiner, Smithson, and Dan Graham, as well as his students, particularly Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, and Rodney Graham, who form the "Vancouver School of Photoconceptualism."

Chapter 1:
Understanding IAIN BAXTER&'s Embrace of Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980)

IAIN BAXTER&'s development of a Pop-inflected Conceptual Art depends

largely on his acceptance of Marshall McLuhan's theory as a prescription for his artistic

practice. By using uncommon materials such as plastics and telecommunication media

such as television, telefax, and Telecopier, BAXTER& assembles a McLuhanesque

framework for simultaneously critiquing mass cultural and fine art communication modes

as equivalent systems that present as well as produce information. BAXTER&'s

assumption of McLuhan's ideas on the power of technology as a medium to affect

perceptual change in both individuals and a given culture serves as the cornerstone of

three of the major principles elucidated here: his tendency to view the landscape as an

infoscape, his experimentation with media to critique normative definitions of art, and his

tendency to view visual art as a communication medium aligned with written language.

While these themes are more fully addressed in the following chapters that examine

BAXTER&'s work throughout his career, this chapter presents key aspects of McLuhan's

theory in order to set the stage for a more specific analysis of BAXTER&'s contributions.

BAXTER& became aware of McLuhan's writing in 1964 after accepting a

teaching position at the University of British Columbia. In this same year, the organizers

of the campus's Festival of Contemporary Arts coordinated a parallel series of lectures

and events based on McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message." BAXTER& served

on this committee, and he was instrumental in arranging McLuhan's visit to the campus

in 1965. As curator Marie Fleming states, IAIN BAXTER& was also an active

participant in a months-long series of meetings held in fellow Vancouver-based artist

Jack Shadbolt's house in order to discuss McLuhan's theories and their impact on art.[1] In

the same year, 1966, BAXTER& took a teaching position at Simon Fraser University,

where he helped create the visual arts department of the Centre for Communications and

the Arts, which was based on McLuhan's communications theories. During his tenure at

Simon Fraser University, BAXTER& experimented with teaching art classes with no

verbal instruction. Instead of relying on spoken language, BAXTER& relied on visual

and other sensory clues to express the particular theme of these experimental classes.[2]

The first major article to include a description of N.E. THING CO. works—art

historian and critic Phil Leider's "Vancouver: Scene with No Scene" (1967)—is also the

first to recognize an explicit connection between BAXTER& and McLuhan.[3] While

BAXTER& was concerned with how visual stimuli operate as nonverbal communication

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[1] See Fleming, 1982, p. 32.

[2] See Matthew Baigel and Joel Smith, "Happening in the Classroom: Non-Verbal Art Instruction," *Art Journal* 25 (Summer, 1966): pp. 370–371. Baigel and Smith recount that students in these classes tended to produce several times more work than students in other, more traditional classroom settings.

[3] See Phil Leider, "Vancouver: Scene with No Scene," *artscanada* 26 (June–July 1967): 1–8, especially page 7, where Leider states, "Underlying Baxter's playfulness is an intense involvement with the various messages of Marshall McLuhan, and his conversation is heavily larded with terrifying McLuhanesque linguistic horrors: 'information retrieval' (in part at least a simple reference to library science), 'intermedia,' 'visual sensitivity information,' 'sensitivity information dynamics,' etc., etc. In part, the critical function of his parodies turns on a McLuhanesque understanding of what a particular artist is about."

prior to his introduction to McLuhan, he found resonances between these ideas and McLuhan's focus on the cultural effects of media. BAXTER&'s appropriation of McLuhan's theory is evident throughout his art as well as in his pedagogical models, including his role in developing the visual arts department at Simon Fraser University from 1966 to 1971. BAXTER& has repeatedly pointed to McLuhan's significance for his art, yet this is the first study to present a clear description of the extent of this influence. As this study will show, BAXTER& consistently demonstrates through his experimentation with such unacknowledged yet ubiquitous media as plastics, telecommunication systems, and corporate culture a desire to impart to viewers a framework enabling them to become aware of the ways a given medium produces cultural exchanges.

In order to clarify BAXTER&'s McLuhanesque approach to his art, this chapter begins by briefly introducing McLuhan, his main texts, and those terms in his lexicon that not only provide the basic structure to his theory but also clarify his connection to BAXTER&. Then it maps out connections between BAXTER& and McLuhan by introducing the latter's view of the artists' role in the information age. By concluding with a presentation of how McLuhan's ideas can be incorporated into analyses of both Pop and Conceptual Art, this chapter will underscore the Pop Art connection that BAXTER&'s Conceptualism sustains and develops.

Examining Conceptual Art through Theory

Critical investigations of Conceptual Art frequently rely on examinations of various types of non-art theory, be they linguistic, economic, or social, in order to illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of this very radical, non-object-specific type of work. Art historians have used such extra-artistic theoretical constructs to assemble diagnostic frameworks for discussing Conceptual works, whether or not a given artist employed in his or her art a specific theoretical basis, and in work that predates the theories used to discuss it. Not exclusive to the history of Conceptual Art, this practice has been applied to evaluate practically every art movement or style of the twentieth century in order to develop alternate and innovative discourses. While the intent of this approach has been to open art to new critical debates, in practice it has at times served to close off such investigative routes by creating short-hand idioms that simply reference existing discourses. In the study of Conceptual Art, for example, there are multiple investigations and references to the writings of Karl Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, and Claude Levi-Strauss (the latter two serving as stand-ins for the larger body of French Structuralist theory). Marxism has been used to explain Conceptual artists' investigations of fine art's inherent commodity status and its role as part of larger capitalist systems. Beyond classic Marxism's focus on modes of production and capitalist economies, other such Marxist-based aesthetic and sociological critical theories as those initiated and developed by Guy Debord, Theodor Adorno, and Louis Althusser form the basis for multiple interpretations of Conceptual Art's frequent manifestations of sub-

aesthetic modes and its intellectually rigorous nature that deter its consumption by mass culture.[4] Wittgenstein's investigation of language, specifically its underlying structures and shifting rules that constitute a form of game, is invaluable as a theoretical lens for examining how Conceptual artists produced works using written language, including their understanding of visual art's role as another language, in order to critique object-based definitions of art and to suggest art's communicative power and possibilities.

Structuralism is a loosely defined body of thought utilized in such fields as linguistics, anthropology, and sociology. In the latter two fields, adherents contend that all culture develops from a definable structure with an underlying system of rules and positions for understanding it. They presume the existence of a universal human thought process that governs all practice and determines any identifiable meaning of cultural activity.[5] All of

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[4] The most relevant of these nonclassical Marxist theorists are listed here with their primary publications. Guy Debord analyzed how mass-cultural modes such as television control and mandate the directions of public discourse on cultural identifications and definitions. See *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967); first English edition, *The Society of the Spectacle*, unauthorized translation (Detroit: Black & Red, in cooperation with *Radical America*, 1970). Theodor Adorno presented a similar idea of popular culture as a construct produced to prevent individual thought and deflect criticism, and the ways that fine art must assume a role of indirect criticism of these mass cultural constructions. See *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), first English translation, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973). Louis Althusser, a structural Marxist, theorized the role of the political institution as duplicating and reinforcing a capitalist structure, rather than being independent to it. See Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Lire "le Capital"* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1965), first English translation, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970). He is also recognized for radically rethinking the notion of the individual as a cultural construction, a subject position controlled and defined by ideological practice. See his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), in the edition *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971). Pierre Bourdieu describes multiple arenas of capital, or power, in economic, social, and cultural fields that relate to Althusser's notion of agency. See *La Distinction* (Paris: Éd. de Minui, 1979), first English translation, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

[5] The leading figure in structural anthropology is Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose principle works include an expanded and edited version of his thesis produced at the Sorbonne, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1949), first published in the United States as *Elemental Structures of Kinship*, translated by James Harle Bell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), and *Anthropologie*

these approaches and their corresponding ideas have proven to be crucial to an emerging

understanding of Conceptual Art, yet this list is in fact incomplete.

One of the figures most obviously absent from this list of useful analytical models

for Conceptual Art is Toronto-based communications theorist Marshall McLuhan.

Central to his theories is the desire to regard all technological innovation (from the

alphabet and the printing press to more recent communications media such as radio, film,

and television) as extensions of human beings' physical and sensory bodies. Rather than

being simply tools that convey information without translation, these media in fact create

new patterns or ratios between the human senses, and thus affect individual selves and

thought processes as well as cultural and national identifications. McLuhan's

investigations of technological progress's role in transmitting and processing cultural and

sensory information served as a touchstone for a wider cultural awareness in the 1960s of

how humanity changes in proportion to emerging communications technology. His

prophetic ideas also served as a theoretical framework enabling such Conceptual artists as

BAXTER&, Les Levine, and the San Francisco–based collaborative Antfarm (1968–

1978) to investigate the cultural construct of fine art and its relation to the mass-culture

structures of popular communications technologies, from print and radio to such newer

structurale (Paris: Plon, 1958), first English translation, *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoe (New York: Basic Books, 1963). Later thinkers who have criticized the limits of the structuralist belief in an overarching, absolute unity yet have remained determined to view social discourse as the product of a structure or set of structures have been termed "post-structuralist." Post-structuralist thought includes the structuralist belief in the notion of the self as culturally defined rather than an individual construction yet recognizes that it is the product of several, and often competing, roles in multiple structures. With this multiplicity in mind, any meaning identifiable from cultural phenomena are not singular but manifold. Key early advocates of these concepts include such recognized figures as literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes, literary and philosophical theorist Jacques Derrida, and sociologist and historian Michel Foucault.

technologies as television and telecommunications. McLuhan's name has been dropped

into such critical studies of Conceptual Art as Corris' edition *Conceptual Art: Theory,*

Myth and Practice,[6] and Alberro's *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*,[7] and it is

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[6] Three essays include references to McLuhan. The first is curator Anne Stephen's essay "Soft Talk/*Soft Tape*: The Early Collaborations of Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden," in Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 80–97. See her assessment of Burn and Ramsden's *Soft Tape* (1966) on p. 84, where she states:

> The title, *Soft-tape*, and the material—a piece of contemporary office technology—owed something to Marshall McLuhan's book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man....* The component parts of *Soft-tape* were described in terms derived from his "electronic technology...."

See also note 21, p. 95, in which Stephen remarks that the spoken script of this work's tape was derived from *Understanding Media*. Stephen concludes this footnote by stating, "Art & Language [a group Burn and Ramsden would later join] published a rebuttal of McLuhan's thinking: B. Bihari, 'Marshall McLuhan and the Behavioral Sciences,' *Art-Language* 1, no. 3 (June 1970): 11–28." While Stephen is correct in her notice of Art & Language's publication of an anti-McLuhan essay, McLuhan scholar Richard Cavell offers an expanded analysis of this connection between McLuhan and Art & Language in his *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) on p. 288, n. 79:

> The [Bernard Bihari] article, while acknowledging that McLuhan "has … had a profound impact on people in the humanities and the arts" (11), purports to demonstrate that McLuhan's theories about the interrelations of the senses and the nature of perception are wrong. The fact that Bihari does not cite from McLuhan makes his article especially suspect, as does his complaint (in the context of this journal) that McLuhan makes "deliberate use of ambiguity and obscured language" (11). Given that the founders of the journal take diametrically opposed views to the ones expressed by Bihari, however, this article presents itself as highly ironic (whether intentionally or naïvely so). It is important, however (whichever way it is read), in highlighting the significance of McLuhan's pronouncements on perception and the interrelation of the senses were having on the artists of that period. (Indeed, the article following Bihari's, by… Mel Ramsden, is "A Preliminary Proposal for the Directing of Perception.")

The second essay to refer to McLuhan is James Meyer, "The Second Degree: *Working Drawings and other visible things on paper not necessarily meant to be viewed as art*," pp. 108–122. Meyer introduces his analysis of Mel Bochner's *Working Drawings* (1966) on p. 108 by noting, "Xerography, observed Marshall McLuhan at the time, allows everyone to be their own publishing company. Bochner took this dictum to heart, photocopying the drawings, reducing and enlarging them to uniform size."

The third essay is art historian Ken Allen's "Understanding *Information*," pp. 144–168, which discusses the seminal 1970 Conceptual Art exhibition *Information*, held at the Museum of Modern Art. Because five McLuhan works were cited in the catalog's section of suggested reading, Allen continually intertwines McLuhan's theory in his interpretation of curator Kynaston McShine's organization for this show.

[7] Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003). See, for example, p. 153, where Alberro notes, "In this sense, [Conceptual Art dealer Seth]

a common reference in analyses of BAXTER&'s art, including Marie Fleming's *Baxter[2]: Any Choice Works, 1965–1970* (1986), select essays in both the exhibition catalogs *You Are Now in the Middle of an N.E. THING CO. Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, 1965–1971* (1993) and *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs 1958–1983* (2006). Yet no examination has explained McLuhan's ideas and how they were adopted and transformed by these artists. With that in mind, this chapter will examine McLuhan's theories as developed in his *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1959) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).

A Brief Background for McLuhan and His Major Works

Marshall McLuhan began his academic career in literary studies, but initiated his development of a broad-based theory of communications technology with his *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), in which he closely scrutinizes advertising messages and their content in order to determine their greater cultural implications. One of the major threads that tie together this collection of short essays is McLuhan's analysis of how the figure of woman had become less a Romantic trope, a metonym for humanity in its natural, unified, and "civilized" state, and had developed into a culturally coded "specialist" figure. The "specialist" figure is a term McLuhan coins to describe the regimented functions of individual participants in a fragmented, industrialized culture that differ from cohesive tribalized cultures, which he contends

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Siegelaub's metaphors of a shrinking world of complex connectivity were of a piece with the infamous communications discourse propagated by Marshall McLuhan and his followers."

comprise members of a corporate body politic who fluidly assume and relinquish "roles,"

rather than functions. McLuhan notes that this process had previously taken place with

the culturally constructed denotation of masculinity by Madison Avenue advertising in

such emerging communication technologies as print, radio, and film.

    The Mechanical Bride registers McLuhan's grounding in New Criticism, with its

emphasis on the prospect of determining all possible meanings of a given text within the

text itself.[8] This book and the New Critical approach act as the foundation for many of

McLuhan's later ideas.[9] He clearly found value in New Criticism's preference for closely

reading discrete texts, but both here and in his later works, he displays a willingness to

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[8] The New Criticism is the name given to a related body of literary criticism techniques proposed by a group of scholars whose members include, among others, I.A. Richards, William Empson, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Cleanth Brooks, and John Crowe Ransom. While the exact membership and relative cohesiveness of the New Critics has been and continues to be debated, the name for this collective group is derived from Ransom's text *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1941). From the late 1920s through the 1950s, the methods of close textual reading and analysis developed by this group of scholars became the dominant form of literary studies taught and used in university English departments across the United States and Great Britain.

    The New Critical method is first and foremost a body of interpretive techniques, rather than a body of theory, that seeks to realize that a given text includes a myriad of potential interpretations and to determine among these the most appropriate and conclusive. Central to this method is the desire to reduce (but not cancel out or ignore) a text's historicity. While the New Critics are frequently derided as being either anti-historicist or ahistoricist, the goal behind isolating a given text from its historical moment is to understand that a text can carry its meaning beyond the limited time frame of its own contemporaneity. This New Critical stance against undue attention to a text's historical context was, initially, a reaction against the acritical literary historical studies that dominated the 1920s. (See, for example, René Wellek, "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Summer 1978), p. 614). Also integral to the origins of the New Critical method was its members' reaction against a perceived trend of the subjugation of all humanities studies by the social sciences of economics, psychology, and sociology, and their desire for the introduction of a critical method in literary studies that would not only isolate the study of literature and poetry as a specialist field but also reinvest their subject text with its own object status. The goal was to reassert the value of studying a singular work, rather than allowing it to be swallowed up into a generalized history of a given epoch.

    [9] McLuhan's focus on the study of popular culture in *The Mechanical Bride* was informed by F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment* (1933). Leavis and I.A. Richards, two literary critics frequently associated with the New Critics group, were mentors to McLuhan during his studies at Cambridge from 1934 to 1936.

contradict the New Critics' reluctance to consider how the content of auxiliary texts, in this case ad copy and its corresponding imagery, affects the viewer/reader. By focusing on how viewers may be influenced by advertising messages, McLuhan disregards the New Critics' aversion to the "affective fallacy," a term derived to dismiss a text's influence on a given reader as irrelevant to literary analysis.[10]

McLuhan's best-remembered works are *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967), an exceedingly nonlinear montage cocreated with graphics designer Quentin Fiore, and *Understanding Media*. While *The Medium is the Massage* is useful as an extreme example of what McLuhan terms a "mosaic approach," a nonlinear presentation of multiple ideas and/or multiple voices embodied in a single volume, many of the ideas presented in this later work are more extensively presented in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in which McLuhan characterizes all technological innovations from money and roads to television, film, and radio as media, or modes of mass communication. The 1964 publication of *Understanding Media* quickly found its way onto best-seller lists and introduced such terms as "global village" and "hot" and "cool media," as well as the phrase "the medium is the message," that soon became popular expression.[11]

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[10] The term "affective fallacy" was coined by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954). In the same collection of essays, Wimsatt and Beardsley also coined the term "intentional fallacy" to describe their belief that the intentions of the authors were equally irrelevant to a given text's meaning. Clearly, McLuhan published *The Mechanical Bride* prior to Wimsatt and Beardsley's essays that foreground the "affective fallacy." Yet McLuhan's later works maintain his interest in suggesting how information carried across mass cultural media is received and assumed as true.

[11] Megan Mullen notes that after *Understanding Media* came out in paperback, it quickly sold 100,000 copies. See Mullen, "Coming to Terms with the Future He Foresaw: Marshall McLuhan's

While the publication and commercial success of *Understanding Media* helped McLuhan traverse the gap between academic and general readership, the book itself has proven difficult for many to understand. Divided into chapters which purport to treat individually such mediated forms as television, money, radio, film, or games, *Understanding Media* is devoid of clearly cohesive, linearly arranged arguments so that pronouncements found early in the text are typically explained much later. The book lacks many of the literary sign-posts guiding academic readers through deductive or inductive arguments, and this chapter will argue that this seemingly erratic arrangement was precisely McLuhan's intent. Furthermore, many of the pronouncements popularized in *Understanding Media* actually have their origin in McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), which, despite its long blocks of quotations, is decidedly more accessible in its more transparent style of argument. For these reasons, these two texts are read together here in order to understand more fully McLuhan's theories.

Critical Awareness of McLuhan

While press coverage of McLuhan and his works was sparse prior to 1962, his name and ideas were hard to escape throughout the 1960s. From 1962 until 1969, no less

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Understanding Media," *Technology and Culture* 47 (April 2006): 373. While these terms are discussed in further detail below, they may be briefly defined as follows: "global village" is the state of transnational, personal collectivity created by the expansive use of electronic media and its reproduction of the human neural system; "hot media" are those forms of communication that transmit high-definition information to one of the human senses (primarily sight and sound), whereas "cool media" are presenting only low-definition content and thus require active participation on the receiver's part; and "the medium is the message" is McLuhan's overarching pronouncement indicating any given medium's transformative effect on the information carried by it.

than 67 articles or reviews were published in such major periodicals as *The Nation*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, and *Harper's*. From 1965 until 1967, *The New York Times* published six reviews of McLuhan's works. He was also the subject of articles in such diverse publications as *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Glamour*, *The Partisan Review*, and *Playboy*.[12]

McLuhan's burgeoning mass-culture popularity placed him at the forefront of cultural and art discourses of the time. Numerous New York artists referenced him in their Happenings, just as actor Henry Gibson referenced him on the late 1960s to early 1970s American television comedy series *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*.[13] He was more accessible than French Structuralist thinkers, having made appearances in articles and interviews in several popular magazines of the day as well as his books being continuously translated and republished across Europe, Latin America, and Japan.

McLuhan's theories of communications and their integral effects on the development of cultural patterns lost their critical currency during the 1980s, but they have been successively revisited throughout the mid-1990s to the early twenty-first century as witnessed by the reprinting of all of his major works and the publication of at

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[12] This long list includes an early review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, John Simon, "Pilgrim of the Audile-Tactile," *New Republic* 147 (October8, 1962): 21–23, and these reviews of *Understanding Media*: Deborah Holmes, "The Cybernetic Caveman," *Nation* no. 99 (Oct. 5, 1964): 194–195; Harold Rosenberg, "Philosophy in a Pop Key," *The New Yorker* (February 27, 1965): 129–136. Articles that seek to explain or explore McLuhan and his theory include Richard Schickel, "Marshall McLuhan: Canada's Intellectual Comet," *Harper's* (Nov. 1965): 183–184; Jane Howard, "Oracle of the Electric Age," *Life* 60 (February 25, 1966): 91–99; Richard Kostelanetz, "Understanding McLuhan," *New York Times Magazine* (January 29, 1967): 18–19, 37, 40–50; and Charles E. Silberman, "Is Technology Taking Over?," *Fortune* 73 (February 1966): 112–115. Articles that express disagreement with McLuhan's ideas include A. Alvarez, "The Evils of Literacy," *New Statesman*, 64 (December 21, 1962): 902; Benjamin DeMottt, "Against McLuhan," *Esquire* 66 (August 1966): 71–73; and Ross Wetzsteon, "The Doubtful Necessity of Understanding McLuhan," *The Village Voice,* May 12, 1966, pp. 19–21.

[13] Gibson's oft-repeated line was "Marshall McLuhan … What are you doin'?" McLuhan also had a cameo appearance in Woody Allen's 1977 film *Annie Hall*.

least three biographies; three collections of essays, interviews, and lectures; and more than a dozen collections of essays or critical analyses engaging his core theories.[14]

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism of McLuhan relates to his writing style and its presumed lack of transparency. McLuhan has been critically characterized as a prophetic writer of aphorisms, whose reasoning is either fundamentally flawed or well beyond his training in literary studies. Yet these criticisms do not account for the larger implications that his consistent use of linguistic puns have on the type of game structure he creates in his text. His sarcasm, as expressed in such chapter titles as "Money: the Poor Man's Credit Card," serves to reinforce his observation that the developing age of electronic automation forced a transition from older Industrial Age technology and its reliance on paper-currency exchange to new modes for the transfer of capital, signified by the emergence and proliferation of the credit card and electronic wire transfer. However, some of his satirical pronouncements are more oblique. The chapter title "Roads and Paper Routes" suggests McLuhan is developing a rich network of linguistic twists that parallel and reinforce his core theory. Whereas "paper route" is a witty characterization of the network of highways used to transport such paper products as mail, journals, and

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[14] The biographies of McLuhan are Phillip Marchand, *McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989); Gordon Terrance, *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); and Judith Fitzgerald, *Marshall McLuhan: Wise Guy* (Montréal: XYZ Publishers, 2001).

Collections of essays or interpretations of McLuhan include Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1999); George Sanderson and Frank MacDonald, eds., *Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1989); Gary Genosko, *McLuhan and Baudrillard, the Masters of Implosion* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Paul Benedetti and Nancy DeHart, eds., *Foreword through the Rear-view Mirror: Reflections on and by Marshall McLuhan* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); Donald Theall, *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (Montreal and Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001); Glen Wilmott, *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and Richard Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

newspapers, it also correlates with his description of roads as an outdated medium used to transport goods and services. Because these goods and services are commodities, they can be further characterized as monetary values since, as McLuhan claims, money is a medium that translates disparate commodities into values based on a single currency. This currency is printed on paper, however, and McLuhan's understanding of the electronic age's cultural transformation reduces such "paper" to outdated ephemera. If paper-based means of communication become obsolete, then the roads designed to carry them also become anachronisms from a by-gone era.

These language games are more than linguistic gymnastics; they indicate that McLuhan is relying on an alternate developmental strategy that can be described as a "mosaic," a term he uses to describe the polyphonic presentation of information characteristic of print journalism and television. McLuhan transforms the visual assortment of shapes and colors that typify the decorative art technique of the mosaic into a metaphor for any medium that relies on a nonlinear or concerted arrangement of multiple voices. He describes medieval manuscripts, which frequently accumulated multiple works by several authors in one volume, as the first mosaic medium and characterizes print-based journalism in the post-telegraph age as a mosaic form that "present[s] the discontinuous variety and incongruity of ordinary life" through an assembly of descriptions of actual political and social events as well as "human interest" stories spread across the page, and filled in with advertising slogans and images.[15] He furthermore describes television as a mosaic that supersedes journalism and film as a

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[15] See, McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 207.

dominant culture producer due to its variety of programming, intermixed and punctuated by commercials. The basic principle of McLuhan's mosaic is its presentation of multiple voices or directions, which is precisely what he offers in *Understanding Media* through his presentation of 33 chapters, 25 of which treat a single medium individually. While each chapter maintains and reinforces McLuhan's foundational proposition, "the medium is the message," they may be read individually, and in any order. Through his chapter divisions, which separate interrelated ideas, McLuhan creates in *Understanding Media* a network that must be mined and then mapped for a more holistic understanding.

McLuhan's Lexicon for Analyzing Media

As noted above, the concept that technological innovations extend the human body is central to McLuhan's work. His usage of the term "extension," a means for augmenting the range of human capabilities via technology, is based on anthropologist Edward T. Hall's *The Silent Language* (1959) that states "all man-made material things can be treated as extensions of what man once did with his body or some specialized part of his body."[16] Clothing amplifies the function of skin; tools expand the function of hands; and the wheel assumes the function of feet when used in transportation devices. These mechanical externalizations convey a series of translations that can be ultimately reduced to biological functions. These translations and the original biological functions become part of their content, which McLuhan describes as their function or the

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[16] Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 4, as quoted in McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962, reprint 2008), p. 4.

information they carry. For example, a pneumatic hammer takes over the role of a

standard hammer, which is itself an extension of the hand. Due to his realization that a

given medium's content is essentially an older technology, McLuhan proposes that the

proper course of study of these prostheses is not their content, but the manner in which

they develop new societal and individual patterns of experience. He argues that the

human mind creates new neural paths to negotiate each new medium. These neural paths

affect not only how individuals negotiate a new technology but also how they interact

with each other on a cultural level.

McLuhan introduces his intention to examine cultural shifts initiated by

technological innovation in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where he tracks the development of

reading from a multisensory activity, requiring sight and sound and voice acting together,

into an action requiring only vision. McLuhan argues that this transition is brought about

by the invention and proliferation of the printing press, which led to innovations in

education, the modern notion of authorship and intellectual property, and even the

sociopolitical shift from feudalism to constitutional monarchy and an emergent sense of

nationalism. This argumentative chain serves as the basis for McLuhan's introduction of

the phrase "the medium is the message" in *Understanding Media*, which encapsulates his

investigation of the largely unobserved effects, or messages, new media have brought

about in people's senses.[17] To illustrate this point, McLuhan introduces the figure of

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[17] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass, and London, The MIT Press, 1964, reprint 1994), p. 7: "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences

electric light, a recurring metaphor in *Understanding Media* expressing a major shift

from a specialized, fragmented, and mechanized society into a re-tribalizing and

electrically automated "global village." He writes:

> The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as
> it were, unless used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact,
> characteristic of all other media, means that the "content" of any medium
> is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the
> written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the
> telegraph. If it is asked, "What is the content of speech?," it is necessary to
> say, "It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal."[18]

Whereas the history of technological innovation is dominated by examples of sensorial

augmentation, McLuhan argues that electric light, his motif for such innovations as

computers, is a new auxiliary form that externalizes the whole human nervous system

rather than amplifying and transforming a single sense.[19]

McLuhan decries the failure to examine any given medium and its effects on both

the individual and the collective, yet he understands that this lack of experimentation

without observation is a by-product of Industrial Age technological progress. While these

innovations serve as powerful translators of information, he suggests:

> The price we pay of special technological tools, whether the wheel or the
> alphabet or radio, is that these massive *extensions* of sense constitute

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of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into
our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."

[18] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 8.

[19] It should be noted that McLuhan discusses computers in the last chapter of *Understanding Media* in the context of industrial automation since their use had not yet been extended into the development of a publicly accessible internet, a term coined in 1973. The main forms of electronic media he discussed, even though he described their effects in near opposition to each other, were radio and television. Much of the resurgence of interest in McLuhan's ideas, which began in the mid-1990s and continues today, has transposed his perception of electronic media from his initial subjects to personal computers and Internet communication.

closed systems. Our private senses are not closed systems…. Our extended senses, tools, technologies, through the ages, have been closed systems incapable of interplay or collective awareness.[20]

As each new enhancement of humanity is assimilated into society, it translates an older sensory framework into one the new medium dictates, which by heightening one sense over the others serves to disrupt the interaction of all of humanity's senses and the tentative balance in which they exist. McLuhan offers in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* the following example that he then reiterates in *Understanding Media*: the alphabet allowed oral information to be written, thereby becoming visual information. A manuscript culture (before Gutenberg's press) was created by this visual translation of oral information and resulted in the development of scribes, who assumed responsibility for the specialist function that in McLuhan's view did not exist in more homogeneous pre-literate cultures. Written words served only as visual storehouses, which when retrieved, could be rendered back in spoken form. According to McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, the moveable-type press not only served to standardize spelling, it also transformed reading into a purely visual activity. The press stripped away the aural and verbal components of reading to become a closed system that relied solely on the sense of vision.[21] The significance of this phenomenon is that reading's development from a

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[20] McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 5. McLuhan's use of the term "closed system" derives from systems theory, an interdisciplinary approach which categorizes subjects as existing within an identifiable system that is categorized as either closed, i.e. not subject to outside phenomena, or open. McLuhan's use of systems theory terminology undoubtedly relates to the work of such systems theorists as Norbert Weiner, who coined the term "cybernetics" to describe the systems-based study of communication of biological and mechanical intelligence in his text *Cybernetics, Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: J. Wiley, 1948).

[21] McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, pp. 18–22.

multi-sensory activity to a focused visual exercise is not the result of societal or cultural shifts: instead, it is the product of the homogenizing action of a new medium, the printing press. McLuhan states, "media, or the extensions of man, are 'make happen' agents, but not 'make aware' agents."[22] They alter sensory perception and therefore modify inter-human relations. According to McLuhan, media's role as catalysts for these transformations has gone unnoticed because technological innovation has been viewed merely as a product or sign of progress rather than an agent of cultural change.

"Hot" and "Cool" Media

Extensions do not, however, affect change equally. McLuhan creates a system of "hot" and "cool" to distinguish between different effective powers of media. He notes, "A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled with data." In contrast, a "cool" medium is one that may extend several senses simultaneously due to its low-definition translation or presentation of information.[23] In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan observes that auditory technologies are "hot" media because their content is understood immediately and rely on an interdependence of thought and action, whereas visual technologies are "cool" because they create a separation or rupture between thought and action.[24] Confrontation with a

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[22] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 48.

[23] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 22.

[24] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 19.

cool medium mandates actively interpreting the information being transmitted, whereas a hot medium requires little or no participation, only reception. This separation of media types works in conjunction with McLuhan's ideas of how the brain perceives sensory information. With each new technological medium there is a corresponding increased rate of information transfer so that the brain must alter an otherwise balanced ratio of senses in order to produce a new equilibrium, which in turn favors one sense over others.[25] McLuhan writes:

> If a technology is introduced … and if it gives new stress or ascendency to one or another of our senses, the ratio among all of our senses is altered. We no longer feel the same, nor do our eyes and ears and other senses remain the same. The interplay among our senses is perpetual save in conditions of anesthesia. But any sense when stepped up to high intensity can act as an anesthetic for other senses.[26]

McLuhan views print technology as hot, since it stripped oral and auditory components away from the acts of reading and teaching, leaving only the visual. Radio is also a hot medium because it is the auditory medium closest to actual speech, due to the seemingly personal connections between broadcaster and listener. The telephone, however, qualifies as cool because it requires listeners to focus actively in order to comprehend.[27]

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[25] McLuhan's ideas of human brain functions depend largely upon zoologist and neurophysiologist J.Z. Young. See McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 4, in which McLuhan cites a passage from Young's *Doubt and Certainty in Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 67–68, where Young notes the desire of the human brain to assimilate new stimuli in order to return to its normal state of synchronicity. McLuhan's reliance on Young for his understanding of human perception is but one area highlighted by critics in academic circles from the mid-1960s up to the late 1970s, who have argued that his lack of background in the varied scientific fields with which his theories engage as well as his nonacademic style of presentation preclude his theories from being serious considerations.

[26] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 24.

[27] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 266–267, where he provides a passage, which is characteristic in its seeming reversal of the aspects of hot and cold, while simultaneously providing a deeper insight into his ideas: "Since all media are fragments of ourselves into the public domain, the action

In addition to these single-sense extensions, McLuhan adds the concept of the hybrid, a technological medium that activates and extends multiple senses. Hybrids may also be characterized as either hot or cold. The two principal examples he offers are film and television, which are deemed hot and cold, respectively. These two hybrid media are described frequently in such visual terms of "seeing" a film or "watching" television, but depend on an interaction between vision and hearing. Both are products relying on a coordination of specialists, although film is presented in high definition, whereas, television, at least in McLuhan's era, is a low-definition hybrid medium. For McLuhan, the experience of film is passive reception. He describes its audience as assuming the camera's role by taking in sights and sounds; ultimately he views films as feature-length advertisements.[28] In contrast, television positions the receiving audience as its screen instead of its camera. To explain this radical effect of television and its difference from film, McLuhan turns to the metaphoric dichotomy between "light through" versus "light on" that he introduced in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* to describe the difference between the permeable manuscript and sealed printed text:

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upon us of any medium tends to bring the other senses into play in a new relation. As we read, we provide a sound track for the printed word; as we listen to the radio, we provide visual accompaniment. Why can we not visualize while telephoning?" Based on current studies regarding the amount of attention required to use a cellular phone while driving, it would seem that McLuhan was correct about the telephone requiring one's complete attention. See David Strayer, Frank Drews, and Dennis Crouch, "A Comparison of the Cell phone Driver and the Drunk Driver," *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society* 48 (Summer 2006): 381–391. Strayer has published multiple articles related to his University of Utah–based long-term study of cell phone usage and its effects on cognition while driving, and his studies are related to similar research projects undertaken at such institutions as Carnegie Mellon and Harvard University.

[28] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 206, 231, 294. McLuhan offers the following effective pronouncement on p. 207: "Movies in America have not developed advertising intervals simply because the movie itself is the greatest of all forms of advertisement for consumer goods."

> The TV image is visually low in data. The TV image is not a still shot. It is not a photo in any sense, but a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light *through*, not light *on*, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture. The TV image offers some three million dots per second to the receiver. From these he accepts only a few dozen each instant, from which to make an image.[29]

McLuhan compares the differences he finds in film and television to those he discerns between printed books and medieval manuscripts. Authors produce printed books and films so that they are received in their complete forms by passive viewers. McLuhan views the film image as an extension of photography—a series of still shots put into motion that imply single points of view. Conversely, the manuscript and the television media are both "cool" and require viewers' active participation to complete their meaning. Despite film's status as a "hybrid" in McLuhan's terminology, he considers this medium to constitute a visual space, due to its relation to photography and his conviction regarding the supremacy of the visual sense in the age of typography. Viewers of "cool" hybrid television images are not presented with visual space and fixed points of view; instead they participate in an "audile-tactile" arena of mosaics, which McLuhan defines as "not *structured* visually; nor… an extension of the visual power," in addition to adding

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[29] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 312. For McLuhan's use of the "light through" versus "light on" in his descriptions of manuscript versus print, see *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, pp. 105–107. There is a reason why entertainment executives continue to differentiate between the "large screen" of movies and the "small screen" of television that, according to McLuhan's line of thinking, has nothing to do with the physical size of the screen itself. For McLuhan, the movie and the television are two separate entities, with entirely different resolutions. McLuhan follows the above passage with a description of why altering the definition of the television to that of the motion picture would alter the temperature of the medium, but would result in it no longer being television. The difference is the resolution. The television technology, which in McLuhan's era was nothing near the high-definition digital signal that networks currently broadcast, was decidedly more low-resolution than the motion picture. This is the crucial difference that, to McLuhan, makes the experience of the motion picture a decidedly passive reception while the experience of television is more participatory. To lose this distinction would be to lose the mosaic effect that McLuhan describes as inherent to the medium of television.

that "the mosaic is not uniform, continuous, or repetitive. It is discontinuous, skew[ed], and nonlineal."[30]

McLuhan's separation of "visual" and "audile-tactile" spaces stems from his concept of the printing press as the originating impulse of Western culture's independent and thus fragmented perspective that led to the sociopolitical process of detribalization. After McLuhan theorizes the printed text as necessitating overtly visual responses and the manuscript as requiring the participation of multiple senses simultaneously, he employs these sensorial metaphors to describe how various media either assault or support a state of synesthesia, in which all the senses remain in a state of balance. Thus, the "audile-tactile" permits active participation, whereas the "visual" requires detachment from the total sensorial field that leads to a form of myopia.

McLuhan creates these continuous and interwoven metaphors in order to describe how Western individuals moved from being audile-tactile, participatory tribal members to becoming visual, isolated individuals—homogenized cogs in the world's vast machinery. The forces or mediums that will reverse this process and return them to a "global village" are electricity and automation. Whereas McLuhan views the underlying principle of mechanization as the linear arrangement of discrete units, the instantaneous speed and force of electricity transforms automation into a new organic unity, "an instant interrelation of a total field."[31] The new synchronization of all operations is initiated by the insertion of a feedback loop, a basic principle of electrical engineering in which a

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[30] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 323, 334.

[31] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 351

signal from the output side of a directional feed is inserted in the input side in order either to stabilize or to augment the signal. The feedback loop effectively ends the linear sequence of the mechanical assembly principle. Instead of amplifying a single sense or physical activity, as all previous extensions have done throughout human history, McLuhan argues that the invention of electricity and its application not only to production in the form of automation but also to popular entertainment is an extension of the human central nervous system, which itself comprises a series of feedback loops.[32]

By electrically accelerating the transmission, reception, and translation of information until these processes are instantaneous, Western culture, according to McLuhan, has developed a central nervous system that inhabits a place physically outside of the individual that leads to an implosion of the fragmented and individual self back into a collective unity as a single field of awareness.[33] This implosion of the self occurs as a by-product of McLuhan's principle of "numbness," which he appropriates from endocrinologists Hans Selye and Adolphe Jonas, whose medical research explains how the central nervous system shuts down or "autoamputates" as a strategy to cope with a super-perceptual stimulus.[34] The individual's sense of self, as well as its national identity,

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[32] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 43: "With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself." McLuhan reiterates this concept on p. 247: "Whereas all previous technology (save speech, itself) had, in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system itself, including the brain. Our central nervous system is a unified field quite without segments."

[33] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 51: "Fragmented, literate, and visual individualism is not possible in an electrically patterned and imploded society."

[34] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 42–43. On p. 43 McLuhan notes, "The principle of self-amputation as an immediate relief of strain on the central nervous system applies very readily to the origin of the media of communication from speech to computer." See also, p. 47: "The principle of numbness

disengages as a means of coping with this external neural network. The resultant new electronic nervous system is shared by all, making it a globally unified field of awareness, exchange, and translation of information into applied knowledge.[35] According to McLuhan, this global field of awareness, in which all share a common external nervous system, will lead people into the utopian organic unity he terms the "global village."

McLuhan displaces the Romanticist mistrust of a seemingly exponential progression of technological innovation as threatening one's concept of humanity. He does so by noting that such reactions are merely natural consequences of realizing the hesitancy that occurs when one's consciousness is reprogrammed subconsciously, so that it incorporates the new directions made available by the central nervous system's recently developed electronic extensions. The externalization of internal neural networks is certainly a cause for concern, but the process is merely a self-made crisis. McLuhan theorizes that Western culture should come to the realization that inventions of this kind—and indeed all inventions—are contingent on the new demands made by extending previously existing technologies.

comes in to play with electric technology, as with any other. We have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed, or we will die. Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and apathy. But it is strikingly the age of consciousness of the unconscious, in addition."

[35] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 348.

BAXTER& and McLuhan's Role for Artists

Having outlined the major points of McLuhan's theory of communication

technologies, this study will now place McLuhan's work and his conception of the role of

the arts in a context that includes BAXTER& and other artists working in the 1960s and

1970s. In the ever-changing perceptual world, constantly in flux due to the expansion of

new media, which both increase the rate of information exchange and alter the balance

between human senses, McLuhan places artists in a preeminent role that enables them to

provide the larger culture some awareness of the changes occurring around them.

McLuhan states, "The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with

impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception."[36]

Whereas McLuhan understands the historically "puny and peripheral" status of artists in

the larger social sphere, he describes the artist as the creative individual, "in any field,

scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge

in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness."[37]

McLuhan takes his description of artists' capabilities and confers on them the

important task of steering culture at its break-point across any maelstrom generated by

technological innovation that is capable of altering a culture's modes of perception.

Given McLuhan's pervasive use of puns and hyperbolic metaphor, this position can be

read as both serious and ironic. Art for McLuhan is essentially a game, "a profound

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[36] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 18.

[37] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 64–65.

reappraisal of a complex cultural state" that uses an accessible model to translate an unconscious or inaccessible set of conditions.[38] He writes:

> This [characteristic viewpoint of both information theory and game theory] is like approaching a painting or a musical composition from the point of view of its content. In other words, it is guaranteed to miss the central structural core of its experience. For as it is the *pattern* of the game that gives it relevance to our inner lives, and not who is playing nor the outcome of the game, so it is with information movement. The selection of the human senses employed makes all the difference say between photo and telegraph. In the arts the particular mix of our senses in the medium employed is all-important. The ostensible program content is a lulling distraction needed to enable the structural form to get through the barriers of conscious attention.[39]

By describing fine art as a game, McLuhan equates the subjective analysis of art with the objective field of game theory, which relies on logic and mathematics to determine probable outcomes of a given game system. He condemns both of these methodologies' singular attention to content for lacking any understanding of the relevance of form, which for him means the underlying rules of the game system.

The above passage's reference to form over content suggests a formalist aesthetic perspective for McLuhan, yet his larger purpose is to reveal the effects of a medium rather than its limits. If, as McLuhan describes, the content of any medium (except for electricity) is another medium, then he is proposing that the artist's purpose is to use such recognizable media as painting and sculpture in order to call attention to the affects of such other media as print, film, or television. His descriptions frequently rely on formalist terms, but McLuhan was not concerned with formal aspects of art other than to

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[38] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 241, 244.

[39] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 242.

understand the means by which art as a medium in and of itself transmits information about other media to a viewer in order to illustrate their consequences on individual and collective thought processes. Instead of accepting a formalist position, McLuhan instead argues that "A work of art has no existence or function apart from its *effects* on human observers. And art … like media of communication, has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures."[40]

BAXTER& understands and accepts McLuhan's requirement for art to be a form of communication with the potential to provide the viewer a framework for comprehending the effects of other media. While BAXTER& has used painting, particularly after the dissolution of NETCO, as a medium to foreground such other media as television or the digital language of binary code, his work during the company's existence relies more on sub-aesthetic presentations of information technology to call attention to the medium itself. He devised strategies that used humor and technological media rather than traditional, aesthetically presented content to serve as the "lulling distraction needed to enable the structural form to get through the barriers of conscious attention," as McLuhan has indicated.[41]

BAXTER& adapts McLuhan's terminology in a variety of ways. While his use of the term "extension" in such works as *Extended Noland* (1966) literalizes McLuhan's usage by the tactic of attaching long ribbons to a copy of Kenneth Noland's formalist chevron arrangement of multi-colored stripes on canvas, he also creates a glossary based

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[40] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 242.

[41] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 242.

around his own term "sensitivity information," which replaces the word "art." The use of

the term "sensitive" rather than "sensorial" points to BAXTER&'s appreciative

synchronicity with McLuhan's own predilection toward linguistic gymnastics.

BAXTER& accepts McLuhan's declaration that art be treated as an analytic mode of

communication by declaring all "information handled sensitively" be considered art.[42]

This study argues that because the word "sensitive" connotes more possible meanings

than "sensory," including such connotations as sympathetic, perceptive, delicate or

confidential, and receptive, BAXTER& creates a language game of prolonged

implications so that "all information handled sensitively" encompasses more than

aesthetic content. Referencing the obvious pun of BAXTER&'s company name, it

includes anything. The presentation of this term as an artistic and corporate policy

represents an extreme development of McLuhan's theory which dealt extensively with

how media produce effects on human sensorial perception. Whereas McLuhan argued

that all extensions of human senses have profound implications on how a culture

perceives itself, and that these effects pass largely unnoticed, BAXTER& and NETCO

create the term "sensitivity information" to signal their desire to investigate and present

these perceptual implications directly to viewers. This point is driven home by

BAXTER&'s 1968 act of sending McLuhan one of NETCO's "VIP" buttons, in which

the acronym stands for "Visually Illiterate Person," rather than the more customary

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[42] N.E. THING CO. Glossary, 1966, reprinted in N.E. THING CO., *N.E. THING CO. LTD.*, v.1(Vancouver, N.E. THING CO., 1978), n.p. This rather weighty tome is a xerographic reproduction of works affixed to their "Information" sheets. It was intended to be the first volume of what would develop into a *catalogue raisonné*. Unfortunately, it does not include every work produced under this name.

designation for special dignitaries.[43] With this gesture, BAXTER& calls attention to the

irony of McLuhan, who specialized in literary studies and interpretation and continued to

produce articles and books for publication while simultaneously arguing that literate

culture is incapable of understanding either the content or the effects of visual

communication. One particular passage from *Understanding Media* encapsulates

McLuhan's viewpoint:

> Highly literate people cannot cope with the nonverbal art of the pictorial,
> so they dance impatiently up and down to express pointless disapproval
> that renders them futile and gives new power and authority to the ads. The
> unconscious depth-messages of ads are never attacked by the literate,
> because of their incapacity to notice or discuss nonverbal forms of
> arrangement and meaning. [44]

BAXTER&'s presentation of the VIP button to McLuhan not only expresses his

awareness and appreciation of the media theorist's ideas, but the occasion also provides

him an opportunity for a wry joke.

Additionally, BAXTER&'s adoption of a corporate structure for N.E. THING

CO. should be understood as part of an overall McLuhanesque strategy of mining

information technology structures. According to both BAXTER& and McLuhan,

corporations in capitalist cultures are the main producers of goods, services, and

advertisements—in short, all modes of information—yet due to their organizational

structures, or corporate culture itself, they exist separately from artists. Both BAXTER&

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[43] BAXTER& sent McLuhan the "VIP" button after meeting with him at an awards ceremony in Vancouver. This meeting was arranged by former Canada Council member David Silcox, who mentions this exchange in his essay "An Outside View," in *Vancouver: Art and Artist, 1931–1983*, 1983, pp. 154–156. On December 18, 1969, BAXTER& sent McLuhan one of his telexes that was addressed to company presidents that requested: "Sit down and with a pair of scissors cut 4 inches off your tie and please mail it immediately to Iain Baxter Pres N E THING CO…. Now you are ready for anything."

[44] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 231.

and McLuhan recognize that this distance installs artists as a separate and largely

disenfranchised class of culture producers. Critiquing this situation, BAXTER& takes on

the same appearance and structure of those entities he most wants to penetrate by

developing N.E. THING CO. as a legitimate business enterprise first incorporated in

1966 and then registered with the Vancouver Board of Trade in 1969. This corporate

structure allowed BAXTER& to engage companies on equal footing by sending telefax

and Telecopier messages to various corporations, gaining entry into data processing trade

shows and conferences, and offering his company's services as a consulting firm. The

creation of NETCO also provided BAXTER& opportunities to reach wider audiences

than a typical gallery exhibition would, especially when N.E. THING CO. entered

business conventions that drew large audiences and produced ad pieces that would be

broadcast on major television and radio stations.

BAXTER&'s opportunistic creation of a corporate umbrella, which allowed him

and N.E. THING CO. copresident, Ingrid Baxter, to pursue diverse art strategies, points

to his use of McLuhan's mosaic. This study proposes that the structure of NETCO, which

provides BAXTER& with the opportunity to critique art and culture in several voices,

can be viewed as the creation of a McLuhanesque mosaic that presents an array of

viewpoints simultaneously. While BAXTER& produces throughout all his works an

extended critique of art and culture by continually operating within and outside of

culturally assumed definitions of art, he avails himself and his work of a broad and

diverse range of methods. Many of his Conceptual Art colleagues pursued more

straightforward directions, yet BAXTER& chose a different path. While all Conceptual

Art conforms to McLuhan's view of "low-definition" media, which requires viewers' active participation, BAXTER&'s multidirectional approach is best understood as the mosaic that McLuhan describes as "the mode of corporate or collective image [that] demands deep participation … [which] is communal rather than private, inclusive rather than exclusive."[45] BAXTER& sought through N.E. THING CO a goal that parallels McLuhan's perception of the mosaic of print journalism, which he describes as "present[ing] the discontinuous variety and incongruity of ordinary life."[46]

Using the company name as an alternate identity, BAXTER& felt secure in pursuing varied modes of cultural and artistic inquiry simultaneously. During its existence, NETCO presented works that range from those such as *Reflected Landscape* (1968) (fig. 8) and *¼ Mile Landscape* (1968) (fig. 9) to numerous telex- and Telecopier-based works and radio and television commercials. The firm produced an extensive series of ACTs and ARTs (nomination pieces whose acronyms stand for Aesthetically Claimed Things and Aesthetically Rejected Things) while also pursuing such business-based actions as entry into data processing conventions and sponsoring a Little League Hockey Team. Furthermore, it opened two subsidiaries—the Eye Scream restaurant and Vancouver's first Cibachrome processing photo lab—and had partial ownership in *Vancouver* magazine. All of these disparate activities were conceived to support BAXTER&'s McLuhanesque idea of art as sensitivity information and to instill in viewers his idea that "Art is All Over," which is aptly presented on another of the

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[45] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 211.

[46] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 207.

company's many buttons, a form NETCO used like mobile advertisements that continually recontextualize information and extend the idea of what art is. While these efforts share common themes and goals, casual viewers receive this vast array of BAXTER&'s methods and approaches as "the discontinuous variety and incongruity of ordinary life," the phrase McLuhan uses to describe his mosaic.

However, BAXTER&'s "discontinuous variety" of works has been a source of critical hesitancy or dissatisfaction, as exemplified in two 1968 reviews. Artist and critic Terry Fenton, in his appraisal of Canadian art, approves generally of BAXTER&'s work, but deems it "sensibility art," a term he describes as "perilously close to entertainment … [because] it is temporal and its quality lies in its adherence to the temper of the times."[47] Fenton expresses concern that BAXTER&, whom he names directly instead of using N.E. THING CO., "seems content to pose questions rather than risk solutions."[48] While Fenton is discussing only the vacuum form and inflated vinyl media that BAXTER& began using during the short-lived collaboration IT, which was formed by the Baxters and John Friel and lasted for two exhibitions in 1965, and continued working in under the NETCO name, his criticism is relevant to the proposal that BAXTER& is developing a McLuhanesque mosaic approach to his art. Corresponding with McLuhan's argument that art's role in a society is to make its members aware of the profound changes brought about by the introduction of new technologies, BAXTER& relies on such "low

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[47] Terry Fenton, "Looking at Canadian Art," *Artforum* 7 (September 1968): 56.

[48] Terry Fenton, "Looking at Canadian Art," p. 56. This quote is prefaced by his statement: "His strength lies in his ability to ask delightful, if not searching questions; his weakness is his seeming unwillingness to commit himself to anything deeper than his manner."

definition" means as recasting Minimalist works in inflated vinyl and presenting plastic

bottles encapsulated in vacuum-formed plastic as icons of a modern era. Because

BAXTER& relies on such low-definition means that correspond with McLuhan's view of

art, viewers must actively complete a work to determine its meaning, rather than

passively receive the spoon-fed conclusions that Fenton prefers. Furthermore,

BAXTER& revels in his contemporaneity because he is assuming McLuhan's role for

artists to clarify mediated effects on culture rather than attempting to produce a

transcendent art.

Critic and curator Jane Livingston echoes Fenton's appraisal, by noting, "It is

tempting to speculate, however, that the N. E. Thing Co. has already gone in too many

directions ever to quite pull itself together."[49] As seen from one vantage point,

BAXTER&'s work appears to present an unending variety of questions. However, this

viewpoint overlooks BAXTER&'s development of an art that serves as a mode of inquiry

rather than a statement of dogmatic conclusions. His work examines art as a

communicative structure that operates within, yet outside of, other mass communication

modes. His goal is to enable viewers to determine the ways in which art and popular

culture interact, and he pursues this goal by abstracting and then describing the effects of

one on the other. Viewers of his works fulfill the role of readers of the mosaic form that

McLuhan states as "becom[ing] much involved in the making of meanings for the

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[49] Jane Livingston, exhibition review, "Iain Baxter, Gallery 669," *Artforum* 7 (October 1968): 67. Livingston is reviewing a show of five inflated-vinyl pieces presented at this exhibition, yet briefly acknowledges the various departments of NETCO, which she enumerates as "Thing, COP, Projects, Publications, Research, Consulting, Photographic and Service."

corporate image." [50] The requirement that viewers participate by activating the works'

inherent modes of inquiry means that BAXTER& need not provide conclusions for the

questions his work raises.

Another way that BAXTER& has accepted and transformed McLuhan's ideas are

through his and NETCO's consistent reliance on photography to document the firm's

intervention with or appropriation of some non-art subject. This strategy fits in neatly

with the larger conceptualist strategy of de-privileging the presented material in order to

circumvent its potential fine art object status while providing a visual means through

which to make the work accessible to gallery visitors. The use of photography, especially

in a dryly presented evidentiary style, is one of the principal means Conceptual artists

used during the 1960s and 1970s. The company's preference for photography as a visual

communication system is also a part of the foundation of the company's theory of VSI, or

visual sensitivity information, which it developed in large part through an understanding

of Marshall McLuhan.

BAXTER& makes evident his understanding of McLuhan's theories about how

Western civilization's formation and reliance on a non-ideogrammatic alphabet has

privileged vision over other senses and generated increasingly abstracted forms and

processes of thought. McLuhan, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), describes how the

Western alphabet and the development of moveable-type technologies removes language

and communication from an inclusive world, where all the senses work together to

negotiate presence and experience, to an increasingly abstracted and fragmented world of

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[50] See *Understanding Media*, p. 204.

the individual. BAXTER& relates his work to McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in the

following passages from a 1967 interview with curator Dorothy Cameron that help to

explain his and NETCO's placement of art-as-information into the larger context of

culture and environment: "The world is made up of pieces of information of all kinds,

visual and sensory," and "All artists, all painters and sculptors are simply 'visual-sensory

informers:' people who handle our world's information...."[51]

These two sentences provide the McLuhanesque framework for BAXTER&'s

theory on art and the artist, and BAXTER& further explains his understanding of

information technologies and their shortcomings as follows:

> A fork, a car, a handle or a rock—all these things are information; and if
> you can get beyond the label-attitude you are able to see and experience
> all they contain. The label is what gets in the way of experience. Because
> an object is labeled a "glass," people simply see g-l-a-s-s. They do not see
> all the intrinsic potentials of "glass-ness": how the glass is a bubble; how
> it's a container that captures space; how it's a clear window into some
> other little world.... People don't go off into these various realms of magic
> and empathy, pure form and surrealism, because labeling has become what
> their appreciation of life *is*. They have lost their innocent way of looking
> and feeling: and they start drilling it out of their kids at the age of six.[52]

BAXTER& has thus absorbed the theories of McLuhan to develop his own philosophy

about art: how it should be defined, how it can be communicated and experienced, and he

integrates this with his desire to explore the world around him and present it to viewers in

order to elicit their own series of discoveries and "intrinsic potentials."

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[51] Iain Baxter, in the catalog entry for N.E. THING CO. in Dorothy Cameron, *Sculpture '67* (Toronto: The National Gallery of Canada, 1967), p. 84.

[52] Baxter, in Cameron, *Sculpture '67*, p. 84.

If, as McLuhan suggests, moveable type and the printing press altered North American culture's ways of communicating written and spoken language to such a great extent, then BAXTER& deems the camera as an analog to the press. It is a technological extension that has profoundly affected visual language. BAXTER& began relying on the camera while still working on his B.A. in Zoology, but he began using it an art context as a documenting device by 1967 in order to create what he calls a "visual dictionary."[53] BAXTER& sees the photograph as having become an extension of our visual communication to such an extent that it in many ways replaces actual visual experience and thus also becomes the locus of personal memory. In realization of photography's potential to classify and arrange memory and thought, BAXTER& conceptualizes this medium as the best tool for compiling this visual dictionary, a nonhierarchical index of anything and everything.

McLuhan's Acceptance by BAXTER&'s Pop Art Precedents and Conceptualist Contemporaries

Through his work, BAXTER& presents a highly refined understanding of McLuhan's media theory. While McLuhan's pronouncements on the effects of media on the social psyche should be considered in any reasoned understanding of N.E. THING CO's conceptual program, BAXTER& is not the only artist for whom McLuhan's ideas can serve as an interpretive tool. Just as McLuhan demonstrates a continuing awareness

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[53] Iain Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, in Val Greenfield, ed., *Iain Baxter, Instantaneous Response: Polaroid Photo Art* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1982), p. 14.

of contemporary art practice throughout his publications, it is clear that both Pop Art and Conceptual Art practitioners were aware of him. Even if they did not actively read and interpret his ideas to the extent that BAXTER& has, McLuhan's ideas were readily available to artists during the '60s. While an exhaustive survey of various Pop, Neo Dada and Conceptual direct references to McLuhan would be helpful to clarify whether his theories can be used as either a historical source for these artists (as they clearly are for BAXTER&) or an interpretive tool, such a task is beyond the scope of the present work. Instead, it needs only to clarify the popularity of McLuhan and his works throughout the 1960s, to summarize existing arguments drawing direct connections between artists and McLuhan, and to point out the convergences between his ideas and both Pop and Conceptual Art to underscore how BAXTER&'s representation of McLuhan is fundamental to the formation of his Pop-inflected Conceptual Art.

Coverage of McLuhan in widely read periodicals did not begin until after his publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which corresponds with the common dating of Pop Art's "beginning" in 1962. Reviews or articles published prior to 1962 that reference McLuhan's 1951 publication *The Mechanical Bride* are rare,[54] yet some art historians have made connections between Pop artists and the theorist's criticisms of the affective force underlying advertising's imagery and tag lines on cultural values. Art historian Michael Compton describes the meetings of the British Independent Group, whose

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[54] Two exceptions are: Thomas Carter, "The Pressure of Unreality," *The Hudson Review*, vol. 7 (Spring 1954): 97–103, and David L. Cohn's review of *The Mechanical Bride,* titled "A Touch of Humor Wouldn't Hurt," *The New York Times*, October 21, 1951. While *The Hudson Review* does not have the readership of *The New York Times* or *Harper's*, its status as a respected journal deserves mention here.

members initiated Pop Art's first manifestation, as being informed by McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride*, specifically its introductory claim that its featured ads and corresponding texts may be read in any order.[55] Art critics and historians Mark Francis and Hal Foster, in their review of Pop Art figures, works and precursors in *Pop* (2005) list McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* as a significant antecedent to Pop Art's presentation of mass-media imagery and echo Compton's claim regarding this text's importance to the Independent Group.[56]

 The Mechanical Bride was printed three times in 1951 (once each by Beacon Press in Boston, Vanguard Press in New York, and Routledge and Kegan Paul in London) but then remained out of print until 1967, when it went through at least four Beacon Press reprints from 1967 to 1969 and one each by Vanguard Press and Routledge and Kegan Paul. While McLuhan's writings did not receive extensive coverage in the press until the 1962 publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, it is clear that his ideas on the effects of advertising imagery and slogans—the overarching theme of *The Mechanical Bride*—are both a potential historical precedent and an interpretive tool for examining American Pop Art.

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[55] Michael Compton, "Pop Art in Britain," Andreas C. Papadakis, ed. *Pop Art*, exhibition catalog, (London: Royal Academy of Arts with *Art & Design*, 1992), p. 64.

[56] See Mark Francis and Hal Foster, eds., *Pop* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), pp. 61, 201–202. The claim of McLuhan's importance as a source for the Independent Group is further recalled by Richard Cavell in his text *McLuhan in Space*, where he cites art historian Margaret Garlake, *New Art, New World: British Art in Postwar Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 9, in which Garlake states that "the key book for the sharpest minds at the Royal College of Art in 1956-7 was not Jung or Sartre but was Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride*." Furthermore, Cavell states that McLuhan's influence could also be found in numerous British art periodicals by at least 1957. See Cavell, *McLuhan in Space*, p. 86, note 83, pp. 288–289.

Ad imagery and mass-media ephemera are the essential content of Pop Art, whose

practitioners alternately appropriated single commercial images as icons—Warhol's

Campbell Soup cans (fig. 10) and his Marilyn Monroes—and combined or altered

commercial imagery in a mosaic approach as in James Rosenquist's large-scale painting,

F-111 (1964–65) (fig. 11). Pop artists differ in their apparent stance toward their subject,

from critical to apologetic to apathetic, noncommittal, or nostalgic. Their approach of

recasting popular imagery into fine art, which opens it up to a wider awareness and

criticism, has a parallel in McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride*, which extracts specific

print ads to mine their content and show, for example, how their connotations affect such

cultural values as the assumed male and female roles and personae.

The connection between Pop Art and McLuhan goes beyond *The Mechanical*

Bride. His commentary on the power of film and television as profound agents of public

opinion, as well as his views of artists as interpreters of media's societal affect, are useful

in examining Pop Art. Warhol's fascination with the concept of public celebrity, as

foregrounded in both his series on Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, can be analyzed

through McLuhan's descriptions in *Understanding Media* on the power of film in the

creation of celebrity.[57] Roy Lichtenstein's re-creations of pulp comics can be understood

in relation to McLuhan's argument that the power of comics derives from their status as a

low-definition medium that demands active audience involvement to complete their

message. Warhol, Lichtenstein, and their Pop Art contemporaries confirm McLuhan's

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[57] Since Warhol began producing works that deal with this fascination in 1962 and *Understanding Media* was published two year later, this McLuhan text could not have been a source for Warhol's initial Pop works, although he was clearly aware of the Canadian theorist later in the decade.

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ideas when they appropriate mass culture imagery and translate it into another stage and

another medium, thereby creating what the Canadian theorist would recognize as a hybrid

medium. McLuhan argued that the power of the artist can be found in the practice of

hybridizing such media as fine art and establishing a pattern of media extensions by

reframing them into "make aware" situations that call viewers' attention to their effects.

An advertisement in a magazine does not call for any awareness of its medium's effect,

only its content—the message that can be summarized as "buy this product." In contrast,

a work of art requires viewers to engage both the medium and its content, thus

encouraging them to come to terms with its underlying message. When the content of art

is the hybridization of mass media's aspects into the field of fine art, the resulting work,

according to McLuhan, constitutes a powerful critique of these mass cultural forms.

McLuhan's ideas can be translated effortlessly into the multiple programs of Pop

artists, whether these artists were critical or noncommittal observers of the effects of

mass culture. Having become an actor on the Pop-cult stage, McLuhan was even deemed

a "Pop philosopher."[58] Perhaps the Pop label is reason enough for the difficulty

encountered in finding direct evidence of Conceptual artists actively employing

McLuhan's theory in their work and writings. While this section illustrates how several

artists understood and applied McLuhan's theories, other artists of the period appear to

have misunderstood him. Lawrence Weiner, whose work deals with the transformation of

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[58] The title of a lengthy interview by writer Eric Norden is "A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," *Playboy* 16 (March 1969): 26–27, 45, 55–56, 61, 63. Additionally, the editors of *Wired*, a periodical published since 1993 that treats the effects of technology on cultural and economic forces, have deemed McLuhan their patron saint.

objects accomplished through language, sees McLuhan as a reactionary, "attempting to take away … the one tool that the working class has now, which is the means to communicate by written language."[59]

Weiner misunderstands McLuhan's ideas about how new communications media, with their transformative effects on information exchange, could be applied to new pedagogical models. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan describes the affinity the youth of his day had with the televisual medium:

> As a simple consequence of this participational and do-it-yourself aspect of electronic technology, every kind of entertainment in the TV age favors the same kind of personal involvement. Hence the paradox that, in the TV age, Johnny can't read because reading, as customarily taught, is too superficial and consumerlike an activity…. The problem … is not that Johnny can't read, but that, in an age of depth involvement, Johnny can't visualize distant goals.[60]

McLuhan is expressing how new media's ability to condition human perception can be used in new educational models. He remains decidedly antihierarchical, for in his seemingly utopian vision of the global village, caste systems dematerialize into interchangeable roles. Language and literacy remain necessary components in this potential future awareness of the power media have in creating new patterns of information processing, but they are only part of the equation. McLuhan desires neither an anti-intellectual state, nor a separation of intellectual elite and illiterate Everyman, as Weiner understands it. Instead, McLuhan simply acknowledges a belief that young

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[59] Lawrence Weiner, interview with Irmelien Lebeer, "Red as well as Green as well as Yellow as well as Blue," *Having Been Said: Writings and Interviews of Lawrence Weiner, 1968–2003*, ed. Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Osttfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004), p. 69.

[60] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 168.

people, unburdened with adults' longer history of older communications media, have a deeper understanding of the transformative and participatory characteristics of new media. Because they do not experience psychological trauma in the face of new media, these new forms of communication should be integrated into educational strategies. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan traces a historical shift in pedagogical models when he describes how scholasticism changed from an oral dictation-and-manual production model to a faster paced visual mode. Prior to the development of moveable type, students spent their course time creating their own texts, writing out words recited by teachers. As printed books became more available, students no longer needed to make texts, which they could purchase, thus the processes of teaching shifted in relation to the new technology.[61] McLuhan was not attempting to distance the working class from written language as Weiner suggests; instead he desired a universal literacy in new communications media.

It is curious that Weiner misinterprets McLuhan, given the latter's view that "A work of art has no existence or function apart from its *effects* on human observers." This statement, as well as McLuhan's deviation from his New Criticism heritage by disregarding the affective fallacy, clearly relates to Weiner's oft-repeated dictum "Statement of Intent" (1969):

1. The Artist may construct the piece
2. The piece may be fabricated
3. The piece need not be built

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[61] See McLuhan, *The Gutenberg* Galaxy, pp. 93–114.

> Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as
> to condition rests with the receiver upon the condition of receivership.[62]

Weiner, like McLuhan, conceives of a low-definition art that the viewer/receiver

activates and completes. The art is a proposal conceived by the artist seeking to engage a

discursive examination of an informational system. Alberro suggests a stronger

connection between these two figures. Describing Weiner's *Propeller* series (1964) (fig.

12) of paintings, which resemble the TV test pattern of pie-shaped segments fanning out

from a circular hub, Alberro argues that Weiner's paintings "negated claims of

uniqueness and privileged forms of experience," and thus provide a new assessment of

acceptable fine art practice.[63] Rather than produce works that mined the subjective depths

of the artist's emotional sensibility, Weiner produces works that assume the critical roles

of Jasper John's *Flag* paintings, as well as motifs found in television in a similar way to

Warhol's images of commodity and celebrity. Although Alberro thoughtfully compares

Weiner's strategy to McLuhan's ideas about television's role in the collapsing of time

and space that initiates the formation of the global village as found in *The Medium is the*

Massage, Weiner's ideas can be seen as well through *Understanding Media*, which was

published in the same year Weiner created his *Propeller* series. Although McLuhan's

1967 text *The Medium is the Massage* describes his role for art as a translator or guide of

the common experience found within expanding electronic media, as well as artists' role

in providing discursive systems of work that allows viewers to come to grips with the

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[62] Lawrence Weiner, in *January 5–31, 1969*, exhibition catalog (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1969), n.p.

[63] Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), p. 86.

informational processes of their own time, these ideas were presented initially in

Understanding Media.

Some of Weiner's contemporaries engaged in similar conceptual practices that

view parallels between visual art and linguistic information, and they appear to have an

even clearer understanding of McLuhan. Alberro describes a connection between

Kosuth's conceptual practice and McLuhan and Fiore's *The Medium is the Massage*,

which acknowledges the informational environment of culture operating as art.[64]

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Kosuth initiated a strategy to remove art from its traditional

aesthetic foundation in order to pursue it as a practice that negotiates informational

systems. This strategy of recasting art's function as delineating information systems

rather than presenting subjective aesthetic content or sentimentality decisively parallels

McLuhan's notion of the artist's role. Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler, participating in

a 1969 radio-broadcast symposium with Weiner, Kosuth, and Robert Barry, described his

own art as follows:

> The language as information is absolutely necessary. Getting back to the
> space thing. The person who looks at a TV set in any room and watches
> the man in the spacecraft, or stepping on the moon, makes a literal jump
> that goes beyond any perceptual frame he could possibly have. Then there
> is the information that tells him that that picture is not contained in that
> frame; that picture is like 240,000 miles away, or however far the moon is,
> and it absolutely demands language. I don't think any of us jumping over
> into language are interested in pure information, or pure poetry, but it

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[64] Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, pp. 47–48. Alberro's frequent reference to *The Medium is the Massage* and the practice of Conceptual Art is informative and well-reasoned. This present study builds upon the connection Alberro notes by arguing that because these ideas are present in both *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, which predate the development of Conceptual Art, the connection between McLuhan and Conceptual Art practice is made more concrete.

> would be a kind of McLuhan world where we transcend the space that we
> can ordinarily perceive.[65]

In this passage, Huebler not only expresses his comprehension of McLuhan's theories, he

also suggests parallels between his and his colleagues' works and the readily available, if

often misunderstood, concepts McLuhan was expressing at this time. In fact, the catalog

for the seminal exhibition *Information* (1970), which featured numerous Conceptual

artists whom curator Kynaston McShine categorized as treating art as information or

concerned with it, includes five titles by McLuhan in its list of suggested reading.[66]

Despite the lack of critical investigations of McLuhan's important connection to

Conceptual Art, several aspects of his writings correspond with the general aims of those

artists operating within a Conceptual Art practice, including (1) his observation that all

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[65] "November 2, 1969, WBAI-FM, New York, "Art Without Space." A symposium moderated by Seth Siegelaub with Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Joseph Kosuth," program initiated by Jeanne Siegel, Art Programs Director of WBAI. "Excerpts," reprinted in *Having Been Said: Writings and Interviews of Lawrence Weiner, 1968–2003*, ed. Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Osttfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004), p. 32.

[66] The McLuhan texts are *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations* (1967), *Explorations in Communication: An Anthology* (coedited by McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter, 1960), and *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968), a text similar to *The Medium is the Massage* both for its content and layout as well as its production by McLuhan and Fiore and coordination by Jerome Agel. The list also includes a number of titles by Levi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind* [1966], *Structural Anthropology* [1963], *Tristes Tropiques* [1955 and 1968] and *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* [1964 and 1969]) and one by Wittgenstein (*Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* [1967]). Additionally, there are several texts on both game theory and systems theory (C. West Churchman's *The Systems Approach* [1968], Anatol Rapaport's *Two-Person Game Theory: The Essential Ideas* [1966] and *N-Person Game Theory: Concepts and Applications* [1969], and M. Shubeck's edition *Game Theory and Related Approaches to Social Behavior* [1964]). These texts, along with the rest of the list, reinforce the view of Conceptual Art as a highly academicized investigatory practice whose practitioner's interests range over a diverse array of topics beyond aesthetics. For the complete recommended reading list, see Kynaston McShine, ed. *Information* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), pp. 200–205. While not every artist included in this exhibition can be understood as "Conceptual," the overwhelming majority were. For a more detailed analysis of this exhibition, including a comparison between the art, the curator's organizational intent, and McLuhan's theoretical perspective, see Ken Allen "Understanding *Information*," in Corris, ed. *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, pp. 144–168.

media, from roads and currency to radio and television, translate products into systems of transferred information, and (2) his prescription that art investigate and record the changes produced by media as transmitters and, more importantly, transformers of this information. Additionally, the preference for drier aesthetic content common to much Conceptual Art further relates to McLuhan's observations on implications of vision's primacy in Western culture.

Due to many Conceptual artists' developing awareness of structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers from the mid- to late 1960s, and more importantly, to art historians' and critics' overwhelming preference for these approaches, Conceptual Art has been readily described and defined through these bodies of theory. This preference does not suggest, however, that this art can be defined solely through a structuralist or post-structuralist perspective. Nor can it be defined adequately through a combination of Marxist and Wittgensteinian perspectives.[67] While a more comprehensive examination of those artists who have a clearly identifiable and documented relationship with McLuhan is too large a task to undertake here, this chapter has nevertheless clarified that artists of the mid- to late 1960s were aware of McLuhan's communications theory, as well as outlined his major themes. It is pertinent to note that those artists whose reliance on McLuhan has been more clearly documented are largely Pop artists and Conceptualists

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[67] The desire to view Conceptual Art through both Marx and Wittgenstein was proposed largely by members of the British Art & Language group. See Corris's "Introduction: An Invisible College in an Anglo-American World," *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, p. 2–4, 14n.9.

such as the initially Toronto-based Les Levine[68] and IAIN BAXTER&. This connection

is not mere coincidence, for it indicates a further connection between Pop Art and the

development of some of the polyphony of voices defining Conceptual Art that have been

overlooked. Having described the framework of McLuhan's media theory and suggested

another connection between Pop Art and Conceptual Art, this study can now present the

works and major themes of IAIN BAXTER& and how they describe a Pop-inflected

Conceptual Art practice

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[68] Levine moved to New York from Toronto in 1964.

Chapter 2: BAXTER&'s pre-NETCO work and the Development of a New
McLuhanesque Hybrid

In his *The Times Victoria* review of IAIN BAXTER&'s first one-man show in

Canada (*Gas, Plastic & Bagged Works*), critic Jerry Boultbee lambastes the artist for his

inflated vinyl and vacuum-formed plastic works at in the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

by stating, "the work simply makes a mockery of 'art,' the artist and the gallery. Its total

effect is sort of lame."[1] Boultbee suggests that this sort of exhibition would find a more

receptive audience—and appear more "artful"—at a university or theatre. Such vehement

criticism of BAXTER& was also expressed by many reviewers in the local press across

Canada in the 1960s, and to a lesser extent, across North America throughout the 1960s

and '70s. Despite such censure, BAXTER&'s works (especially that completed under the

NETCO name) also garnered significant praise during this period. He was championed

by Lucy Lippard, who included NETCO in her 1973 compendium of Conceptual Art, *Six*

Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966–1972, and two versions of her most

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[1] Jerry Boultbee, "Display Mockery of Art, Gallery," *The Times Victoria*, March 9, 1966, n.p. This article is reproduced in *N.E. THING CO. LTD.*, vol.1 (Vancouver: N.E. THING CO, 1978), n.p., which is a xerographic compendium of works and published information about the company and its copresidents, IAIN BAXTER& and Ingrid Baxter. This large volume, while exceedingly hard to find due to its limited edition of 500 copies, served as NETCO's entry for Jean-Christophe Amman's 1978 exhibition of Canadian artists at the Kunsthalle Basel and continues to be one of the richest sources documenting NETCO's exceedingly large scope of works.

influential exhibition—*577, 087* (Seattle Art Museum, 1969), and *950,000* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1970). Both he and NETCO were featured in several seminal Conceptual Art exhibitions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, show *Art by Telephone* (1969), as well as the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Information* and the New York Cultural Center show *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (both 1970). In addition, Seth Siegelaub exhibited his art, and Joseph Kosuth referred to his work in his seminal essay "Art after Philosophy."[2]

The disparity between praise and condemnation that these reviews and citations reveal is not remarkable in and of itself, but it is referenced here to suggest that these works clearly require a more careful reading to understand why this disparity exists. This study will propose the idea that BAXTER&'s consistent desire to inject humor and an outwardly satirical appearance to his work—the reason behind many of his detractors' statements—is strongly connected to his appreciation of Pop Art and remains one of his essential contributions to Conceptual Art. Whereas such Conceptual artists as Kosuth, Weiner, and the members of Art & Language have been lauded for their work's rigorous, intellectual approach and dry-aesthetic, BAXTER& presents works that mask their critical rigor with layers of satire and parody. To develop an understanding of how BAXTER& developed his divergent, Pop-inflected Conceptual Art, this chapter will focus on his work prior to the formation of N.E. THING CO. These pieces are his first

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[2] "Art after Philosophy" was a three-part essay featured in *Studio International* from October to December 1969. Kosuth refers to BAXTER& in the second installment of this essay, subtitled "'Conceptual Art' and Recent Art," where he includes him in his list of relevant Conceptual artists by stating: "The Canadian Iain Baxter has been doing a 'conceptual' sort of work since late 1967." See Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, Part II" *Studio International* 178 (November 1969): 161.

Pop-derived hybrids, and they incorporate his emerging understanding of McLuhan's communication theory and Zen Buddhism that serves as the foundation for his distinctive type of Conceptual Art.

As noted in the introduction, five generative principles, which are apparent throughout IAIN BAXTER&'s work, are frequently interwoven in individual pieces that express this artist's goal of presenting his work as a communicative mirror of everyday life and his observation of it. In order to illustrate BAXTER&'s multivalent, epistemological critique of art with respect to both its definition and its ability to convey meaning, his art will be examined through these principles. They are: (1) BAXTER&'s study of Buddhism that led him to investigate the aesthetic potential of the apparently banal emptiness of the everyday; (2) his ecological perspective, which he used to develop a view of the landscape as infoscape, a realm comprising not only natural forms but also information; (3) his McLuhanesque experimentation with both artistic and technological media; (4) a desire to view art as a communicative medium that is closely allied to verbal or written language, and inclusive of it; and (5) his attempts to recast his artistic role both linguistically and symbolically through the use of pseudonyms.

Rather than run repetitively through these principles in five descriptive lists, this chapter will focus on BAXTER&'s solo works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the cooperative partnership IT of 1966, and the N.E. Baxter Thing Co. of 1966–67 to demonstrate how he harnesses diverse influences presented in these five principles, to develop a critically risky, broad range of approaches that inform the fully developed Conceptual Art produced by N.E. THING CO. Because the focus is on IAIN BAXTER&,

this chapter will unfortunately only include a cursory examination of the contributions of Ingrid Baxter. She was a collaborative partner to BAXTER& in both life (they were married from 1959 to 1978) and art (she was a member of IT and copresident of NETCO). Her role as cocreator of the work ended with the break-up of their marriage. She summed up her role in the following manner: "As the ideas flew back and forth, then we just developed them. Iain did most of the actual production of works, and I would consult or insult, whatever I felt like or the project needed."[3] Her account of her participation appears modest, but NETCO was engaged in producing Conceptual Art whose physical element supported the more significant informational and ideational content. Because of the importance of conversation within this collaboration, a full study of her exact contribution needs to be undertaken in the future.[4]

Educational Background and an Introduction to IAIN BAXTER&'s Approach to Buddhism

   Unlike many Conceptual artists, IAIN and Ingrid Baxter did not come from an undergraduate art background. Ingrid Baxter's major undergraduate field of study at the University of Idaho was music, with a minor in physical education. During college, she

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[3] Ingrid Baxter, interview with Grant Arnold, 5 May 2009. A video recording of this interview may be found at http://www.vancouverartinthesixties.com/interviews/ingrid-baxter (accessed 8 January 2011). Furthermore, this division of labor is presented in Lisa Balfour Bower, "Peering through the 'Gates of Perception.'" *Toronto Star*, 6 February 1982, F5; as well as by IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 19, 2008.

[4] The most complete account of IAIN and Ingrid Baxter's creative process is found in Fleming, *Baxter²*, 1986, pp. 9–10.

was a competitive member of an exhibition diving team and an integral part of a

synchronized swimming team that garnered frequent mention in the local press.[5] She also

set up swimming safety programs for community pools in Spokane, Washington, and

Moscow, Idaho. After the dissolution of NETCO in 1978, she earned a Master's in

Education (University of British Columbia, 1981) and later established Deep Cove Canoe

and Kayak, a popular kayak rental and guide business in Vancouver, B.C.

IAIN BAXTER& shares a competitive sports background with his first wife. Prior

to enrolling at the University of Idaho in 1955, he was Alberta's Junior Champion in

skiing, but his competitive career ended when he broke his neck in a car accident.

BAXTER& considers this serious setback and his rehabilitation as a major defining

moment in his life, leading to a strong sense of individualism. He left his home in

Calgary to attend the first year of college in the United States while still wearing a leather

neck brace, and ultimately he decided not to use this experience as an excuse for

introversion and timidity but rather to turn it into a motivator for pursuing anything

piquing his curiosity.[6] He came to art through undergraduate studies in zoology. Trained

in this form of comparative biology, BAXTER& illustrated the first field guide for the

northern Rocky Mountains, a text that continues to be useful for those working in this

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[5] Synchronized swimming was popularized largely through the actress Esther Williams, whose 1940s and 1950s films typically featured this Olympic sport that merges swimming and synchronized dancing. See N.E. THING CO., *N.E. THING CO. LTD.*, vol. 1 (Vancouver: N.E. THING CO., 1978), n.p. for a series of newspaper clippings related to Baxter's participation in these two sports teams' activities.

[6] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 18, 2008.

field.[7] This experience led him to study art largely on his own. He became aware of the paintings of Morris Graves (1910–2001) and Mark Tobey (1890–1976), who both lived in Seattle, Wash. Coming to maturity in the 1940s, they drew upon their interest in Buddhist spirituality to create gestural abstractions based in part on wildlife scenes from the Pacific Northwest and Japanese calligraphy.[8]

While the works of Graves and Tobey clearly appealed to BAXTER&, their understanding of Zen made the greatest impact on his later art. BAXTER&'s study of these artists led him to pursue other available sources on Zen Buddhism, such as those by D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. Beginning in the late 1920s and continuing until 1959, Suzuki published at least seven books and collections of essays in English on his interpretation of Zen, and his accomplishments are recognized as the foundation of North American interest in this Eastern belief system. Suzuki has often been criticized for his

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[7] William Baker, Earl Larrison, Charles Yocum, and Iain Baxter, *Wildlife of the Northern Rocky Mountains* (Healdsburg, CA: Naturegraph, 1961). Prior to this, BAXTER& illustrated the essay of his undergraduate professor at the University of Idaho, Moscow, Earl Larrison, titled "The Squirrels of Idaho," *Journal of Idaho Academy of Science* vol. 1(January 1960): 41–62. BAXTER& served as art director for the first issue of this journal and designed the cover, mastheads, and decorative elements that are found throughout the publication. According to a newspaper clipping, presented without citation in *N.E. THING CO. LTD.* (1978), this journal was aimed at a general as well as a scholarly audience.

[8] BAXTER&, telephone interview with the author, March 27, 2006. Tobey was also interested in the Bahá'í Faith and converted to it in 1918. While his series of paintings known as *White Writings* undoubtedly has other sources, he spent time throughout the 1920s and '30s studying Chinese and Zen calligraphy. His work has received serious critical study, but requires future analysis, especially since he has had a profound impact on such later artists as BAXTER& and John Cage. Currently, a small group of European art historians are working on a catalogue raisonné. This group, calling themselves the Committee Mark Tobey, have established the informative Web site http://www.cmt-marktobey.net (accessed 26 January 2011).
Graves and Tobey, along with fellow artists Guy Anderson and Kenneth Callahan, have been described as "The Northwest School" due to their common interests in the Pacific Northwest, especially the Puget Sound area, as well as their similarities in medium and approach to expressions of this region's landscape and wildlife. The most recent and well-researched examination of the so-called "Northwest School" is Sheryl Conkelton and Laura Landau, *Northwest Mythologies: The Interactions of Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson* (Seattle and London: Tacoma Art Museum, in association with University of Washington Press, 2003).

nontraditional approach to Zen. His view of this philosophy is tied to what has been termed "New Buddhism," which seeks to open up Zen practice to the laity by subverting the necessity of continuous, focused study and monastic discipline in order to make it more relevant to everyday life. New Buddhism originated in the Meiji period (1868–1912), during which time Japanese government propaganda sought to denounce Buddhism as a corrupt foreign influence on the nation's spiritual health. New Buddhism is a response to this government policy designed to modernize and humanize the ancient practice.[9]

Watts became one of the most popular sources for a Western understanding of Buddhism and Zen due to his lecture series, including his radio broadcasts (1953–1973) produced while teaching at the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. Watts was introduced initially to Zen through Suzuki's texts, yet hybridized it with other world traditions and negated the necessity of meditative practice and ritual altogether in order to attain enlightenment. Because BAXTER& was introduced to this view of Zen, all subsequent descriptions of Zen and BAXTER&'s use of the philosophy will be that which Suzuki and Watts described and advocated.

BAXTER& subscribed to aspects of these popularized Buddhist practices— particularly the concepts of the mirror as void, the reduction of the ego, the acceptance of the process of transformation or change and its concomitant dependence on a strategy of

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[9] For more on Suzuki and his alteration of Buddhism into an experiential doctrine, see Robert Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42 (October 1995): 228–283; and James Heisig and John Maraldo, eds. *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

an open-ended and all-encompassing education rather than a reliance on a single text—in

his investigations of art as the mirror-void of the everyday. The concept of the void is a

key component of Zen practice, as with all Mahayana Buddhism. Symbolized by the

mirror, the void does not signify emptiness per se, but the transience and impermanence

of the world and all its constituent elements. In his lecture "The World as Emptiness,"

Watts describes the void as being the sum of everything, the space between all things,

rather than nothingness. He clarifies that the use of the mirror in Buddhist imagery as a

metaphor for the void arises "because a mirror has no color and yet reflects all colors."

He notes that the void, as a description of reality, constitutes the spaces between all

things but is also a metaphor for the absolute self: the mind acts ultimately as a mirror

that continually reflects what it faces while having no true form of its own, and thus is

freed from self-reflection.[10] As this study will show, BAXTER& mixed these lectures

with his readings of Dr. Suzuki, and these Zen attitudes served as a source for

BAXTER&'s mirrors in his NETCO and post-NETCO photographic works.

After enrolling in the Master of Education program at the University of Idaho,

BAXTER& received a Japanese government travel grant to work with Kyoto-based

artists. The grant was designed to span two academic years from 1961 to 1963.

BAXTER&'s first year was to be spent in an intensive language course in Kyoto with

other grant recipients. After completing this course, students moved to other institutions

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[10] Alan Watts' lecture "The World as Emptiness," is part of the public-broadcast lecture series produced at the KPFA in Berkeley in 1953. Many of these lectures are available in .mp3 format through http://www.alanwatts.com, and some, including "The World as Emptiness," are available in transcription at http://deoxy.org/w_world.htm.

in Kyoto to spend the second year studying their individual fields. Due to a strong desire

to interact with his immediate surroundings, BAXTER& boycotted the structured

environment of the course and left the first-year language class in order to break out on

his own, found employment and housing as well as located places to make and exhibit his

work.[11] He returned to the University of Washington for the fall 1962 term, well before

completing his two years in Japan, so that he could continue graduate study in education

and be with his wife and their newborn son, Tor, whose name is derived from the

Buddhist term satori, which Suzuki defines as "an intuitive looking into the nature of

things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it

means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a

dualistically-trained mind."[12] Despite having no undergraduate art background,

BAXTER& then convinced the University of Washington Art Department to accept him

into its Master of Fine Arts program. In 1964, after completing graduate work in painting,

he received a teaching position on the arts faculty at the University of British Columbia.

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[11] The story of BAXTER&'s travels in Japan are telling for their illustration of how he developed his willingness to make his own path, as well as his ability to make connections with people from various avenues of life in order to survive. BAXTER& recounted his travels in an interview with the author, November 17, 2008, which can be found in the *IAINBAXTER&raisonnE* research and archive site at *http://archives.library.yorku.ca/iain_baxterand_raisonne/items/show/1627*.

The Art Gallery of Ontario houses BAXTER&'s personal archive. Within this collection is BAXTER&'s notebook, which dates from 1961, documenting his travels to Kyoto that is organized in sections labeled "painting," "architecture," etc. Although BAXTER& claims the irony is unintentional, the section labeled "Zen" is entirely blank.

[12] D.T. Suzuki, "On Satori—The Revelation of a New Truth in Zen Buddhism," *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)*, reprint of the 1949 original (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 230. Suzuki's characterization of satori as intuitive, rather than analytical, parallels BAXTER&'s presentation of his art method as intuitive rather than rigorously theoretical (despite his acceptance of McLuhan's theory). Interview with BAXTER&, November 18, 2008. Tor was born during the Boy's Festival while the Baxters were in Japan.

BAXTER& attributes his success as an artist to his introduction to Buddhist thought, his resourcefulness that made both his studies and his travel in Japan possible, and his and Ingrid Baxter's initial self-taught approach to becoming artists. In addition, he cites as important both his understanding of ecological processes and willingness to step outside of convention to find new ways of approaching, defining and presenting art.[13]

Although BAXTER&'s assimilation of a Buddhist outlook is a fundamental aspect of his approach, it has only been mentioned in passing in the literature on his work and consequently has never been understood as a major factor in the development of his mature work.[14] However, Zen's emphasis on everyday existence and its commonplace activities as a source for satori does parallel BAXTER&'s focus on the mundane and everyday aspects of his own consumerist society.[15] When he produces viewer-oriented works, he offers possibilities for an audience to gain insight into this reality without being misdirected by existing ideological frameworks that serve to separate both them and parts of their lives into isolated fragments. The concept of ideology as a divisive force is shared by both Zen Buddhism, which views it as something to overcome in order to attain enlightenment, and McLuhan's media theory, which maintains that it clouds people's

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[13] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 18, 2008.

[14] One source that specifically mentions BAXTER&'s consideration of Buddhism is Marie Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), p. 11.

[15] While consumerism is frequently referred to as a doctrine of protection of consumers, all references here refer to this term's alternate meaning, which connotes the "doctrine advocating a continual increase in the consumption of goods as a basis for a sound economy." *OED*, *s.v.* "consumerism." This doctrine was developed in the early 1960s as a countermeasure to waves of economic recession found throughout American history.

view of the reality lurking behind the culture of innovative technological gadgetry.

Throughout his art production, beginning in 1964 and continuing to the present,

BAXTER& has developed a series of sub-aesthetic presentations that require viewers to

investigate and determine the possible meaning of individual works. Instead of creating

objects of conventional aesthetic interest that viewers passively receive, BAXTER&

presents objects and scenes that not only display non-art appearances but also foreground

such banal aspects of consumer culture as plastic containers or toys, empty stretches of

roadsides and industrial settings. By presenting viewers with such seemingly

uninteresting subject matter within the context of fine art, BAXTER& devises

frameworks for the potential realization that the mundane may be worthy of concentrated

consideration. In such sub-aesthetic subject matter, BAXTER& develops a new aesthetic

category, just as Kosuth did in his series of *Definitions* (fig. 7), which are cut-out

dictionary definitions affixed to index cards and then represented visually in art contexts

as Photostats.[16] The style BAXTER& developed in his Cibachrome lightboxes, for

example, became a major precedent for such later Vancouver artists working within a

photoconceptualist framework as Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Rodney Graham and Stan

Douglas, former BAXTER& students who are typically grouped together as "the

Vancouver School of Photoconceptualism." Given BAXTER&'s professed interest in

Buddhism, it is surprising that no study of his works has suggested that their sub-

aesthetic reflections of the everyday enable them to operate in a manner akin to *kōans*,

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[16] These works are also known by their formal titles, *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*.

Zen riddles or linguistic games with no real answers.[17] The *kōan* is a discursive problem,

open to interpretation and designed to instill in students, who successfully cope with a

given *kōan*'s contradiction, a measure of *kensho*, or awareness of the true self that

Suzuki's brand of Zen views as a momentary phenomenon.[18]

Zen's realization of the beauty inherent in processes of erosion and destruction is

also featured in BAXTER&'s early work. The BAXTER& pre-NETCO piece that most

clearly foregrounds this strategy is his performance of *2 Tons of Ice Sculpture: Beauty*

through Destruction, Disintegration and Disappearance, completed for the 1964 Festival

of the Contemporary Arts on the University of British Columbia campus (fig. 13). For

this performance piece, the first ever presented in Vancouver, BAXTER& assembled

blocks of ice in a minimalist arrangement of cubic structures. Armed with a pair of

welder's goggles, an acetylene torch and a selection of knives and cleavers, he rendered

the ice blocks into shards and a large puddle of water.

Two analytical frameworks essential for considering this work are: (1) it enacted a

Zen aesthetic of destruction, and (2) it inverted the Maurice Merleau-Pontian

phenomenological approach of embodied perception then being developed by such

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[17] Art historian and critic Robert Morgan, in his essay "Art Koans: Zen and the Tao in Conceptual Art" (2001–2003, revised 2008), draws parallels between the *kōan*, as defined by Suzuki, and an expanded definition of the "conceptual" in art. The artists he specifically mentions are Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. While he points to the possibility of using a Zen perspective for interpreting the intuitive and non-conventional approaches of Conceptual artists, Morgan's larger purpose in this essay is to expand what he sees as the dogmatic, self-imposed limitations of criticism. See http://www.brooklynrail.org/2009/02/artseen/art-koans-zen-and-the-tao-in-conceptual-art.

[18] See Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," p. 23. Sharf maintains that the concept of kensho is not historically a momentary occurrence, nor is it traditionally sanctioned as a "phenomenological reduction" of an "unmediated experience." In more traditional sects of Buddhism, which are at odds with the version of New Buddhism that Suzuki and his followers have popularized, both *kensho* and satori are "used to denote the comprehension and appreciation of central Buddhist tenets as emptiness, Buddha nature, or dependent origination."

Minimalists as Morris. The extended title of this performance clearly indicates

BAXTER&'s desire to foreground the process of transformation inherent in the process

of destruction. His study of Zen and its acceptance and appreciation of the natural

processes of erosion and disintegration enabled him to consider its principles in this

piece's design. Such processes correlate with the dynamic cycle of growth/death and

creation/deterioration occurring in nature and can be understood within a Zen outlook as

a metaphor for humanity's place within the natural world. In his creative/destructive

work, BAXTER& highlighted part of this cycle: although the blocks of ice were broken

down, their destruction enabled them to assume new forms.

  2 Tons of Ice revised the phenomenological approach that asks viewers to engage

actively and physically with the work and to become aware of the ensuing space in which

both the art object and viewer are intertwined. Instead of requiring viewers to

perambulate around the work, BAXTER& made the ice—the object component of this

performance—extend into the viewers' space by turning it into a puddle of water that

soaks the ground on which they stand. Furthermore, his participatory piece allowed

others to assist in the destruction of the large ice blocks.

  Performance-based art that foregrounds the work's own destruction existed before

BAXTER&'s *2 Tons of Ice*. Swiss artist Jean Tinguely created such kinetic sculptures as

Homage to New York (1960) (fig. 14) and *Study for the End of the World No. 2* (1962)

(fig. 15), which destroyed themselves in the process of their performance, and were

enacted at the Museum of Modern Art and the desert surrounding Las Vegas,

respectively. Although these works precede *2 Tons of Ice*, BAXTER& contributed to this

category by using handcraft methods as a destructive rather than constructive process. Traditional pieces of sculpture are created through a subtractive method of carving or an additive method of assembly. Both methods necessitate the use of hand or power-operated tools by artists and assistants to create the works. In order to be completed, *2 Tons of Ice* relied instead on handcraft for its destruction. Whereas Tinguely designed and constructed his Rube Goldberg-esque, kinetic sculptures so that they would demolish themselves, BAXTER&'s work demanded that he, and any willing accomplices, reduce his ice block assembly to fragments and a puddle of water. Thus, BAXTER& developed and presented a wry parody of traditional art practice by requiring the artist and viewers to actively destroy rather than construct an art object in order to establish a new discursive framework for it. This inversion, whereby creation becomes destruction, is the real innovative work that this performance piece enacted.

Despite his early introduction to Buddhism, BAXTER&'s pre-NETCO art rarely exhibits his reliance on this Eastern worldview as straightforwardly as *2 Tons of Ice*. Instead, the majority of BAXTER&'s early work presents these ideas obliquely. Much of BAXTER&'s early work tends to focus on consumable objects. While his critiques of mass consumerism are closely related to his investigation of seemingly inconsequential and commonplace events and sites such as empty roadside views or industrial settings (subject matter that he would pursue extensively through NETCO and after) that correlate with his appreciation of Zen Buddhism, these works are more recognizable as extensions of Pop Art modes. Furthermore, BAXTER&'s early use of pseudonyms, one of the five basic principles that this study tracks throughout his work, has a parallel in his

understanding of the Buddhist concept of negating the personal ego in order to allow for a reconsideration of one's actual place in existence.

Plastic Commodities and the Initial Pop Impulse

In 1964, the same year BAXTER& accepted a teaching appointment in the Fine Arts Department at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, he gave up his Hard-edge painting style to embrace Pop and minimalist-inspired modes, using the industrial processes of vacuum-formed plastics and inflated vinyl structures. The year of his appointment to the faculty at UBC is furthermore noteworthy as the beginning of his awareness of McLuhan's theories on how media can process content into information and how this phenomenon produces corresponding shifts in human thought in both individual and collective worldviews. Although BAXTER& had not yet articulated his concept of the everyday realm as both a physical space and an infoscape, these plastic and vinyl pieces represent his inauguration of this idea.

The plastic and vinyl pieces BAXTER& created from 1964 to 1967, as well as his more recent though infrequent use of these media, can be categorized into the traditional art genres of still life and landscape. Yet their medium and execution convey BAXTER&'s preference for creating games out of art as well as his growing concern for art to participate in a wider cultural sphere by critiquing consumerism. Due to his background in comparative biology, BAXTER& was well-versed in examining a subject through its relation to larger ecological systems. He applied this system-based

investigative methodology to his art production to discern how fine art operates relative to popular culture. Rather than viewing the realm of fine art as autonomous and separate from the large, diverse field of mass culture, he sought to identify as well as communicate how art exists as a component of a far larger sphere of commodities and information exchange.

BAXTER& began using the vacuum forming process slightly prior to working with inflated vinyl. In these works, BAXTER& placed objects between rigid sheets of plastic, which are heat-sealed and vacuum-pressed in a machine that operates in a manner akin to contemporary food sealers. The objects inserted in these pieces vary from bottle openers to paintbrushes to wire mesh, but the objects most commonly placed in these works are one or more bottles. While BAXTER& has employed glass bottles as molds for these works, the majority of the bottle-molded vacuum-form pieces feature such plastic containers as those used for cleaning products or beverages (fig. 16). These works create an additional, resonant layer to his criticism of commodity culture because they are plastic encapsulations of mass-produced plastic forms, which BAXTER& has called "the common pottery of today."[19]

His frequent use of these bottles in their varied arrangements derives from his interest in Italian painter Giorgio Morandi's quiet, architectonic arrangements of bottles

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[19] See BAXTER&, interview with Bruce Ferguson, in IAIN BAXTER&, interview with Bruce Ferguson, in Val Greenfield, ed., *Iain Baxter, Instantaneous Response: Polaroid Photo Art* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1982), p. 9.

and pitchers from the mid-1910s until his death in 1964 (fig. 17).[20] In his numerous still

lifes of bottles, Morandi explored many arrangements of the same objects, and through

his style and palette developed an ambiguous figure-ground relationship that served to

flatten out the space of the picture plane. BAXTER& became aware of Morandi during

his Master of Fine Arts studies, when he and one of his professors, Gaylen Hansen,

would set up systemic arrangements of everyday objects and attempt to explore all the

possible variations.[21] BAXTER& hybridized the formal qualities of Morandi's still lifes

by converting them into a permutational game of possible arrangements, similar to Sol

LeWitt's Minimalist works with open-ended and incomplete cubes. In his search to

define all possible formats and appearances of a still life arrangement, BAXTER&

initiated his investigations of the seemingly banal, non-art look that typifies much of his

photographic work with N.E. THING CO.

In his vacuum-formed plastic still lifes of bottles, BAXTER& created a game of

making art from everyday objects. To fabricate these works, BAXTER& used plastic and

glass bottles as molds, which are formed by cutting the container and filling it with rigid

foam or plaster so that it will retain its shape in the forming process. A thick sheet of

plastic is heated and pressed over the arranged objects, and then mounted to a backing,

typically made from another thick plastic sheet. Frequently BAXTER& then removed the

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[20] IAIN BAXTER& is not the only Conceptual artist who has expressed interest in Morandi's work. Robert Irwin also appreciated Morandi's systemic work for its modernist characteristics. For more on Giorgio Morandi, see Janet Abramowicz, *Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[21] Marie Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works*, exhibition catalog (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), p. 11.

object that forms the mold so that a void is left in place of the bottle (fig. 18). The plastic sheeting may be clear or colored, and in some instances it is painted after the pressing process.

By utilizing the vacuum-form medium to produce what are essentially still lifes of household goods, BAXTER& created works that oscillate between being art and resembling product display. Now nearly ubiquitous in creating the clam-shell product containers for store displays, widely despised for being difficult to open, the vacuum-forming process was originally devised for consumer products. It is surprising to note that no one has thought to ask the artist about his initial impulse to work in this medium, or if they did, found it significant enough to relate. In a 2008 interview with the author, BAXTER& recounts the story of a trip to a gas station in 1964, where he noticed an advertisement for Champion spark plugs made from this vacuum-form process. His interest in the sign encouraged him to find a local business that would allow him to use its press.[22] This original commercial use of vacuum-forming is not lost on BAXTER&, who chose it and his molded bottles, which were originally designed to hold consumable goods, to create opportunities for interaction between the art sphere and mainstream culture: placing a bleach or milk bottle in front of viewers brings to mind connections between the world of fine art and the realms of consumer products and industrial design. BAXTER& recognizes that art, as a product displayed in an art gallery, bears a parallel relationship to consumable objects displayed in a store.

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[22] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 16, 2008.

While the vacuum-form works did not garner as much critical condemnation as the inflated vinyl pieces, they are extraordinarily radical in presenting a categorically new non-art look. Works in this series distill consumerism into outwardly mute presentations, since they are clear molds of unlabelled plastic containers. Lacking the contextual references to specific products that typify Pop Art dialogues, they carry the potential for disregard by critics and viewers alike—except for their bright colors, they are not as visually arresting as the Pop Art images that were still fairly new to a viewing public in 1965, especially in the far west locale of Vancouver, a city still enamored with the naturalistic painting styles of such regional favorites as the painter Emily Carr. Furthermore, they carry little to suggest a framework for visual analysis to viewers unfamiliar with artworks designed to incite epistemological inquiry. Rather than presenting objects for viewers' visual delight, these works exhibit BAXTER&'s understanding of Zen coupled with his desire to critique both North American consumerism and normative definitions of fine art through commercial packaging. The vacuum forms enclose a shifting number of voids—some of these present empty bottles while other pieces have been further emptied of the original containers, thus creating a double void. These multiple, literal subtractions become ironic positions that construct another metaphoric void because, as vacuum forms, they ultimately shut out their ability to frame an autonomous object, the sine qua non of fine art. In doing so, they become gratuitous objects critiquing their own candidacy for being regarded as art. In this way, BAXTER& parodies art's autonomy and gratuitousness at the same time that he pointedly and ironically emphasizes that it is only an empty wrapper for a product or

function long-removed from the work, i.e. religious iconography, cultic value, etc.

Considering how these works construct meaning while presenting multiple voids, they

serve as significant markers in BAXTER&'s shift from object-centered production to

Conceptual Art documentation, and they need to be recognized for their place in the

dialogues BAXTER& creates across his works and those by other artists.

This strategy has an obvious antecedent in Andy Warhol's series of silkscreen

paintings of consumer products, exemplified by his Campbell soup cans. Beginning in

1962, Warhol produced a series of these paintings featuring this iconic yet ubiquitous

condensed soup. The initial series consisted of 32 individual canvases—each featuring a

single can of a particular variety of the soup. While these works were initially intended as

single images, Warhol began producing such multiple images aligned in grids as *100

Cans* (fig. 10), *S&H Green Stamps* (fig. 20), and *192 One Dollar Bills* (fig. 21), all made

that same year.[23]

Both BAXTER& and Warhol used a medium recalling an industrial process to

present consumer products individually and in series. Warhol's silk screening technique

has been interpreted as part of his core strategy due to his frequently noted desire to be a

machine, to reduce the interaction of the artist in the production—and more importantly,

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[23] Art historian Kirk Varnedoe, in his essay "Campbell's Soup Cans, 1962" recounts the decision by Irving Blum, the owner of the Los Angeles–based Ferus Gallery in which Warhol's first soup can canvases were shown in July 1962, to display the works in a linear arrangement on a shallow shelf applied to the wall to parody and reinforce the viewer's connection between the fine art imagery and a supermarket display strategy. See this essay in Heiner Bastian, ed., *Andy Warhol Retrospective*, American reprint of the English edition (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), pp. 40–45. While Varnedoe correctly implies that Blum's actions as collaborator changed the "initial logic" of the works, Warhol's work in a grid or serial array is well documented through not only his many grid-based, consumer product, and celebrity "portraiture" works from 1962, but also the drawing of matches in a grid pattern (dated c. 1957) featured in the same catalog as Varnedoe's essay.

the production of meaning—of art.[24] While Warhol's work is populated by banal images

of consumerist products and celebrity, BAXTER& takes this strategy in the direction of

an extreme reduction of aesthetic content and presentation of familiar objects that do not

bear the product labels that produce the iconic effect of the Warhol cans. By removing

this content from the resulting work, BAXTER& prevents the distracting reference of the

label from interfering with his criticism. Whereas clear brand recognition was part of

Warhol's strategy, BAXTER& is presenting a more direct approach through his even

more banal aesthetic designed to obviate the imagery underlying consumer culture.

Warhol parodies the realm of advertising and graphic design, and BAXTER& explores

the modern material, plastic, and its ubiquity in packaging and display. By removing the

context of labels from the bottle forms and voids, BAXTER& presents the object of

consideration itself in a way that clearly relates to McLuhan's message behind the

medium. Here transparent modern packaging for modern products is presented in an art

context that parallels consumer displays through its similar presentation methods—a

grouping of art objects/products aligned on a wall ready for consumption.

Works such as these vacuum-formed objects traverse and redirect the original

intent of the Duchampian readymade not only because of the framing apparatus of the

vacuum-formed plastic sheeting but also because of the fact that in many of these pieces,

the original product container no longer resides in the void-form created during their

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[24] For an early reference to Warhol's machinic desire, see Paul Bergin, "Andy Warhol: The Artist as Machine," *Art Journal* 26 (Summer 1967): 359–363. Two of the more insightful observations of Warhol's potential strategies include Thierry de Duve, "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected," translated by Rosalind Krauss, *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 3–14, and Benjamin Buchloh's 1989 essay "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966," reprinted in Annette Michelson ed., *Andy Warhol* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 1–48.

construction. Unlike Duchamp's strategy of temporarily placing such items as a bottle rack or urinal on display in a fine art setting and later returning these items to their original purpose, BAXTER&'s empty vacuum-formed works exist as indexical traces or remnants of not only the original container, but also mass culture's consumerism. It is surprising that another key aspect of these works has yet to be discussed—that each of the bottles serving as forms for these works are in fact found objects. BAXTER& notes that he would look for these containers in the trash and use them in whatever state he found them, whether crushed or not.[25] He thus creates a wry joke with these works by presenting a culture's trash as a fine art mirror. Such works as these literalize Pop Art investigations of commodity fetishism by creating double-veiled mirrors of clear plastic—one of the ultimate mid-century modern commercial materials. Unlike Pop presentations of mediated imagery of celebrity or consumer brands, however, BAXTER&'s vacuum forms represent their subjects using the same industrial material and process—vacuum-formed hard plastic. These works confound subject and object through a radical self-reflexivity that is eminently tautological.

While the vacuum-formed still lifes that incorporate a single mold appear at times like small Pop-era altarpieces (fig. 19), the works that include multiple bottles or objects reinforce their consumer display origins. In them, viewers are presented with multiples, objects packaged together for easy consumption. In both types of these works, BAXTER& presents viewers with distillations of industrial design, marketing strategies, and fine art in terms of the containers' mix of organic and geometric forms, and thus

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[25] IAIN BAXTER&, telephone interview with the author, April 7, 2010.

drives home the interrelatedness of modernist art and product design. Both are vehicles, or rather vessels, for communication that ultimately speak not simply to viewers but also to consumers, enticing them to buy one product over another based largely upon the temptations of its packaging and its reputation.

BAXTER& recognized early on that art's function is the translation and presentation of information. With these vacuum-formed still lifes, he continues to perceive art as a communication system but adds an element of cultural critique to his message through the parallels he draws between art works and quotidian consumer products. These two aspects of his art—its power to communicate and its critical though often humorous messages—characterize BAXTER&'s solo pieces as well as his subsequent work with N.E. THING CO. The vacuum-formed plastic still lifes incorporate a readily apparent Pop aesthetic in their reliance on repackaging consumer products in a fine art framework. These works should, however, be viewed as BAXTER&'s proto-conceptualist work because they are insistent on their status as objects rather than as documentation of an art strategy, even though they introduce the function of art as a discursive interaction between not only the artist and viewer but also the concepts of "art" and "popular culture."

Bagging Art as Language

The trajectory substantiated by the vacuum form works is not a straight line from Pop-derived Neo-Dada to a fully realized Conceptual Art. The second major medium

BAXTER& began working in prior to the formation of N.E. THING CO. is heat-sealed, inflated vinyl. Concurrent with his vacuum-form works, BAXTER& started creating "bagged" landscapes as alternative bas-reliefs. By heat-sealing vinyl sleeves to create separate channels, BAXTER& delineated forms in which he added such materials as air, water, paint, plastic toys, and soil to create simplified and stylized landscape "paintings."[26] He originally utilized the vacuum-formed plastic process to create these landscapes, as seen in such works as *Landscape with Tree* (fig. 22) and *Landscape with One Tree and Three Clouds* (fig. 23), both from 1965. These two works feature naïve, childlike shapes that denote the ground and sky, and both use the same mold for the trees noted in each work's straightforward, descriptive title.

BAXTER& continues the multilayered critiques of art, commodity, and consumer packaging in the bagged landscapes that he began with the vacuum forms. Rather than making emptied molds of plastic containers, he fills the voids of his vinyl sleeves with an array of natural and manmade materials to create encapsulated landscapes packaged for easy consumption (fig. 1, fig. 24). While the contents and material may differ, BAXTER& continues through his bagged works to propose an idea of art as a hermetically sealed microcosm. The glass-covered shadow boxes of the American artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) offer a clear antecedent to BAXTER&'s hermeticism.[27] In

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[26] These works were characterized as paintings by their inclusion in the exhibition *Painting '67*. Similarly, the vacuum form works were frequently considered "prints," due to their creation by a press. BAXTER& bought a vinyl sealing machine with a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, an independent governmental agency established in 1947 whose purpose is to support the arts and humanities through a network of grants, fellowships, and awards.

[27] For more on Joseph Cornell, see Kynaston McShine, ed. *Joseph Cornell* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980); Mary Ann Cawes, ed. *Joseph Cornell's Theatre of the Mind* (New York:

these boxes, Cornell placed a vast array of clippings, curiosities, and other materials to create small environments whose meanings were obscured through the typically ambiguous relationship between their various components. While BAXTER& and Cornell both share the sense of being collectors of ephemera, Cornell's works read as more personal, whereas BAXTER&'s are more an invitation to viewers to play along in their parodic criticism. Furthermore, through his plastic enclosures, BAXTER& develops a more commercially viable means for packaging products and ideas, thus developing a hybrid of his Zen sense of contradiction and a wry Pop irony. The bagged landscapes distill his sense of the contradiction between the culturally separated realms of consumerism and the natural world—two systems impacting North American culture.

Through the simplified stylization of the bagged works, BAXTER& maintains his pursuit of alternative sub-aesthetic presentations. Both this sub-aesthetic art and his reliance on industrial processes need to be understood as part of his overall abandonment of traditionally recognized artistic approaches. Added to this is his affinity toward word games, in which he consciously uses such descriptive words as "inflated" and "bagged" for works in order to bring to the mind of his viewers all of the possible meanings of those terms. By calling these works "inflated landscapes" he is directing attention not only to their existence as plastic pillows filled with air (or water, or dirt) but also inserting a wry joke on fine art objects' over-inflated cultural capital. BAXTER& further

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Thames and Hudson, 1993), a collection of Cornell's letters, diary entries, and files; and Lynda Roscoe Haritgan, *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination* (New Haven and London: Peabody Essex Museum and Smithsonian American Art Museum, in association with Yale University Press, 2007). Another catalog worth mentioning for its examination on the friendship between Cornell and Marcel Duchamp is *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp … In Resonance* (Houston: The Menil Collection and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1998).

engages in word games when he begins referring to these works as "bagged landscapes." Again, this term has multiple meanings: a reference to the nature of these works as plastic bags, a punning connotation of being simply executed, and yet a third related to its captured or encapsulated state, its being "in the bag."[28]

In addition to creating these landscapes, in 1965 BAXTER& also employed plastic bagging as an alternative strategy. Works such as *Still Life: Puff Wheat in a Plastic Bag* (1965) (fig. 25) and *Bagged Day-Glo Oranges* (1967) (fig. 26) consist of either drawn sketches or serigraphs of food stuffs cut out of paper and inserted in a plastic bag secured at the top with a twist tie. These works achieve a near non-art status in their joking nature, but their serious intent prevents them from being a simple joke. They are at one level handmade art works created from traditional art media (pencil, serigraph, etc.). But BAXTER& placed these handmade representations of foodstuffs in clear plastic bags and sealed them with a grocer's labeled twist tie (such as Safeway, in the case of *Bagged Day-Glo Oranges*). BAXTER& thus draws clear parallels between his representations of food and the ways that these foods are packaged for consumption. This strategy clearly aligns with his aforementioned practice of questioning the denotative limits of art and the ideological constructs that create unrealistic divisions between art, life, and commerce.

The largest single work of this pre-N.E. THING CO. era, and the one that uses the plastic bagging strategy to its fullest, is BAXTER&'s environment *Bagged Place*, completed for the 1966 Festival of the Arts at the University of British Columbia (fig.

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[28] *OED*, *s.v.* "bag": "A preoccupation, mode of behavior or experience; a distinctive style or category … ;" "the produce of a hunting, fishing, or shooting expedition;" "To seize, catch, take possession of, steal … ;" "to claim, reserve."

27). Listed in a newspaper ad as a four room, fully furnished suite appropriate for a non-smoker and adjacent to campus, *Bagged Place* enacts a striking commentary on the pervasive character of consumerism in everyday life. Every object in this accumulated environment comes individually wrapped in plastic—the furnishings, the groceries and staple items, even the walls and defecatory trace left in the toilet.

Because of its size and complexity, this work amplifies and extends the levels of criticism found in the other bagged works. This is an environment purpose-built for domestic use, and it draws parallels between patterns of economic consumption of home furnishings and fine art. None of the materials used are "found" objects; each one was procured explicitly for the realization of this work.[29] The contents are new, untouched, and ready to be employed in the viewer/consumer's everyday living patterns, just as works of art bought by patrons are transformed through the process of economic exchange into a consumable commodity. Because of this process, art assumes a home furnishing status similar to a bedroom suite or clock—it becomes a pedestrian commonplace in the patron's home, a glorified form of window dressing. BAXTER& further parodies this phenomenon, whereby art is translated into home décor, in the later NETCO work *A Painting to Match the Couch* (1974–75), a near life-size photograph of a sofa, displayed over the same sofa. The environment of *Bagged Place* presents a modern

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[29] The furnishings were provided by the father of one of BAXTER&'s students, who ran the family's large furniture store, Mosk's. At the end of the exhibition, the pieces were returned to the store. Due to this fact, *Bagged Place* enacts Duchamp's readymade strategy on a large scale. Yet BAXTER&'s installation moves beyond the Duchampian strategy in complexity by presenting a broad-based commentary on culturally defined patterns of living rather than presenting a single object for its sub-aesthetic challenge to definitions of art.

living space to viewers, yet defamiliarizes the comforts of domestic space through not only the plastic barriers but also the fact that this constructed space is a fine art arena that concurrently parodies consumption of household products, concepts of domesticity, and interior design.[30]

He also employed the bagged or inflated plastic medium to complete his fine art appropriation pieces, in which he lightheartedly re-created existing works by other artists in order to drive home his wry commentary on art's commercial and cultural status. In his *Bagged Rothko* (1965) (fig. 28) and *Pneumatic Judd* (1965) (fig. 3), BAXTER& recasts these late modernist and Minimalist works as inflated vinyl structures that at times resemble swimming pool floats. *Bagged Rothko* maintains the tripartite schema typical of Mark Rothko's paintings, but does so by heat-seaming a pillow of vinyl, making three horizontal chambers. Each of these is filled with bands of colored cotton batting at the top and bottom strata to achieve a similar gestural edge as in the original work. *Pneumatic Judd* consists of five blue verticals suspended from a horizontal beam of gold-colored inflated vinyl. Each segment is self-contained and thus also features a plastic nipple-valve used to fill each chamber. Since the chambers are not fully filled with air, the piece stands in stark contrast to the very rigid, industrially manufactured Judd original. Here the copy stands as a joking, flaccid doppelganger.

BAXTER& took these inflated, critical copies of existing works and extended his joking commentaries on color field, Pop, and Minimalist works into other media. Continuing his focus on Donald Judd, BAXTER& produced *Slipcover for Donald Judd*

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[30] *Bagged Place* was reconstructed using Ikea furnishings for the 1987 exhibition "From Sea to Shining Sea" at the Power Plant, Toronto.

(1966). Consisting of white fabric with yellow polka dots that is stretched and folded across a plywood box attached to the gallery wall, *Slipcover for Donald Judd* (fig. 29) stands in stark visual contrast to its original. Rather than displaying the highly finished look of the metal and Plexiglas original, this humorous copy displays a homespun quality, as if it were a sewing pattern available at any five-and-dime store. BAXTER& subverts the industrial look and character of the original by constructing a cover for it with a cottage-industry aesthetic. Unlike the Judd original, whose construction was farmed out to an industrial manufacturer, BAXTER&'s work is "home made." The punning quality of this work, like that of the inflated copies, has a disarming appearance that hides a more serious critique. They ask viewers to question how these works differ from the originals in terms of its means of manufacture by recasting it in a different medium. The look of seriousness and imposing presence is lost when looking at *Slipcover for Donald Judd* and recalling the Judd original. BAXTER&'s recasting of these pieces calls into question the ways a work's medium affects viewers' interaction with the work itself and how successfully that piece functions in its communicative role.

Like McLuhan, BAXTER& views art as communication and delights in using humor to make his art more approachable. In these works, he also follows McLuhan by examining how art media and their potential messages are connected. Because these recast works comically substitute the original medium for another, they are the visual equivalent of malapropisms in language, where words are substituted with similarly sounding words to render a given phrase absurd. It is surprising that this connection has not yet been made clear in the critical discourse surrounding BAXTER& and N.E.

THING CO. This lack of understanding of BAXTER&'s critical stance is perhaps brought on by the disarmingly humorous nature of much of his work that actively disguises a much deeper ironic and therefore critical stance. These are not frivolous acts masquerading as serious art but serious art with humorous masks.

The subject of these works, whether inflated, bagged, or constructed in another medium, is modernist art—how it functions as a communicative system, and how this is affected by modes of display and selections of media. There is a definite linguistic element to these appropriation pieces, because they are "inflated," much like the intellectual rigor Judd applied to his art. However, even though his works in this series appear to deflate the serious nature of the original, BAXTER& maintains that "at the same time [I'm] respecting it, because I'm giving it another layer of recognition."[31]

Two other works from 1966, *Straightened José de Rivera* and *Stripped and Racked Franz Kline, Mahoning, 1956*, also remake other artists' works, yet the deconstruction taking place is more literal. *Straightened José de Rivera* (fig. 30) is a wooden dowel wrapped in aluminum foil and placed on a gallery pedestal. In this work, BAXTER& not only removes the gestural bends and twists of the de Rivera original, he also recasts it as a prop for a bad, science fiction B-movie. This copy is not even metal, but constructed of everyday supplies found in both hardware and grocery stores that could serve such functions as a closet rod and a protective wrapping for cooked turkey. The title for *Stripped and Racked Franz Kline, Mahoning, 1956* (fig. 31), much like the de Rivera copy, relies on double meanings to convey its larger message. The de Rivera

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[31] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with author, November 17, 2009.

copy is "straightened," suggesting that BAXTER& has not only removed all the twists

and bends found in the original material but also "straightened," or put in order, the

original communicative purpose of the Rivera work. The Kline copy goes through a more

violent alteration. Recast in strips of black fabric laid into a painted wood, comb-like

rack, the Kline copy is completely disassembled and reordered. Here BAXTER& turns a

gestural action painting into a Minimalist floor piece. The anthropomorphic connotations

of the title should not be lost in the humor of the new work's appearance. The phrase

"stripped and racked" relates to both the visual deconstruction and reordering of the

original work and a sly twist on the figure content typically found by critics in Kline's

work.[32] Here, it is not only the work that is deconstructed. Kline's painting is similarly

stripped and racked, forced to endure some type of medieval torture to be laid out on the

floor of the gallery with someone else's name applied to the resulting work.

Through these works, BAXTER& reinforces the connection between his desire to

underscore art's status as a vehicle for communication and his appropriation of the

media-centric theories of Marshall McLuhan by calling these recast copies "extensions,"

a term he included in the title of *Extended Noland* and *Extension for Josef Albers*

(1966).[33] McLuhan used this term extensively in discussing innovations in

communication technology as extensions of sensory processes rather than as simple tools

put to use by humans. BAXTER& has made extensions for such artists as Kenneth

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[32] Franz Kline has stated that his work in black and white gestural painting began as depictions of a figure and then became increasingly abstracted. See, for example, his quotes in John Baur, ed., *The New Decade* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1955), p. 8.

[33] BAXTER& described all of these works "extensions" in an interview with the author, November 18, 2008.

Noland and Joseph Albers. His choices of artist-targets confirm his insistence on reexamining modernist works and seeing how their messages can remain relevant in an extended art network. Yet in these works he constructs a framework to question the targets in order to understand how his extension communes with or detracts from the original, even as he relies on viewers to come to provide their conclusions.

With both the extension series and the vacuum-formed plastic pieces, BAXTER& interprets McLuhan's ideas on the communicative properties of media and art. He produces art made in plastics to call attention to this material's increasingly large presence in North American consumer culture in two primary ways: (1) plastic as protective encapsulation, and (2) plastic as construction material. This petroleum-based material has developed the contradictory connotations of being either space-age, and thus advanced and sterile, or cheap and fragile.[34] Since BAXTER&'s first use of the material during the 1960s, plastics have also developed an environmentalist stigma due to the unrecyclable nature of some of the chemical compounds colloquially known as "plastic" and their nonbiodegradable nature. Through these works, BAXTER& initiates an open-ended examination of consumer culture's increasing reliance on plastics and the changes to cultural identity this material has enacted. With the vacuum-formed pieces, he questions the perceived hygienic nature of plastics while using this association as a joke

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[34] The use of petroleum as a material for the manufacture of plastics dates from the post–World War II era and is marked in the 1950s as the industry moved increasingly to the thermoplastics that petroleum-based plastic compounds afford. As a result of this shift, the 1950s is also the era of the explosion of plastics in the consumer market place. The present discussion draws on the history of plastics provided in art historian Jeffrey L. Meikle's text *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), especially the chapter "Growing Pains: The Conversion to Postwar," pp. 153–182.

on fine art as essentially sterile, thereby producing the dual-pronged parody of calling

into question the culture's dependency on sterile products as well as probing the

mainstream assumption of fine art as a barren or isolated cultural sphere. The bagged

vinyl works comment on the perceived cheapness of the material by producing art that

has affinities with pool floats or cheap children's toys. These inflatable works present

dual criticisms on the nature or limitations of fine art and North American culture's

profound reliance on plastics.

Visual Communication and Linguistic Humor

BAXTER&'s desire to view visual art as a medium that can communicate

independently or in coordination with written language predates his understanding of

McLuhan. BAXTER&'s acrylic on canvas work *Standards 24* (1962) (fig. 32),

completed in the same year he began his graduate studies in painting, represents an early

exploration of the humor, linguistic play, and pseudonyms that subsequently characterize

his work with N.E. THING CO. and his more recent solo pieces.

In its most basic aspects, *Standards 24* plays within late modernist conventions.

At nearly six feet tall by over five feet wide, it assumes the scale of a large abstract

expressionist canvas. This painting is filled with gestural strokes of color that form a

network of lines and shapes in which one can read, among other things, a potential male

human figure in the large red circle and an arrow that extends downward from it. A white

horizontal line splits the canvas into two halves, which together with the circle found above this line calls to mind Adolph Gottlieb's *Bursts*.

However, BAXTER& is only playing at an expressionist style, using its conventions to create a game of art for the spectator. The left-most quarter of the unframed canvas is all white—a slate upon which BAXTER& lists 40 elements of painting and composition. The roster reads like an art text of things students should concern themselves with while creating a painting: scumbly paint, composition, main area of interest, blending, subjective line, accident, and plasticity, to name but a few. Each of these elements is numbered on the list, and these numbers correspond to the numbered areas of the painting. A cut out in the canvas is labeled with the number 31, which corresponds to the list of words as a "Hole," whereas the cut-out portion of this hole, hanging from the remaining un-cut portion of this void is labeled number 32, for "Foreground." The number 24, which corresponds with the word "Theme" on the list of standards at the left, is found near the center of the red circle in the upper half of the canvas.

The cut-outs, numbers and words, and slightly curled canvas's lack of a frame all contradict the viewer's ability to view this work in terms of the then-dominant critical approach to painting, Clement Greenberg's opticality. Instead, BAXTER& encourages viewers to play the game he has created by using a paint-by-numbers approach that maps out the work and prevents any aura it may otherwise exhibit from beckoning to a beholder. BAXTER& plays the game of investigating and communicating the nature of painting from within the rules of late modernism while breaking apart these conventions

and rendering them absurd by adding a numbered map and textbook litany of artistic "standards" for creating an ideal painting. By playing the game from within a preconceived set of rules while making them seem ridiculous to viewers, BAXTER& aligns himself with the tactics displayed in Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955) (fig. 33) and Jasper Johns' *Flags*. Yet this study suggests this little-discussed work and its theme approaches an anti-manifesto on optical painting whose most apparent antecedent is Marcel Duchamp's *Tu'm* (1918) (fig. 34). Both of these works are satirical elaborations on the ontological limits of painting. Duchamp accomplishes this end by using strictly visual elements—color swatches, Platonic-appearing shadows of his early readymades, and a hand by an actual sign painter pointing to the illusionistic tear in the canvas—all of which are laid out in an array across the canvas surface. BAXTER& is more literal in his approach: he creates a single composition using an abstract expressionist style, which he transforms into a map complete with a legend for viewers to navigate.

BAXTER& is challenging both late modernist and traditional art school definitions of painting, but he is also working with linguistic elements to determine how art, as a communication system, may work through more than visual means. This is underscored by the structural components of painting that he lists and maps across the surface of the work so that they prevent viewers from subjectively approaching this work. In this painting, BAXTER& establishes a cognitive distance between these art terms and the painting's visual components. The implicit formula parodied by this work—that a successful painting must accommodate all of these terms—becomes an apparently ineffective means to inscribe a work's discursive potential. These elements exist only in a

visual framework, which means they are purely self-referential and cannot provide means for art's extra-visual linguistic potential.

BAXTER& had been experimenting with the development and potential success of a nonverbal teaching method for art since 1963. Along with Joel Smith, a colleague who taught art at the University of Idaho before accepting a position at Ohio State University, BAXTER& investigated visual teaching methods as well as grant-funding opportunities to pursue effective techniques for his pedagogical style.[35] While BAXTER&'s investigations proved ineffective as a sole means of art education, his experimentation with visual stimuli as a form of language is relevant to the discussion at hand since it predates his introduction to McLuhan in 1964.

Although *Standards 24* and his experimentation with nonverbal instruction are essentially neo-Dada expressions, they confirm BAXTER&'s early attempts to examine art's potential as a metalinguistic mode of communication. These examples also clarify BAXTER&'s quickly achieved reception of McLuhan's information theory.

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[35] See Matthew Baigell and Joel Smith, "Happening in the Classroom: Non-verbal Art Instruction," *Art Journal* 25 (Summer 1966): 370–371. See also BAXTER& Fonds, Art Gallery of Ontario, Box 3, File 12, "1963, Baxter Folder: 'Creativity File & Project Sensory'[on back of label: 'Non-Verbal']" Letter to Mr. Hartmann, Director, Graham Foundation, Chicago, Il, July 31, 1963: A letter asking for grant funding …
"Professor Joel Smith, of the Ohio State University, and I are presently working on pilot studies for the project which we hope can be commenced as a concentrated effort in the summer of 1964. The project is an experimental study of *Non-verbal communication as a more logical and sensitive approach to art and creative motivation*." Emphasis in the original.

A Portrait of the Artist as Someone Else

Beyond the visual and language elements of *Standards 24*, BAXTER& develops a game about artistic conventions pertaining to authorship. This painting features BAXTER&'s first usage of a pseudonym as a means of distancing himself from his work and a way of thwarting viewers' habitual readings of art works as unmediated objects of specific artistic temperaments. Instead, BAXTER&, true to the irreverent approach that marks his work with N.E. THING CO. and his more recent solo work, signs the canvas "Mr. Art Painter." The use of a pseudonym, a major theme in BAXTER&'s work, prevents viewers from connecting with the artist as a discrete personality, or from determining a specific intent on the part of the artist, thus forcing viewers to play the game of interpretation themselves (as well as to discern its rules) and determine what the painting may communicate. Mr. Art Painter is a gentle joke designed to bar spectators from leaving the piece at hand in order to consider the artist's intention behind the work. He uses anonymity to reinforce the game structure of the painting that parodies the self-referential character of late-modernist painting: if painting should refer only to itself, then its creator's identity is inconsequential.

The majority of the subsequent extension pieces, such as *Slipcover for Donald Judd*, were produced in the first of BAXTER&'s cooperative artistic entities that operated under the name "IT." The name was meant to signify the word rather than the acronym for "information technology." [36] Much like his earlier use of the pseudonym

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[36] The term "information technology" has been around since at least 1949, when it is included in the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act to describe some of the federal property for which the newly created General Services Administration would become responsible. See SEC. 110. [40 U.S.C.

"Mr. Art Painter," the name IT was chosen as an anonymous umbrella under which to operate, free from tendencies to credit or discredit the author of a work rather than deal with the work of art (IT) explicitly. IT was a short-lived collaboration between IAIN BAXTER&, his wife Ingrid Baxter, and John Friel, their friend from Washington State University.[37] The three artists collaborated on work for two exhibitions taking place at the Rolf Nelson Gallery in Los Angeles in 1966. For these shows, the three artists worked together to create extensions of other art and objects for display and sale. The use of the name IT afforded them the anonymity they sought: Marie Fleming notes that the identities of the three artists were not revealed until a later time.[38] However, this condition of anonymity did not survive in the Baxters' later 1966 formation of the N.E. Baxter Thing Co., which was renamed N.E. THING CO. a year later.

In works created for the IT shows, BAXTER& and his colleagues were addressing art's ability to function as a communication system and taking into consideration the commercialism theme found in BAXTER&'s earlier vacuum-formed and inflated vinyl works. Some of these works were priced well below then-current market prices for a gallery exhibition—certain works carrying a price of merely 25 cents. Here, the artists of IT aimed to deflate fine art's cultural capital by economically devaluing it. The Baxters and Friel were actively commenting that the world of fine art

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757] INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FUND. "IT" as an acronym for "information technology" appears to have developed in the early 1980s. *OED s.v.* "IT."

[37] See Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works*, 1982, p. 9 and note 3, p. 92, for more on Friel. In an August 8, 2010, interview with the author, BAXTER& notes that Friel went on to work for Ed Keinholtz after IT was disbanded.

[38] Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works*, 1982, p. 9.

was inscribed simultaneously in information and economic systems of exchange, and thereby pointing to interrelations between the worlds of art, commerce and mass media. By creating a pseudonym to secure their anonymity yet titling their extensions by referring to the original source's name, i.e. Donald Judd and José de Rivera, IT developed heightened tensions between anonymity and name recognition. Works such as *Slipcover for Donald Judd* and *Straightened José de Rivera* were not named for specific Judd or Rivera pieces, but for the artist themselves. By noting cultural tendencies to brand artworks by the artist's name rather than by a specific title, while simultaneously providing an anonymous collective name for their group, IT deflected criticism based upon their identity by redirecting it to the subject artist or the system itself. Viewers were forced to come to terms with the ways these extension works reflected or contradicted the artistic program of Judd or Rivera rather than with how BAXTER& and his colleagues were attempting to question the original artists' intentions.

BAXTER&'s pre-NETCO works were viewed typically with derision and confusion by the Canadian art press of their time, and they went largely unnoticed in the United States despite such precedent-setting examples as *2 Tons of Ice* and *Bagged Place*. Many of these works, especially the bagged landscapes, were simply too unfamiliar for its critical audience to develop an analytical framework. At the same time, however, BAXTER& received support from such seminal figures as curator Alvin Balkind and such distinguished institutions as the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser

University, and the Canada Council, all of which were central to the formation of a Vancouver avant-garde. The radical nature of this era of BAXTER&'s art has been subsequently overlooked or misunderstood despite its inclusion in most retrospective exhibitions examining BAXTER&'s and NETCO's art. It is probable that the humorous coloring to which BAXTER& subjects his works served to soften his critical intent to the point that the epistemological orientation of these pre–N.E. THING CO. works has gone unnoticed. Whereas such Conceptual artists as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Art & Language are lauded for their work's rigorous intellectual approach and dry sub-aesthetic, BAXTER& has presented a consistent, layered satirical approach that masks his work's critical rigor, which derives from his Zen attitude and his reading of McLuhan.

These pre-NETCO pieces document how BAXTER& undertook and transformed Pop Art's examination of mass culture by turning away from mediated images of products and celebrities to focus on marketing strategies and industrial processes designed for consumer products. Yet these works include numerous elements that can only be characterized as conceptualist in nature. The themes explored in BAXTER&'s early work clearly illustrate the formation of such conceptualist strategies as his focus on the interaction of the realm of fine art and the world of commerce. His understanding of the interconnectedness of art and consumer exchange supersedes its Pop aesthetic to establish a recursive stance for launching open-ended investigations on the nature of art as an institution bound to the larger economic networks of commercial society. By using industrial processes and consumable goods, applying destruction and deconstruction strategies in his own work and his extensions of existing modernist works, and setting

low prices for the IT works, BAXTER& is attempting to devalue his work in this system of economic exchange and negate the cultural capital of fine art. These works of his involve little artistic skill in the traditional sense of using mainstream fine art media, but they retain value as sources of informational exchange. This focus on art as a vehicle in a communication system is a feature common to all the works discussed above and provides the most clear-cut connection between BAXTER& and an emerging Conceptual Art strategy, which he develops as part of the NETCO collaborative enterprise.

Chapter 3: N.E. THING CO., A Corporate Profile

"That is the biggest business in the world; that of information. But we don't look at it as an art form. We always think it's art, music, dance and film, and that's why we always have such a hard time connecting everything…." IAIN BAXTER&[1]

"The media accelerates its own information." Les Levine[2]

Although IAIN BAXTER& first became aware of Marshall McLuhan's communications theory during his first teaching appointment, at the University of British Columbia in 1964, and began to integrate McLuhan's ideas in his early works, it was only during his tenure as part of N.E. THING CO. (1966–1978, hereafter NETCO) that BAXTER& fully explored and incorporated them into his working methods. Whereas a number of Pop and Conceptual Art artists may have relied on McLuhan's texts, either in whole or in part, BAXTER&'s work with NETCO assimilates McLuhan's focus on how information exchange is defined by technological media and its concomitant effects on both individuals and popular culture more fully than any other artist of the time.[3]

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[1] Iain Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, in Val Greenfield, ed., *Iain Baxter, Instantaneous Response: Polaroid Photo Art* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1982), p. 22.

[2] Les Levine, "The Information Fall-out," *Studio International* 181 (June 1971), p. 264.

[3] While it is feasible to suggest that Toronto and New York–based artist Les Levine equals NETCO's proliferation of McLuhanesque ideals, Levine's video and installation work, which enacts both McLuhan's exploration of advertising content and Dadaist Kurt Schwitter's *Merz* structures, is more tightly focused than BAXTER&'s broad experimentation.

Conceptual Art has typically been characterized as proposing information exchange as an

abstract notion, divorced from mass cultural modes. Yet this characterization allows no

consideration of BAXTER&'s consistent return to and transformation of Pop Art modes

after the development of his own collaborative model of Conceptual Art during

NETCO's existence. His Pop-inflected Conceptual Art, informed by McLuhan's

investigations of mass media and their role in the production of popular culture, marks a

clear departure from a Minimalism-inflected Conceptual Art model.

The previous two chapters presented McLuhan's body of work and its relation to

BAXTER& and explored how he developed new hybrids of Pop Art, Zen Buddhism, and

his own emerging understanding of McLuhan in his pre-NETCO works. This chapter

moves on to examine how BAXTER& worked through and experimented with these

strategies in a more explicitly conceptualist series of strategies. These generative

principles become closely interrelated in BAXTER&'s art as part of N.E. THING CO.,

with individual works often displaying several of them simultaneously. With that in

mind, this chapter groups together works or series of works in order to discuss how these

principles are continually developed in constellation. This chapter picks up where the last

left off, with BAXTER&'s use of pseudonyms, and examines BAXTER&'s adoption of a

corporate identity. Because of this strategy's revolutionary nature, it relates this approach

to BAXTER&'s investigation of McLuhan's theory. These interests will then be

expanded by discussing how N.E. THING CO.'s use of such emerging communication

technologies as the Telecopier, telefax, and Polaroid—as both art media and avenues for

mass cultural criticism—emerge from McLuhan's theories. BAXTER&'s confrontation

with the realm of the everyday as an "infoscape" relates to his use of the telefax and

Telecopier, and it will be considered in greater detail through an examination of how it

inflects NETCO's "landscape" works. This chapter then will move to series of works

known as ACTs and ARTs that actively comment on aesthetics and linguistics.

Enacting a Corporate Strategy

As described in sections of the last chapter focusing on "Mr. Art Painter" and IT,

BAXTER& had developed a strategy of creating pseudonyms to operate more freely as

an artist. His reason for developing anonymity as an individual derives partially from his

studies in Buddhism, particularly its aim of subverting the individual ego. BAXTER&

viewed pseudonyms as a means to explore a multitude of artistic directions while

potentially preventing critics from characterizing him and his work as an easily digestible

entity. Unfettered by prevailing cultural conditions that tied one's identity as an

individual artist to his or her work, BAXTER& joined forces with his wife Ingrid in 1966

to create the corporate entity of N.E. THING CO.[4] Under the NETCO moniker,

BAXTER& continued his previous artistic innovations in the realms of everyday

commodities and advertisements along with a reevaluation of the definition and

informational character of fine art.

The company was formed as an umbrella structure so that its principles could

pursue multiple directions simultaneously, instead of working in what Ingrid Baxter has

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[4] While the use of capital letters is inconsistent in the literature dealing with the company, the name is always presented in all capital letters in literature produced by NETCO during its existence.

called a "categorical" mode, a narrower, traditional way of defining and producing art.[5]

Works were not signed with the Baxters' names; the company's gold seal was affixed to its pieces to signify that they were products of NETCO. While the Baxters presented themselves as officers of their firm, most reviews and notices in the art press refer to IAIN BAXTER& first and include the N.E. THING CO. name only on occasion. They rarely describe the company as the actual producer of their works or cite Ingrid Baxter as one of its principals. The occlusion of Ingrid Baxter's role in this collaboration is undoubtedly related to lingering but still strong sexist attitudes prevalent throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In a 1979 interview, the same year as the company's dissolution and the Baxters' divorce, IAIN BAXTER& sought to correct this oversight:

> We should talk about Ingrid's involvement because I worked very closely with my wife at that time. We bounced around a lot of ideas and she has a really great conceptual mind. So a lot of her thinking is woven in there.[6]

When NETCO was initially incorporated, IAIN BAXTER& was listed as president, with Ingrid Baxter serving as vice president. However, this organizational structure was emended in 1970 by establishing a copresidency for the company to reflect how its principals viewed their roles.

In an early article devoted to N.E. THING CO., the mission statement for the Company is listed as follows:

> (1) To produce sensitivity information.
> (2) To provide consultation and evaluation service with respect to things.

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[5] See Ingrid Baxter, video interview with Grant Arnold, 5 May 2009, http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/interviews/ingrid-baxter (accessed 8 January 2011).

[6] Iain Baxter, interview with Robin White, *View* 2 (September 1979), p. 12.

(3) To produce, manufacture, import, export, buy, sell, and otherwise deal in things of all kinds.[7]

This mission statement elucidates the all-encompassing strategy of the company: to produce and provide any form of goods and services related to "sensitivity information," their McLuhanesque term for the perceptual effect created by all things. The definition for SI is as follows:

> A term developed by NETCO to denote all forms of cultural activities, i.e., dance, music, theatre, film, fine art, poetry, novels, etc. It is based on the theory that there are all types of INFORMATION around in the world. INFORMATION is usually, or tends to be, confronted and dealt with in either a practical or sensitive manner. Thus INFORMATION which is handled in this pure or sensitive way culminates in SI (Sensitivity Information) in general context, and eventually leaves its mark on life as culture.[8]

The firm's mission creates an infinitely recursive cycle since sensitivity information (SI) is their main product, but it is created by and/or found in everything. Thus, they may provide anything, including the clear pun of their corporate identity, or they may simply point out the SI to viewers to fulfill their goal.

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[7] See Charlotte Townsend, "N.E. THING CO. and Les Levine," *Studio International* 179 (April 1970), p. 173. While this is not the first article written about NETCO to be featured in a major art periodical, Townsend's is the first to address solely NETCO in an uncritical way (in both meanings of this term), as it is mainly a listing of the corporate departments and objectives. The first article exclusively about NETCO is Jane Livingston's one-page review of NETCO's Gallery 669 show (Los Angeles) published in the October 1969 issue of *Artforum*. Although the works from this exhibition were largely inflatables and therefore covered in the previous chapter, the contents of this article will be addressed further below.

[8] This glossary in which this definition appears has been noted and reproduced in various publications, including "Appendix C," in Marie Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), p. 97.

NETCO developed works along the same lines as N.E. Baxter Thing Co., which BAXTER& notes as merely the first name for the same company.[9] Yet, by dropping the surname "Baxter," NETCO represented an attempt to further distance their individual artistic identities from discussions of their collaborative work. Registered as a business in 1967, the company finally secured full corporation status in 1969 when it was officially recognized as an incorporated business entity by the Vancouver Board of Trade. It is crucial to an understanding of NETCO and also IAIN BAXTER&'s contributions to Conceptual Art to recognize that the Baxters' assumption of a corporate identity is a unique artistic approach. Clearly, artist cooperatives existed prior to NETCO. However, even though these collaborations exhibited under a group name, the contributions of individual artists tended to display their personal names. Art & Language, the British and American contemporary of NETCO that was formed in 1968, typically operated as a corporate body, but only in the noncommercial sense of a group of individuals presenting work under a single name. Individual works were frequently attributed to a specific artist rather than being listed as "Art & Language," thus the collective impulse of these artists had defined boundaries that presented Art & Language as a group of individuals, not a singular entity. Furthermore, the Toronto-based General Idea (1969–1994), another contemporary of NETCO, exhibited works and produced actions under their collaborative title, yet each artist worked under an individual pseudonym: Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and AA Bronson. And these are simply instances from the English-speaking Conceptual Art or neo-Dada movements. More examples exist outside of North America, especially

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[9] Telephone interview with IAIN BAXTER&, December 27, 2009.

in Central and South America. All of these cooperatives either continued to retain each individual's identities or work as a political organization. The assumption of a corporate structure and identity by an artist or artist group is singular to NETCO, where it is an integral component of the Baxters' artistic investigations.

Despite NETCO's status as an enhancement of its original name, N.E. Baxter Thing Co., the company's organization retained the departmental arrangement listed for its earlier incarnation in 1966. The structure consisted of 11 divisions: Research, Thing, Accounting, ACT (Aesthetically Claimed Thing), ART (Aesthetically Rejected Thing), Photography, Printing, COP, Movie, Project, and Consulting. As in many corporations, these 11 departments were not equally represented throughout the company's existence. The COP department consisted of appropriation works similar to the previously mentioned *Bagged Rothko* (1965) and *Pneumatic Judd* (1966), both completed by BAXTER& prior to the company's formation. Work produced by this "department" did not continue much after 1969. Similarly, the ACT and ART departments, which will be treated in depth below, were only active during the late 1960s, but produced nearly 200 pieces in a span of less than four years.[10] The most consistently active departments were Research, Thing, Photography, and Project.

The Baxters' adoption of a corporate structure has been alternately characterized as either an insincere, even self-promoting, gesture or an indictment of commodity culture.[11] This

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[10] See Marie Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works*, (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982), pp. 40–41. Fleming notes that the ACTs and ARTs were produced, stamped, and certified from 1967 to 1970.

[11] A concise example of critics' problems with the corporate identity include Lucy Lippard, who in her catalog essay "You Are Now in the Middle of a Revisionist History of N.E. Thing Co.," in Nancy Shaw

difficulty was not experienced by critics alone. BAXTER& stated that his fellow artists

also found it challenging: "They all thought it was kind of goofy to have this company.

You know people like Andre and others were trying to be Marxist or Leninist and wear

big coveralls, and here's this guy trying to be this company and they thought I was kind

of out of it."[12] While the use of the corporate pseudonym should be viewed as a

commentary on the systems of economic exchange that prevail within the art world

system, the gesture plumbs depths beyond a direct critique. BAXTER& states that the

corporate identity allowed them a level of anonymity to pursue the wide variety of

directions they found engaging as well as the ability to penetrate capitalist structures by

assuming a similar form.[13] Their adoption of a corporate structure also constitutes a

reversal of one of McLuhan's pronouncements. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan

expanded on economist John Kenneth Galbraith's advice that businesses study art:

> It is this aspect of *new* art that Kenneth Galbraith recommends to the careful study of businessmen who want to stay in business. For in the electric age there is no longer any sense in talking about the artist's being ahead of his time. Our technology is, also, ahead of its time, if we reckon by the ability to recognize it for what it is. To prevent undue wreckage of

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and William Wood, eds., *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. THING CO. Landscape* (Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1993), p. 58, states, "the corporate aspect, which, for all my enthusiasm for the Baxters' work, always gave me pause because it was ultimately not a critical stance. Humourous, yes. Ironic and corrective, no." Lippard, who has long been a significant supporter of IAIN BAXTER& and NETCO, re-characterized her opinion of NETCO's critical edge in her essay "3 Minute Photos," in *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs, 1958–1983*, 2006, p. 11, where she admits having "read Iain and Elaine/Ingrid's corporate alias (N.E. THING CO.) as complicity with the postminimal conceptual cartel's attack on the commodification of art…." This shift, between viewing NETCO on the one hand as not "ironic and corrective" and as an "attack on the commodification art" on the other, represents precisely the historic difficulty of negotiating NETCO's work.

[12] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 18, 2008.

[13] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 17, 2008.

society, the artist tends now to move from the ivory tower to the control
tower of society.[14]

The Baxter's NETCO creation is an inversion of Galbraith's strategy since it represents
two artists becoming involved with the world of business rather than business becoming
involved with the world of artists. Thus, the formation of NETCO should be seen as part
of their investigation into information exchange systems initiated through IAIN
BAXTER&'s prior reading of McLuhan.

This study has previously addressed how NETCO's corporate status functions in
relation to McLuhan's mosaic by allowing its principles to launch a multivalent critique
on culture and art through a myriad of strategies, including the company's participation in
data processing conventions, its radio and television ad pieces, its restaurant and photo-
lab business enterprises, as well as its more gallery-centered art production. It has also
described how the corporate identity provided its founders with an intended yet
unrealized veil of anonymity. Yet the strategy of the corporate pseudonym must be
understood as more than just a gesture. The founding of NETCO is in fact a work of art
in its own right, an understanding that has been markedly absent in previous studies.
While other artists have created personas as their "public" identities both prior to and
after the existence of NETCO, the Baxters created and presented the firm as a work. The
1969 public notice of N.E. THING CO.'s incorporation, published in *The British
Columbia Gazette*, is presented as a work by the company, which included it as the cover
for its 1978 compendium of works, *N.E. THING CO. LTD*. Many of the business cards,

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[14] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1999, p. 64.

pamphlets, and other ephemera are featured in the catalog for the 1992 Art Metropole

exhibition, *Media Works*, including the "Please Complete and Return" logo (fig. 35). AA

Bronson, who curated the *Media Works* exhibition, notes that NETCO, "like any major

corporation, invited Canada's number one designer," Alan Fleming, to produce the

logo/business card, a two-sided square card with the company's logo, consisting of six

dotted lines headed by the phrase "Please Complete and Return," and footed by "N.E.

THING COMPANY LIMITED" on one side, with the principal's name and contact

information on the card's reverse.[15] The provincial government's recognition of their

incorporation and their third party-designed stationary are presented as significant,

distinct works that document the concept and existence of the company, just as many of

their works were presented as documents of the actual work of art, a standard strategy in

Conceptual Art.

Furthermore, the company, as a discrete entity occupying space, served as the

defining structure of at least two major exhibitions—NETCO's first one-artist show at the

National Gallery of Canada (the first ever monographic exhibition by this institution) and

its *Building Structure* exhibition at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto (both 1969).

For each of these exhibitions, the space of the galleries was transformed into the

corporate headquarters for the company. The National Gallery show (fig. 36), occupying

the entire first floor, was partitioned into separate spaces reflecting various departmental

divisions, including one gallery of desks and covered typewriters—the steno pool. This

installation piece, the first of its kind exhibited by the National Gallery, produced

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[15] See AA Bronson and Iain Baxter, *Media Works* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1992), p. 38.

confusion in gallery visitors, who at times questioned whether they were in the museum or had mistakenly entered an office building. According to art historian Nancy Shaw, one viewer asked about the rental fees for the site.[16] This exhibition not only equates the institutionalized framework for viewing art with a space designed to house the commercial activities of a business but also literalizes NETCO as an entity separate from its officers, IAIN and Ingrid Baxter. It documents the existence of a work of Conceptual Art, which is itself an all-encompassing structure for all of the corporation's activities and products that were on display in their departmental offices.

The Carmen Lamanna exhibition, instead of presenting the finished space of a working office, consisted of exposed wood studs and joists that formed the walls, floors and ceilings—a work in progress (fig. 37). Despite the fact that the gallery space is only one story tall, the framing method draws comparisons to the balloon framing structure common in North America for building multistory structures until the early part of the twentieth century. This method featured wall studs that extended into the second story of the structure, unlike the more recent platform framing method, in which each story is framed separately, thereby eliminating the open space extending across the two floors of a structure in between wall studs that would allow a fire to spread more quickly throughout it. BAXTER&, who was continually reworking his family residence in Vancouver, was undoubtedly aware of balloon framing and the possibility for associative puns to his inflatable works, which were humorously titled *Flatulent Products* for a May

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[16] See Nancy Shaw, "Siting the Banal: The Expanded Landscapes of the N.E. THING CO.," *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. THING CO. Landscape: Works by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, 1965–1971* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Art Gallery, 1993), p. 30.

1968 exhibition.[17] Fleming interprets these two environments, along with *Bagged Place*, as "document[ing] the creation and existence of the building [by] duplicating a space in such a way as to comment on the environment.... The work is created by and reflected in its content."[18] With the Lamanna environment, the firm extends and literalizes the metaphor of the corporate entity as inhabiting a space separate from its officers by presenting an office that, unlike the earlier National Gallery of Canada show, was still a work in progress.

Added to these examples is the most clear-cut presentation of the company as a conceptualist work rather than simply an imposed identity. As part of NETCO's contribution to the innovative *Studio International* exhibition, which was presented in this journal's Summer 1970 issue, it took out a classified ad in the March 13, 1970, issue of *The Citizen*, a local Vancouver newspaper (fig. 38). Headed by the title "Unlimited Potential," the ad listed the company for sale, a business opportunity available for the reasonable price of 1.2 billion Canadian dollars. This ad-piece follows the rules of the *Studio International* exhibition: each artist would (a) create a directive for another artist, and (b) carry out a directive provided by another artist. The company's directive came from fellow Conceptual artist Doulas Huebler, who required that it "release all 'claims' to a work previously claimed and return it to its former existence or establish an authentic

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[17] See "A Selection of N.E. THING COMPANY A.C.T.s" in Ann Rosenberg, "An Illustrated Introduction to the N.E. THING CO. LTD.," *Capilano Review* 8/9 (Fall 1975/Spring 1976), p. 146, which describes the Carmen Lamanna Gallery as "presenting the act of building and the resulting balloon frame structure as sculpture."

[18] Fleming, *Baxter²: Any Choice Works*, 1982, p. 82.

claim to every aspect of the 'after life'; or both."[19] That the company chose to offer itself

for sale clearly indicates NETCO's existence as a work in its own right.

Information Technology Innovations and the Proliferation of NETCO's Business

Strategies

Even at this early, pre-Internet date, communication in the late 1960s was

regarded as an approaching tsunami of technologies designed to speed and mediate the

flow of information from one source to another. More and more, it became obvious that

the innovators creating, using, running, and selling these new information technology

systems were corporations marketing their services largely to the business world.

Because of the Baxters' profound interest in information exchange of all kinds and how it

could relate to their various investigations of art as both a system and vehicle for

information exchange, they found through their adoption of a corporate identity a means

of gaining access to these developing systems, including improved methods of

photocopying, telex, Telecopier, and computers.

NETCO's McLuhanesque investigations that relate to how technology affects

information passed between senders and receivers date from before the 1967 shift from

N.E. Baxter Thing Co. to NETCO. Just as NETCO retained the departmental divisions

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[19] Huebler actually addressed his directive to IAIN BAXTER&, yet the table of contents for this special exhibition issue lists "N.E. Thing Co." as the contributor. The section including both Huebler and NETCO was edited by Lucy Lippard. For NETCO's contribution, see *Studio International* 180 (July/August 1970): 39.

from its predecessor, it also kept the basic terminology found in its earlier incarnation's

1966 Glossary. In this document, the company introduced the acronym "SI" (Sensitivity

Information) as the result of "INFORMATION which is handled in [a] pure or sensitive

way … and eventually leaves its mark on life as culture."[20] By dividing "information"

into the two categories of sensitive and practical, it thus differentiated the transmission of

information that produces or elicits an aesthetic experience from that which becomes

absorbed and transmitted into applied knowledge. NETCO prefaced this definition by

stating, "The idea of comprehending 'all arts as information handled sensitively' breaks

the historical chains that keep them apart from each other and grossly misunderstood."

Seeing fine art as an avenue for communicating information is not, in itself,

specific to NETCO. Instead it represents a common strategy among Conceptual artists.

On the other hand, NETCO appears to pioneer the idea of viewing information found in

the arts as something transformed through the characteristics of its display systems and to

decide to investigate how the technologies of these display systems transform both the

viewer's perception of the subject and the subjects themselves. By this strategy, the

company's use of banal or pedestrian content becomes a form of control in a series of

experiments, the known quantity that enables more accurate measurements of perceived

changes. The Baxters were clearly familiar with the scientific method of experimentation

and observation through IAIN BAXTER&'s undergraduate studies in natural science.

While NETCO's approach to viewing art as information exchange rather than mere

object display marks a core conceptualist strategy, its presentation of this manner of

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[20] Fleming, 1982, p. 97.

exchange, informed through a pronounced interest in McLuhan's theories, were carried

further than any other artist relying on the same body of theory.

Pursuing a seemingly never-ending series of directions in order to explore how

communication, visual or otherwise, works as a system of exchange, the Baxters not only

set up an actual corporation, but made use of corporate technology as well. As the

company became aware of the Telecopier and telefax, which allowed users to transmit

either images or text electronically to others, it viewed these technologies as

McLuhanesque extensions, but also as means to more readily communicate their ideas to

a broader audience. The company installed one of these machines in its corporate

headquarters at 1419 Riverside Drive (the Baxters' family residence)[21] and began using it

to produce conceptualist works that existed solely as information. The printouts received

at the terminus of their transmission were just that, printouts on paper, and thus hardly

collectible.

The company's first solo exhibition using new telecommunications technology

was the 1969 show *Trans-V.S.I. Connection NCSAD-NETCO*, in which it sent messages

and instructions to the Art Gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design over the

exhibition's 30-day run. These instructions were in turn carried out by students at the

school and photographically documented. The photographs and copies of the transmitted

instructions were compiled after the exhibition closed to create a catalog of VSI,

NETCO's acronym for its term "visual sensitivity information." Besides the obvious

difference of producing the catalog after the termination of the exhibition, this series of

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[21] The headquarters is alternately called "The Seymour Plant" (the pun "see more" intended, as always) and was a site of many photodocumentation works carried out by the company.

works was also innovative in that the Baxters never left their home in Vancouver despite participating daily in a show in Halifax, over 3,500 miles away on Canada's east coast.

This technology allowed the firm to participate actively in exhibitions across the entire North American continent and even internationally that it otherwise might not have been able to contribute to due to travel and shipping costs. NETCO sent telex works to such far-flung places as New York and Dallas. One such work is *North American Telexed Triangle* (1969) (fig. 39) in which data transmissions were sent and relayed from Vancouver to Portland, to Dallas, and finally to Boston, thus creating a sphere delineated by an electronic communications network.

In some of these works, the company explored the characteristics of the technological medium used and capitalizes on them by creating word games (since the information was typically typed, unless a Telecopier was employed) to reinforce the limits of either the telecommunications media or language attempting to express visual phenomena. One example is *Fill in a Hole* (1968–70) (fig. 40), a Telecopier work consisting of the original document, a piece of paper with a large hole torn out of its center, and the received document, which displays a solid black mass instead of a void. This visual joke's overt humor masks its more serious investigative intent: the limits of the device that transmits a void as a solid. Another work, *Trans-VSI Number 12: 4.5 Inches of Sky* (1969–70) (fig. 41), is a telex transmission addressed to the Museum of Modern Art that contains four and a half inches of text, each line of which consists of the letters "S," "K," or "Y" repeated across a line to form three equal vertical columns of a single letter. Although resembling concrete poetry, this work relates to the company's

overall goals of exploring means to disrupt normal lines of communication or to illustrate their confining limits.

The telex and Telecopier works bear a resemblance to mail art, although they rely on electronic telecommunications technology rather than the postal service.[22] Both are essentially ephemeral works that seek to contradict the supposition that art be defined necessarily as permanent, displayable objects and challenges the commodification of it. Ironically, both NETCO's works in these media and examples of mail art have been presented in exhibitions and are found in private and public collections. While mail art may assume any form, from simple messages or concrete poetry to illustration and graphic design, it is essentially a nonhierarchical form that relies on the postal network for its dissemination. NETCO's telex and Telecopier pieces are more than just discrete works of mailable art. These are duplicating technologies that require an original to send a copy, which the firm capitalized on in its work *Send the Truth and Receive a Lie* (1970). NETCO used these technologies not only to quickly and cheaply disseminate works but also to investigate the media in a McLuhanesque fashion. McLuhan argued throughout his main texts that one medium duplicates the original purpose of another, each new medium is essentially an extension of another and any medium's function can ultimately be reduced to an original, human sensorial activity. However, McLuhan also maintained that a new medium does not duplicate an older medium on a one–to–one

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[22] Mail art, or art that relies on the postal service for its exchange rather than a gallery setting, is widely recognized as the development of Pop artist Ray Johnston, who began working with mailed letters and drawings as art in the late 1950s. See John Held Jr., "The Mail Art Exhibition: Personal Worlds to Cultural Strategies," in Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, eds., *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2005), pp. 88–115.

scale. Rather, it translates the older medium into something wholly new and thus has a

different "message," as McLuhan would say. In the Telecopier works, as in every

BAXTER& work that features a duplication of an original into one or more different

media, this artist sets up a dialectic for viewers to consider how this process of translation

affects their reception of the original. Thus, the actual works are neither the originals nor

the copies, but both of these and the processes used to send them.

The company sought to present its art to the broadest possible audience, and it

even relied on its corporate credentials to enter booths in trade meetings and exhibitions.

The first was *Session '70 Computer Conference* in Vancouver, in which NETCO

installed a booth displaying some of the ACTs and ARTs, among other works. The firm

entered this conference in order to communicate directly to such large

telecommunications companies as IBM, NCR, and Xerox and offer NETCO's services as

consultants in VSI. Earlier attempts, in which the company directly telexed various

corporations, had met with little or no response. Yet here, it had direct access to any and

every passer-by willing to peruse the material and talk with the artists cum corporate

heads. According to a review by critic Joan Lowndes, the attempt was successful. Among

others, Roger Emsley of the Canadian Systems Support and Development Corporation

expressed his interest in the potential ideas NETCO could offer.[23] As a result of this

conference, N.E. THING CO. was invited to exhibit later that year at the Data Processing

Conference and Business Exposition in Seattle.

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[23] See Lowndes, "N.E. Thing Co., Session '70 Computer Conference Bayshore Inn, Vancouver, June 1970," *artscanada* 27 (August 1970): 60.

NETCO's ingenious contribution to the Seattle exposition was its marketing pamphlet, which took the form of a folder that attendees could use to hold pamphlets picked up at various other booths. The other attending companies' information was thus drawn into the N.E. THING CO. sphere of activities, a company which marketed itself as "the number one ICOM consultant in … anything."[24] To help draw attendees to its booth, the copresidents, together with the manager of the firm's special projects, the Baxters' long-term friend and former student Paul Woodrow, hired models to circulate on the conference floor while dressed in NETCO-designed inflatable clothing termed "wearables."[25]

The Seattle data processing conference was an internationally attended event that drew an estimated crowd of 20,000 during its four-day span. The enormity of this number of attendees in comparison to the average gallery or museum attendance during this time is astounding. IAIN BAXTER& recounts the significance of this number in his interview with White:

> If you had a month-long exhibition at any art museum, the Museum of Modern Art, or—L.A. County Museum or Dallas…you *might* get five or six thousand people through the exhibition—and that's a lot of people, actually. But 20,000, the concentration is incredible.[26]

Beyond the sheer size of the crowd in attendance, these trade shows provided NETCO other opportunities. These events allowed the company to communicate directly to people

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[24] ICOM is an acronym for international consultants over media. The quotation comes from the printed matter on NETCO's folder created for the Seattle conference.

[25] As with many individuals "hired" by NETCO, Woodrow's personality and energy prompted the Baxters to ask for his help by acting the part of a corporate executive. . . . . These positions were temporary since N.E. THING CO. consisted of only IAIN and Ingrid Baxter.

[26] Baxter, interview with Robin White, *View*, 1979, p. 18.

in the business community, and the Seattle conference reportedly landed NETCO at least

one consulting job, a lecture on how to motivate computer database professionals.[27]

Broadcasting Idioms

NETCO used emerging communication technologies to interact directly with the

business world, but it also took advantage of its corporate form to gain access to

broadcast networks and their large viewing and listening publics. In 1971, NETCO

purchased air time on the Canadian Broadcasting Channel (CBC) as well as space on

CBX radio to transmit nationally a series of short ads that examined standard idiomatic

expressions by performing them with the twin goals of (1) questioning how language is

used and normalized within a culture and (2) introducing the work of N. E. THING CO to

a broader audience than available to them in a more traditional gallery stetting.

The television ads were introduced with the statement, "The N. E. THING

Company presents Visual Sensitivity Information Number...."[28] Then the particular target

cliché such as "Chewing the Rag," or "At the Drop of a Hat," would be announced while

it was literally performed by an actor shown chewing on a piece of cloth or dropping a

hat. Likewise, the radio ads consisted of an inverted conflation of aural and visual

experience, such as "Sound Sensitivity Information Statement Number 33—this

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[27] Baxter, *View*, 1979, p. 18.

[28] Baxter, *View*, 1979, p. 11.

statement is leaving the front of your radio at a 45 degree angle. Did you see that?"[29] and

"Sound Sensitivity Information Number 12. The study of a nude," for which the

announcer describes such physical measurements and attributes as height, eye and hair

color, and identifying birthmarks or moles.[30] These works, which were created for a 1971

solo exhibition at the University of Alberta Art Gallery, were documented on the firm's

standard "Information" sheets, which included two maps of Canada indicating the

broadcast patterns of the two networks carrying the ads, and compiled with cliché pieces

that were not broadcast as ads to make a 25-minute video loop.[31] Considered as a group,

the television ads visually performed language, which is typically either an aural or

verbal activity, or one denoted in print. Conversely, the radio ads requested the listener to

examine the typically aurally experienced phenomena of sound waves in a more visual

mode.

NETCO's television and radio ads can be examined by looking at how they fulfill

their creators' claims for them as sensitivity information. In their most basic form, the

cliché ads can be viewed as SI; that is, they can be "confronted or dealt with" in a

sensitive way, as the company's definition implies. What is surprising is that no one has

yet examined how these ads are more than simply aesthetic phenomena. These works do

not produce an aesthetic response so much as they didactically produce applied

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[29] Baxter, *View*, 1979, p. 12.

[30] See AA Bronson and Iain Baxter, *Media Works*, 1992, p. 66.

[31] This compiled video is part of the collections of IAINBAXTER&raisonnE, a Web-based archive and research site, and can be found at http://archives.library.yorku.ca/iain_baxterand_raisonne/items/show/1215 (accessed 22 January 2011).

knowledge: they point out or dramatize how language and sound work in order to elicit spectators to internalize the knowledge they are trying to convey. By extending this argument we can see that none of N. E. THING CO.'s works, projects, extensions, or interventions is simply SI and that NETCO's definitions need reconsideration as its work was never expected to exist solely in the realm of aesthetics. If SI is only a denotation of cultural activities, then the potential connotations of the dramatized idioms require further examination. By asking spectators to question the nature of language and of perception, the company placed the audience in the position of being able to interrogate not only the framework of language but also the intertwined structures of mass culture and art.

The Baxters formulated NETCO as not only a form of protection for themselves—since a corporation is a legal entity separate from its officers, who, as artists, can act on the firm's behalf while potentially deflecting criticism away from themselves as individuals—but also as a parody of the systems of producing and selling art and to allow for certain opportunities that a corporate structure affords. One of the most significant aspects of assuming the identity of a business was to escape the narrow confines of the art world as well as the specific limits of Vancouver itself. By assuming an overtly commercial identity, however, the Baxters were able to expose their firm's work to larger and more diverse audiences such as the more than 20,000 people at the 1971 Data Processing Managers Association Conference in Seattle as well as potentially thousands and even millions across Canada who saw or heard the ad spots. Their status as the principals of a legitimate corporation allowed the Baxters access to these potentially democratizing media. IAIN BAXTER& states:

> I couldn't have gotten on those stations unless I had a company. You can't penetrate certain structures unless you have—a structure that looks like their structure. So by having the N. E. THING Co. over the years I've been able to move like that.[32]

The ad pieces intervened in systems of business that are larger than the art world, but must also be understood for their layers of irony. On one level, they assume the structure of the commercial—these pieces are experienced in the framework of advertising, which Levine regards as the true content of television.[33] These pieces carry out the traditional purpose of advertising because they present to the public a company's product. Yet the product is the commercial itself, whereas the "work" of each ad piece is the tension they create between linguistic and visual expression. Added to this is their parody on the commercial form itself, which frequently relies on idiomatic expressions to communicate its message and at times even creates catchphrases that later enter into the vernacular. These pieces do not verbally explain the etymological roots of such subject expressions as "a fly in the ointment" or "a stick in the mud." Instead, NETCO films literal representations: a fly wallowing in a jar of petroleum jelly or a stick standing in a muddy puddle. Clearly there remains a separation between the two since the firm uses the video medium to play off such linguistic expressions as "under the weather" and "kicking the bucket" to suggest, through a dryly humorous approach, how the separation between language and action has widened. In this sense, the ad pieces are similar to Kosuth's 1965 *Self-Described and Self-Defined* (fig. 42), in which the artist relies on the advertising

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[32] Baxter, *View*, 1979, p. 12.

[33] Levine, "The Information Fall-out," 1971, p. 264.

medium of neon to spell out the title phrase. While Kosuth's intent, as expressed in his three-part essay "Art after philosophy" (1969), is to create art propositions that comment solely on the condition of art, he actually produces in this work a piece that vacillates between a tautological definition of art and a reference to something outside of fine art, the realm of advertising.[34]

The firm promoted the 1971 radio and television commercial pieces as it did all of its work, as sensitivity information, yet the intended effect is not one of aesthetic delectation but of epistemologically questioning art, language, and the phenomenon of electronic media such as television and radio. The company's use of telemedia formats remained consistent with its mission of celebrating the ordinary and revealing the systems of information of art as part of a larger, mass cultural network in order to ask its audience to engage and reconsider their world.

¼ Mile Landscape and the Recognition of the Landscape as "Infoscape"

As an integral part of NETCO's mission to combine McLuhan's theories pertaining to technology's effect on information exchange with its principals' wide-eyed awareness of the everyday world around them, NETCO's copresidents developed a new conception of "landscape." Observing McLuhan's conception of electronic media as

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[34] This interpretation of the Kosuth piece derives in part from discussions with Robert Hobbs. See Kosuth, "Art after philosophy," *Studio International* 178 (October, November, December): 134–137, 160–161, 212–213. Kosuth would of course counter this proposed view of his work by noting that within this essay, he explicitly derides any morphological consideration of art as based in aesthetic judgment, a subjective field that has no bearing on how art reflects, constrains, or expands the definition of art.

describing a meta-environment of information that steers the development of popular

culture and ideology, the company began exploring how perceptions of the natural world

can be altered by this meta-environment.

The Baxters' conflation of informational and physical landscapes dates from early

in IAIN BAXTER&'s career. In a 1968 *Vancouver Life Magazine* piece, he states:

> Most of the time we became aware of what is being done in painting
> through the medium of art magazines; these magazines then become for us
> 'Art Landscapes,' so I take the elements they represent and re-create them
> in my terms, just as I take the real elements from the natural environment
> and present them in my own terms.[35]

In this passage, BAXTER&'s use of the word "landscape" as well as his description of

art magazines as a "medium" is indicative of his overall desire to synthesize aspects of

McLuhan's communications theory, underscoring the ways electronic media affect

cultural systems, with his own background in ecology, which describes how specific

phenomena influence natural systems. His recharacterization of the art press as a

landscape indicates another example of an ironic semantic gaming strategy. The term

"landscape" denotes a representation of a fictional or factual viewpoint and place, but

"viewpoint" is understood as either a physical or ideological perspective. BAXTER&

extends landscape to include the press since it also operates as a representation of

perspective and a type of place. Christophe Domino describes the logic behind this

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[35] See Marguerite Pinney, "Art," *Vancouver Life Magazine* 3 (May 1968): 53.

concept as the recognition that everything has a sign value relatable to a broadened

definition of landscape.[36]

Through his pursuit of sensitivity information and his realization of landscape as

an expansive medium, BAXTER& eventually merges the two together. In an undated

statement, he says, "We live in a natural landscape and a landscape of information and it

is the fusion vs. the confusion between those landscapes that excites me and informs my

practice."[37] This fusion and confusion represents what BAXTER& eventually names in

1999 the "infoscape."[38] Simply put, BAXTER& has extended his understandings of

McLuhan to describe the two interconnected worlds in which we live: the natural world

and the world of information. Rather than retaining an artificial separation between these

two spheres, caused by employing language and technological extensions to isolate and

separate individuals from each other and the larger world in which they live, NETCO

strives to communicate through the metaphor of landscape that the two are parts of the

same "sandwich," a favorite analogy of BAXTER&'s.

In 1968, NETCO created *¼ Mile Landscape* (fig. 9), a work later repeated in

various locations in the United States and Canada. This study proposes that the company

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[36] Christophe Domino, "Formalism of the Informal," in *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs 1958–1983* (Windsor, Ontario: Art gallery of Windsor, 2006), p. 45.
[37] This passage is noted in Lippard, "Three Minute Photos," *Passing Through*, 2005, p. 11.

[38] BAXTER& presents the idea of the "Infoscape" in the following statement: "In the end, we each live our own landscape inside the *Infoscape—Landscape as Lifescape…*," in his artist's statement, *Landscape Works* (Banff, Alberta, Walter Phillips Gallery, 1999), p. 5. This artist's statement, dated April 1999, is a collection of earlier pronouncements, as noted by the statement's concluding note: "Notes and writings dating from the early 1980s have been edited for this publication." This note can only refer to BAXTER&'s statement because the only other text in the catalog is the curator's essay by Melanie Townsend. However, this is the first published definition of BAXTER&'s infoscape neologism.

created this piece to play with various landscape traditions involved with the Picturesque and to redirect viewers to reconsider art's function in establishing frames for seeing and understanding.

N.E. THING CO created the first manifestation of *¼ Mile Landscape* for the May to June 1968 solo exhibition at Gallery 669 in Los Angeles. In its tangible form, the work consists of two halves: a quarter-mile stretch of highway near Newport Harbor, California, nominated as a landscape work, and a gallery display referencing and mapping the larger work. On the roadside of the actual site, three signs were posted directing motorists: "You Will Soon Pass By a ¼ Mile N. E. THING CO. Landscape," "Start Viewing," and "Stop Viewing." Because the signs were posted on only one side of the road, only one view was appropriated and framed for a directional reading. The gallery documentation consisted of three hand-tinted silver prints depicting each of the three signs in situ; a map marking the location of the piece; and a watercolor and pencil sketch of the piece, which was pasted to the map, obscuring its center.

From this description of *¼ Mile Landscape*, it is surprising that this work has not been compared to Robert Smithson's *Site/Nonsite* series (fig. 43) begun almost simultaneously with the NETCO piece. In this series, Smithson created a dichotomy between Sites, or nominated but otherwise unaltered, nondescript areas of land that the artist described as both "kind of backwaters or fringe areas"[39] and "the earth or the

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[39] See Smithson's 1972 interview with Paul Cummings, titled "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archive of American Art/Smithsonian Institution," in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 155.

ground that we are not really aware of when we are in an interior room,"[40] and Non-Sites,

which are collections of geological samples taken from their corresponding Sites, placed

in Minimalistic bins. The Non-Sites are frequently exhibited with an aerial or topographic

map of the Site, masked off to correspond to the shaped bins and accompanied by a

textual description detailing the construction of the gallery-displayed work. Smithson

designed the parallels between the masked-off maps and the shapes of the bins to

emphasize his conception of the Non-Sites as "three-dimensional map[s] of the site[s]."[41]

Smithson's first work in this series, *A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey* (1968), was

first exhibited at the Dwan Gallery in March 1968,[42] yet his series was more widely seen

through his inclusion of three examples in his September 1968 *Artforum* essay, "A

Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," which also includes illustrations of two

NETCO works.[43] There is a clear correspondence between NETCO and Smithson's

strategies of nominating an outdoor site as an art work while also creating parallel, indoor

narrative structures in the form of gallery mapping and documentation.

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[40] Robert Smithson, "Earth" symposium at Andre Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, 6 February 1969, in Jack Flam, ed. *Robert Smithson: The Complete Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 178.

[41] Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 172. This conversation was initially published in *Avalanche* 1 (Fall 1970): 48–71.

[42] See Susan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 63. This work was originally titled *A Nonsite (an indoor earthwork)*. The source providing the most comprehensive dating of Smithson's three-dimensional work is Robert Hobbs, ed., *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

[43] See Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum* 7 (September 1968): 44–50. The two NETCO works are *Portfolio of Piles* and *Eroding Fountain* (both 1968), although Smithson attributes them to IAIN BAXTER& without mentioning N.E. THING CO., an occurrence commonly found among art periodical references to NETCO during its existence.

¼ Mile Landscape was repeated on Prince Edward Island in 1969 for the *N. E. THING CO. Ecological Projects* exhibition in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and again in 1992 (fig. 44) at Pacific Spirit Park for a 1993 retrospective of the company's work at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery. There are three significant things about this last version: (1) it was mounted after the dissolution of NETCO in 1978,[44] (2) the signs were placed in the grassy median of the highway rather than along the shoulder of one side, and (3) the signs were different since they were reworded and reordered so that the first sign of this work's original appearance ("You Will Soon Pass …") was replaced by a sign between "Start Viewing" and "Stop Viewing" that stated "You are Now in the Middle of an N. E. THING CO. Landscape."[45] The photo documentation component for this later variation is also different in its depiction of the entire stretch of median with the signs in addition to the separate photographs for each sign, whereas the first incarnation included only the three photographic depictions of the individual signs.

On the most fundamental level, *¼ Mile Landscape* is a framed view for spectators. This is the essential character of the work, yet this reading fails to account for the series of exchanges it comprises. The first clue that there is something more noteworthy happening than a simple appropriation of a readymade landscape is found in the original version of the California roadside landscape, which is a field with a slightly

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[44] IAIN and Ingrid Baxter separated in 1978, the *terminus post quem* for the company although IAIN used it intermittently afterward.

[45] This rewording of signs actually follows the 1969 Prince Edward Island adaptation, whose signs were produced in the same font as the initial 1968 appropriation.

rolling hill on an otherwise nondescript plot of farm land. In foregrounding the banal, the "defeatured landscape," to borrow a term from one of IAIN BAXTER&'s former students, Ian Wallace, NETCO was potentially pointing to the myriad of empty roadside landscapes that typify highway systems much like Ed Ruscha's artist book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) (fig. 45). Curator Nancy Shaw views the meaning of the NETCO work as "appropriat[ing] the highway vista as corporate and aesthetic property while bringing attention to the construction of landscape as object of aesthetic enjoyment by a transient car viewer."[46] Her explanation provides a useful analytical framework for this piece, and this will be augmented here by examining how this work functions as a critique of the traditional mode of landscape and, by extension, art itself.

¼ Mile Landscape engages in a Wittgensteinian play on the word "landscape" and its use in an art context. NETCO empties the "fine art" usage of the term by encompassing the actual landscape rather than a representation, or by turning the actual landscape into a representation of itself, a tautological sign of itself, while gallery viewers must content themselves with viewing only documentary fragments of the actual work. The piece is essentially an artistic landscape since it is an aesthetic window framed by the artists. But due to the frame comprised by this work, which consists of literal signs instead of a stretched canvas or wooden frame, NETCO removes this piece from the traditional artistic arena, i.e., a codified space for viewing, such as the gallery, and places it outdoors. Additionally, the size of this aesthetic marker toys with viewers' abilities to

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[46] Nancy Shaw, "Siting the Banal: The Expanded Landscapes of the N.E. Thing Co.," in Nancy Shaw, Scott Watson, and William Wood, eds., *You Are Now in the Middle of a N. E. Thing Co. Landscape* (Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1993), p. 30.

see the work as they would a painting. Since their field of vision fails to encompass the entire stretch at once, they must experience it dynamically so that real time enables them to negotiate an exchange with the ideal time of traditional aesthetic experiences. By using such narrating structures as highway signs, maps, and drawings, NETCO creates a McLuhanesque hybrid to call attention to the existence of SI among everyday sights. In nominating this strip of roadside, the company calls attention to such inherent information as land as aesthetic site, land as property, and land as site of agricultural production, which passersby might otherwise overlook.

Art is a medium of communication, and landscape, as a particular genre of painting, develops through the advent and dissemination of the Picturesque and Romantic traditions into expressions of a fabricated sense of nostalgia for a mythic, utopic past. In the Picturesque, an appreciation of seventeenth-century French painter Claude Lorrain's idealizations of the past through a representation of pastoral settings led to the practice of viewing such actual landscape as gardens and tourist attractions through the language of painting, an aesthetic representation.[47] Eighteenth and nineteenth century neoclassicists, Romantics, and Gothic Revivalists transformed this originally pictorial re-presentation of the older literary descriptions that art historian Rudolf Wittkower termed "Virgil's pastoral delights" into "contrived wilderness."[48] Landscape architects and painters

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[47] For a more complete understanding of the Picturesque tradition see David Marshall, "The Problem of the Picturesque," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 35 (Spring 2002): 413–437; Dabney Townsend, "The Picturesque," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (Autumn 1997): 365–376. These essays provide a clear historical framework for this subject and how it has developed from the earliest texts by The Reverend William Gilpin, the first to define the Picturesque as an aesthetic category, to the highly respected text, John Dixon Hunt's *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

integrated buildings, frequently designed as ruins, with their surrounding environs in order to orchestrate a series of vistas that promoted a sense of aesthetic delight and harkened back to a romanticized, naïve past. Another integral part of the Picturesque tradition is the Claude glass, a handheld, tinted, and slightly convex mirror used to frame a view in nature that might resemble a Claude Lorrain landscape painting. Both the landscape architecture and the Claude glass fictionalize a factual view.[49]

This tradition is connoted in *¼ Mile Landscape*'s way of framing a pastoral view, an actual plot of farmland in the middle of Newport which can be seen through the windshield of a moving vehicle.[50] The Claude glass was historically used while standing or riding in a carriage. A vehicle's windshield presents an unfolding parallax in motion and becomes a contemporary Claudian lens that obscures sight through polarization rather than smoky diffusion. Additionally, the work is an appropriation of a segment of highway and its concomitant landscape, a modern, lowbrow, and ubiquitous extension of the Picturesque's strategy of framing views of contrived irregular wilderness. By framing this portion of the field as art, NETCO fictionalizes this factual view by separating it from its environs while pointing out to spectators the activity of foregrounding an aspect of the "myth of the open road" as a constructed and shaped environment.

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[48] Rudolf Wittkower, *Palladio and Palladianism* (New York: George Brazillier, 1974), p. 188 and 186, respectively.

[49] While the Claude glass was the most prevalent device used by tourists to achieve a picturesque view, other significant type of apparati were glasses with colored lenses.

[50] This farm is undoubtedly now gone due to its proximity to the beachfront area and the progressive sprawl of the urban landscape of the large Los Angeles metropolis.

But the company also examined how art operates as a communication medium. Painting can be self-reflexive in framing views that may reflect interior (psychological) or exterior places, ideas, or meanings as its content even though it is largely bound by the framing edge, which calls attention to its physical separation from a representation of its subject. Thus its primary information, in terms developed by Seth Siegelaub, is of painting itself, and any resonance with self or place is secondary. With NETCO's *¼ Mile Landscape*, the actual plot of land, its signs, and the firsthand experience of it constitute the primary information. It comments on the potential self-reflexivity of painting by assuming this condition by being exactly what it describes, a quarter mile of landscape, and, through its sub-aesthetic nature, reveals its content more directly. Someone driving past the work would not necessarily identify it as art without previously knowing of the gallery exhibition or N.E. THING CO, even though its gratuitousness might well cue them into it.

Instead, the awareness of the work as art is derived through its representation in the gallery—the photos, the map, and the drawing—which becomes a secondary source of information and a crucial institutional ratification. The gallery documentation literally maps out the work but is not the work itself, as it is with Smithson's Non-Sites, since *¼ Mile Landscape* was enacted three times and produced three sets of documentation. These components nevertheless play with their existence as evidence: the photographs are hand-tinted silver prints (a printing method often used in fine art prints), and the drawing over the map is a watercolor and pencil sketch. The company, in its typical fashion, created a delightfully ironic play between nominating the quotidian that forms

the actual work of art while using fine art media, typically connoting "art," to create its documentation. This secondary form of communication fails to map the piece on a one-to-one scale, unlike the unrealized NETCO work *5,000 Mile Movie*, a piece which proposed to film continuously the view from a car window on a journey across Canada.[51] In *5,000 Mile Movie* (1967) the firm conceived not only of nominating the landscape alongside the Trans-Canada Highway, a central vein of information transmission and commerce, as their art but also anticipated a primary scale map in the form of a film that operates by conflating real and filmic time, thus forcing real time to operate synchronously with ideal time. The larger concepts of art functioning within and beyond the system of viewing art in a gallery setting, appropriation and ownership of land in a commercial system, and the ideological view of land as untamed wilderness, in short, the content of *¼ Mile Landscape*, all become vectors of a tertiary set of information that exists outside and yet is dependent on both the landscape itself and its documentation.

Painting and especially landscape painting may communicate an external nostalgia for a utopian primordial past, as expressed above, but it mainly communicates these ideas not only within the closed system of the framed canvas but also in the closed system of art display, including galleries, museums, and domestic and institutional settings. In this manner, painting becomes inscribed in a series of preordained social and economic systems ready to circumscribe it, much as land itself is already framed for consumption. A significant condition of the nostalgia expressed through a Picturesque landscape painting lies in its separation from its subject, the land. By playing with the

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[51] This work was later completed with some modifications to its original conception by BAXTER& and his current wife, Louise Chance Baxter, as *One Canada Video* (2004).

preordained ideas of land and art's inscription in established systems of commerce, however, *¼ Mile Landscape* negates these types of ongoing commercial equivalencies. The work nominates a parcel of land in order to experience it visually. The view framed by the highway signs is a plot of land owned by someone else; this fact is made painfully evident in the second version of the piece. The farmer who actually owned the land appropriated for the Prince Edward Island version resided in a house located at the end of the quarter-mile section. During the course of the exhibition, several spectators stopped by the house with offers to buy the landscape, conceiving it as either an art piece or actual real estate available for sale. Infuriated by the inconvenience occasioned by this work, the landowner requested that N.E. THING CO remove the signs and thus end its piece. The company as well as the owner of the property prevented the actual work (the first order information) from being purchased since there was no painting, no actual art object to buy. Additionally, the roadside view framed by the signs is in the public domain, open for anyone to view. After the signs along the highway were removed, only the three photographs, the map, and the drawing remained; they assumed through their reliance on fine art media the hollow appearance of art object, and the first set of these was actually purchased by the Art Gallery of Ontario.

This seminal work encompasses many of NETCO's landscape concerns, and the firm used this genre as a platform in a number of other works to comment on and critique a number of other themes, such as the disparity between visual perception and photographic representation, processes of industry, and architectural development's alteration of the environment. Some of these works are presented as straightforward

images of the everyday while others document the firm's intervention in or alteration of the displayed scene. In this first group, consisting of images of everyday scenes, three works exemplify several different directions. *Ruins* (1968), *Approximately 2,500,000 gallons of water* (1967), and *360° Landscape* (1969) illustrate the company's uses of "straight" photography[52] to document the landscape while investigating the physical limits of the medium as a visual communication system. *Ruins* (fig. 46) is one of NETCO's first Cibachrome transparencies (and likely the first use of this advertising medium in an art context in Canada). The scene looks straightforward: a hillside view of suburbia with houses literally stacked on top of each other with trees interspersed among them. The title, however, suggests that viewers must determine why this scene of a contemporary neighborhood is characterized as "ruins."

NETCO's title for this work indicates another dialogue between them and Smithson, who frequently discussed his conception of modern suburbs as "ruins in reverse," which he clarifies as "the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built."[53] Smithson's perspective on recent architecture as ruins relates to his development of the

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[52] The term "straight photography" was developed in the first decades of the twentieth century to describe a photographic aesthetic based upon clear images, as opposed to pictorialist photography, which sought through such strategies as soft focus or the use of filters to produce prints that approached the look of etchings and painting. The term has also developed to describe an unmediated photograph, where the image presented is entirely unstaged. Through such Group f/64 artists as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams and the New York–based Alfred Stieglitz, who began as a pictorialist but grew tired of photography attempting to emulate a recognized art medium, straight photography became the norm for photography-as-art throughout much of the twentieth century.

[53] Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in Holt, ed. *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 1979, p. 54. This essay was first published as "The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum* 7 (December 1967): 48–51.

concept of entropy as an allegory for a lack of content within an information system.

Entropy was first defined in 1865 by German physicist and mathematician Rudolf

Clausius to describe the quantity of heat that remains unconverted into mechanical energy

within the closed system of a steam engine.[54] It has become an integral component of

discussions of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, yet in major texts on the subject, it is

only defined mathematically. Smithson cited the Second Law of Thermodynamics in his

June 1966 essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments," by stating:

> Many of the artists have provided a visible analog for the Second Law of
> Thermodynamics, which extrapolates the range of entropy by telling us
> energy is more easily lost than obtained, and that in the ultimate future the
> whole universe will burn out and be transformed into an all-encompassing
> sameness.[55]

The term "entropy" has been transformed through information theory into a quantity of

information lost in a transmission, and it has also become a literary trope related to either

its informational implications or its thermodynamic implications, the so-called "heat

death of the universe" that Smithson alludes to in this passage. Even though Smithson

refers to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, his usage of entropy can only be

understood as its informational sense because entropy is thermodynamically expressible

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[54] See *OED*, *s.v.* "entropy." Some useful sources dealing with the problems of the definitions of entropy that do not require necessarily an extensive knowledge of calculus include: K.G. Denbigh and J.S. Denbigh, *Entropy in Relation to Incomplete Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Bruce Clark, *Energy Forms: Allegory and Science in the Era of Classical Thermodynamics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001); and Arieh Ben-Naim, *Entropy Demystified: The Second Law of Thermodynamics Reduced to Plain Common Sense*, expanded edition (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2008).

[55] See *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 1979, p. 9. This essay was published originally in *Artforum* 5 (June 1966): 26–31.

only as a quantity of lost heat energy.[56] Considering Smithson's expressed understanding of ruins and entropy and his correspondence with NETCO's principals, *Ruins* can be understood as an ironic iteration of the lack of sensitivity information found in the postwar suburb, an entropic equilibrium brought about by developing a content-rich space into a meaningless domiciliary tract.

Approximately 2,500,000 gallons of water (fig. 47) is one of NETCO's experiments in documenting fleeting views. This strategy was used extensively in the company's collection of snapshots taken from the Baxters' family car on Sunday drives and vacations. This work, however, documents a section of rapids on the Seymour River in North Vancouver through a series of 16 photographs arranged in a grid pattern. Each photographic still marks the passage of 20 seconds so that the complete work documents a total of 5 minutes of elapsed time. In pieces such as these, each photograph is a visual, static document that can record VSI as a fragment of a larger whole. Taken together, the photographs nearly express the totality of the scene even though they cannot fully convey the actuality of watching over two million gallons of water rush by in a matter of minutes.

Because this work reveals the limits of the photographic medium to portray the motion of the river, it can be seen as the antecedent for Rodney Graham's film *Two Generators* (1984).[57] Graham's film portrays a nighttime scene of a section of Gold

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[56] Smithson has expressed through his writings an interest in information theory through references to such figures from this field as A.J Ayers, Norbert Weiner and Marshall McLuhan. For a different perspective, see Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's essay "A User's Guide to Entropy," *October* 78 (Autumn 1996): 38–88.

Creek, near the campus of the University of British Columbia. The beginning of the four-minute loop is completely dark, but viewers can hear the sound of water rushing across the rocks. This sound is drowned out when a diesel generator, powering large work lights, is turned on, enabling viewers to see the river but no longer hear it. Whereas the NETCO work reveals the limits of photography, Graham's piece documents, with a dry wit worthy of Baxter&, the limits of film and audio recording—the viewer can either see or hear the subject setting, but not both, and the length of the film loop is limited by the length of the film stock itself.

The last representative sample of this group, *360° Landscape* (fig. 48), is one of NETCO's investigations creating a more human-scale scope of vision while relying on the limits of the photographic medium. A series of photographs were taken from a rooftop in order to document the view panoramically and then were assembled on microfilm to create a continuous loop. The odd- and even-degree photos alternate between a fish-eye and a 100mm lens in an attempt to mimic the human eye's ability to shift continually from wide to narrow focus. The resultant static images are incapable of adequately registering this feat, and through this facture NETCO is expressing how the characteristics of this ubiquitous visual communications technology have altered our continuously shifting mode of perception of objects and settings that unfold in time into static, fixed perspectives. In curator Bruce Ferguson's 1981 interview with IAIN BAXTER&, this failure of photography to encompass the scope of human vision is

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[57] My thanks to David Moos for noting the possible connection between these two works.

introduced when Ferguson asks "When you photograph something, do you think it replaces the experience of it?" BAXTER& responds:

> When I was at Old Faithful, there were about 500 to 600 people all sitting around in chairs, and I was the only guy looking the other way. This kid ran up and his parents came and he said, "Did you see it, did you see it […]" And they said, "Yeah, we got three pictures." But, "Did you see it, did you see it?" It was a great dialogue. So, I don't think they ever saw it, but they'll see the photographs.[58]

Images documenting an interaction with or alteration of the landscape can be characterized as "drawing" directly on the landscape. NETCO frequently inserted objects in or applied paint to natural settings to document an entropic state as well as placed mirrors in a setting and photographed this interaction to deflect viewers' attention to scenes out of frame. Works in which the company "draws" on the landscape often feature snow-covered settings, which BAXTER& has likened to a large sheet of paper.[59] Many of these involve making marks in the snow while skiing, a favored pastime of the copresidents, but some are opportunities to inject humor while commenting on the history of declaring land ownership. *Territorial Claim* (1969) (fig. 49) was enacted during NETCO's involvement in the Lucy Lippard–organized "Inside the Arctic Circle" trip and subsequent exhibition.[60] Two images are presented on the company's ubiquitous

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[58] Iain Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, in Val Greenfield, ed., *Iain Baxter, Instantaneous Response: Polaroid Photo Art* (Calgary: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1982), p. 23.

[59] See Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, *Iain Baxter, Instantaneous Response: Polaroid Photo Art*, 1982, p. 14.

[60] The September 1969 Arctic Circle trip was arranged by the Edmonton Art Gallery as part of their "Part and Process" exhibition and included Lucy Lippard, Bill Kirby (who then served as the gallery's director), Edmonton-based journalist Virgil Hammock, Edmonton-based artist Harry Savage, Lawrence Weiner, and IAIN and Ingrid Baxter. This trip to Inuvik, Northwest Territories, was the first meeting

INFORMATION sheet, a during- and after-shot of the president urinating on the snow-covered tundra.

In works such as *Pumpkin* (1968) (fig. 50), NETCO attempts to underscore the limits of everyday language to express an idea. The work is presented as a Cibachrome print, conceptual sketch, and map documenting the location of the interaction. NETCO convinced the farmer of a pumpkin field to allow them to rearrange the vegetables so that they would spell out the word "pumpkin." In doing so, the company jokingly created a tautology while documenting the interaction so that the spelled word would appear upside-down. While making a literal connection between signifier and signified, this work also illustrates how neither the photograph of the field nor the word itself can individually express the concept of pumpkin in its totality. Both are impoverished systems that the viewer must connect to attain a more complete understanding. *Pumpkin* operates as a corollary to such Joseph Kosuth works as *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (fig. 51), which consists of a Photostat printing of a definition of the word "chair" aligned with an actual chair and a life-size photograph of the same piece of furniture set against the gallery wall. Both the NETCO and Kosuth works explore the relationship between the thing itself and its linguistic referent, yet the firm collapses Kosuth's tripartite schema by using the object in question to spell out its own label and constructs the image in situ, whereas Kosuth creates the limits of his work as a set of instructions to be carried out at each exhibition of it. However, the dissimilarities between these two works are less reflective of critical value judgment than basically different methodological approaches

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between BAXTER& and Weiner, and it is documented by Lippard in her essay "Art Within the Arctic Circle," *The Hudson Review*, 22 (Winter, 1969–70): 665–674.

between Kosuth and the Baxters. Both have consistently explored how art propositions can create, define, and expand the inherited limits of the term "art" as a discrete, aesthetic object produced by an artist and placed in a gallery. Kosuth has done so largely through such works as his *One and Three* series as well as his series *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*. In contrast, the Baxters' preference for interacting more directly with the world outside of the gallery, their whimsical nature, and their multiple critical directions have led them to diverge from Kosuth's more focused approach.

Enacting the Mirror Void of Buddhism

While the NETCO works discussed above are clearly involved with IAIN BAXTER&'s own realization of McLuhan's thought, he sustained in the collaborative work the interest in Buddhism demonstrated in his pre-NETCO art. In addition to serving as a corporate identity that represents McLuhan's mosaic and is a work of Conceptual Art in its own right, N.E. THING CO. also functioned as a pseudonym behind which the Baxters could interact collaboratively rather than as individuals. The company should thus be seen as an extension of BAXTER&'s early attempts to subvert his individual ego, one of the requisite steps on the Buddhist path to achieving satori. Within the Zen approach, reducing individual self-consciousness is necessary to achieve a heightened awareness of one's place within a larger perspective of reality.

As part of this reconceptualization of reality, a key Buddhist concept is the void, symbolized by the mirror's ability to reflect everything except its own physicality. The

realization of reality as a type of mirror void is part of a desire to empty all internalized rational conceptions in order to experience the self alongside and within the external world. The self and objects in the world are the mirror's transitory reflections that are unable to possess any of the reflected aspects coming within its frame.

The Baxters assume and literalize this concept in a number of photographic works featuring mirrors that obscure a fragment of a framed view while reflecting another fragment of another view or scene opposite the camera lens. Three works, *Reflected Landscape* (1968) (fig. 8), *Reflected Seascape* (1969), and *Reflected Arctic Landscape* (1969), serve as examples of this series, which IAIN BAXTER& transformed from landscapes to portraiture in his *Reflected Beauty Spots* series after NETCO's dissolution. *Reflected Landscape* (fig. 8) is an image of the Seymour River with a square mirror propped against a rock in the current. The documented scene, presented in a Cibachrome lightbox, is largely the river itself, with a centrally placed mirror reflecting a cut out of the sky and treetops. *Reflected Seascape* (fig. 52) likewise is a presentation of a stretch of beach on Prince Edward Island, with the mirrored reflection of the sea and sky at the horizon. The last example of this series, *Reflected Arctic Landscape* (fig. 53), is a darkened stretch of the scrubby tundra that highlights the bright light of the Arctic sunset neatly framed in the two-foot square mirror. These works can be interpreted as commentaries on the mechanics of photography, which frames a specific view, thereby excising it from that large landscape and erasing the realization of anything not in the resulting picture, or as wry parodies of the single lens reflex camera's modus operandi, which uses a mirror to allow its user to frame a scene directly through its series of lenses

that expose the film. These works critique the mechanics of photography, but also of human perception, which the camera attempts to duplicate. Viewers' focus on one thing or scene in front of them prevents their realization of an expanded reality around them, of which they form a part, rather than from which they are separate. The mirror in these works becomes a device to call viewers' attention to the narrowness of the human field of vision, both literally and metaphorically. The *Reflected Landscape* series creates an ironic tension between the works' status as art landscapes, which mirror nature, and their status as didactic reminders that viewers are engaged in looking at incomplete representations of the outdoors, which are incomplete not only because they are framed simulations but also because they feature mirrors at their centers. These mirrors reflect not the gallery viewers but rather another simulation of the world physically opposite the camera's viewpoint. They frame a view of nature within another natural space, and thus they relate to the Buddhist void by suggesting to viewers the need to broaden their focus beyond limited perceptual frameworks.

Additionally, NETCO's use of the Cibachrome lightbox relates to BAXTER&'s other constant source, McLuhan's theory. The Cibachrome format, which is a high resolution process that yields a transparency rather than a print, was initially used in the advertising industry for wall-mounted lightbox ads in bus and subway stations. Much like BAXTER&'s appropriation of the vacuum formed plastic medium he discovered in the Champion spark plug ad at a gas station, NETCO draws on the Cibachrome medium's marketing foundations. Thus the Cibachrome lightbox relates to McLuhan's metaphor of "light through" versus "light on," a dichotomy this theorist establishes between

manuscripts and printed pages, as well as television and film. NETCO reinforces this dichotomy by presenting the reflected landscapes as transparencies, photographic prints, and maps with rough sketches of the represented settings. The three representational strategies are combined to present the effects of each on viewers' perceptions so that they may determine the "message" of each component medium. The Cibachrome transparency's roots in advertising should not be overlooked. NETCO's use of the medium signals that the firm is actively negotiating a layered dialogue between its status both as a corporation and as an artists' collaboration, as well as the separation and overlap between advertising design and fine art.

NETCO's original use of the medium is also relevant to this study's position that BAXTER& should be regarded as the initiator of the varied photoconceptual strategies employed by the members of the Vancouver Photoconceptualist School. The Cibachrome has been used extensively by many of these artists, including Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham. BAXTER& was the first to employ the medium in Vancouver, and NETCO opened the first photo processing lab for this process that enabled the firm and others to use it more effectively.

Piles of ACTs and ARTs

In their attempts to subvert the object-centered norms of an art system that dictated a narrow definition for art as a discrete, self-contained object and placed special emphasis on the gallery as the center of display, NETCO developed the *Piles* exhibition

in February 1968. Held at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, this show consisted of 10 pedestals upon which NETCO placed piles of such materials as hair, salt, twigs, and eggshells. Accompanying the exhibition was the catalog *A Portfolio of Piles* (fig. 54), comprising photographs documenting existing "piles" located in the natural and urban/industrial landscape of Vancouver along with a map detailing their various locations. Because the catalog is unbound, the portfolio itself becomes another pile. Much like Duchamp's assisted readymades, the piles placed in the gallery setting were not intended as art objects, a claim supported by their omission from the catalog. Instead, they were attempts to spur a dialogue between the viewers and the found piles located across the cityscape, the real work of this show. NETCO subverted the perceived order of significance of one communications system (that of the art gallery, filled with non-art objects) for another, historically less significant one (a catalog containing photographs of other non-art objects and a map).

In a traditional and even late-modernist object-centered art system, access to the actual art object is the most direct means for an artist to communicate. In Conceptual Art perspectives, however, works of art often fail to communicate anything more than their aesthetic condition: the displayed object acts as a stumbling block rather than a mode of transmission. To counteract this phenomenon, Conceptual artists created discursive constructs that were largely presented by documentation that described the existence of these constructs in a sub-aesthetic format. The documentation does not comprise the work so much as it points to its existence. Fellow McLuhanite and artist Les Levine notes in his essay "The Information Fall-out" how:

> Most of the works that are concerned with information are using media as a form of "evidence creating." The photographs or documents act pretty much in the way they are used in a courtroom. They are presented to make it absolutely clear that such and such a thing has occurred, and this is the way it looked when it did occur. The medium, in most of these works, is information.[61]

Levine continues by arguing that North American culture, through its increasing dependence on communications media, has become a society in which older models, where art world figures retain positions of "aesthetic authority," are outdated and elitist. This technological proliferation, as Levine believes, creates a scenario in which the best artists present works as documentary evidence, "abdicate completely any aesthetic authority, [and] make no judgment about the kind of information."[62] Because these artists present work without also describing a corresponding logic system, viewers/spectators will force one upon it in order to make sense of it, thereby expressing their own "aesthetic authority" and filling what Levine calls the "logic vacuum" of these pieces. This appearance of individual control, an outgrowth of the democratic society perpetuated by the media explosion, is however presented by Levine as a falsehood—true authority lies in the overarching cultural ideology. The result of living in a media-based society where individual choice is expected, even in the realm of aesthetics, is that everyone becomes an artist in their own right.

Although *Portfolio of Piles* was published prior to Levine's statements noted above, N.E. THING CO. was operating under a similar, albeit less cynical, view of the place of the artist in society. The firm's deferment to the readily attainable everyday

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[61] Les Levine, "The Information Fall-out," *Studio International* 181(June 1971), p. 264.

[62] Levine, "The Information Fall-out," p. 264.

world outside the gallery is a crucial strategy for developing their view of alternate communication modes and media. The quotidian holds more promising means of connecting with a viewer in order to articulate their communication strategies. Instead of relying on the gallery as a closed site for display, NETCO utilizes it as a communication field to present documents of the exterior world.

This strategy is central to all of the firm's photodocumentation works, including the ACTs (Aesthetically Claimed Things) and ARTs (Aesthetically Rejected Things), two series of photographs of both art and non-art objects that are given citations to indicate their achievement of the status of ACT or their failure to move beyond ART.[63] The ACT certificate (fig. 55), for example, describes the subject ACT as follows:

> All men are to recognize and to note for posterity that ACT___, on this day___ in ___, 19__has met the stringent requirements of sensitivity information as set forth by the N.E. THING CO. It is hereby and henceforth elevated for eternity to the realm of *Aesthetically Claimed Things*. It is to be known from this day on by all men as an *ACT*. *The N.E. THING CO. reserves the right to redo or duplicate any *ACT* as a future project.

The certificate assumes an inflated legal tone that renders it absurd. The firm clearly presents the format of overwrought language as parody. In addition to their citations, each work is given a company seal, a parody of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, a certification for household goods begun by this magazine's editors in 1909.[64]

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[63] The ACT and ART pieces were exhibited in two exhibitions in 1969 at the National Gallery of Canada and the X Biennial São Paulo. See Fleming, *Baxter²*, 1982, p. 41.

[64] For a brief history of the Good Housekeeping Seal, see the publisher's Web site http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/product-testing/history/good-housekeeping-seal-history (accessed 11 January 2011).

To qualify as an ACT, the object or occurrence must "meet the stringent requirements of sensitivity information as set forth by the N.E. THING CO." The company's ironic displacement of more traditional concepts of art is obvious: the conflation of "art," an elevated status conferred by the fine art tradition, and "ART," a condition to be avoided. ACT, an acronym connoting vigor or liveliness, is superior to ART.

These two categories provided NETCO with additional avenues to comment on its philosophy of turning to the world at large to realize the interconnectedness of art as a communication strategy and life as a realm of informational exchange. Unlike many Conceptual artists, NETCO's principals are clearly providing aesthetic commentary and judgments, albeit with tongues firmly planted in their cheeks. Instead of supporting the aesthetic authority of the fine art object, NETCO suggests that the loci of aesthetic pleasure or of sensitivity information are non-art commodities or places, which comprise the largest number of the ACTs.

As is typical with NETCO and BAXTER&'s solo works, making sense of what Levine would call the "logic vacuum" of the ACTs and ARTs is difficult. This phenomenon is treated by curators and art historians such as Marie Fleming and William Wood, who come to similar conclusions: in general, art works that can be viewed as collectable objects, as commodities, are rejected. *ART # 16 Robert Smithson's "Non-Sites"* (1968) (fig. 4), for example, is rejected, as Fleming suggests, "on the basis of the presentation of the concept as a collectible object."[65] This explanation makes sense on

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[65] Fleming, 1982, p. 41. Fleming notes that, "Typical of an optimistic viewpoint, the ACTS greatly outnumbered the ARTS."

one level since Smithson's piles of rocks placed in geometric structures do present themselves as collectible commodities. Fleming's analysis is further supported by realizing that most of the art objects that were claimed rather than rejected fall into the following categories: they were presented as preexisting reproductions of the originals mined from an art journal or exhibition catalog, were in some way determined to be too difficult to enter commodity status, or as Wood suggests, were "partially motivated and sustained by the perceived distance of NETCO from the centre of art world designation."[66]

However, in the case of *ART #16 Robert Smithson's "Non-Sites,"* there is an alternate reason for the company to reject its principals' friend and colleague's work. Smithson's work and interests frequently coordinated with NETCO's, who would have been very aware of how Smithson set up his correspondence of Sites and Non-Sites since they had produced a very similar dichotomy in the *Piles* exhibition and *A Portfolio of Piles* as well as in *¼ Mile Landscape*. Furthermore, the half-tone photographs that serve as the "originals" for *ART #16* and *ACT #87 Robert Smithson's New Jersey Rock Site* (1968) are in fact images presented in articles by or about Smithson's Site-Nonsite project. Smithson chose locations in largely overlooked or forgotten industrial settings as Sites to denote them as sites of his artistic appropriation because he viewed them as sites where time, geological processes, and informational entropy all coalesce. The gallery-displayed Non-Sites were created as means to map out the Sites, a documentary form physically accessible to viewers. NETCO understood, or at the very least recognized, this

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[66] William Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary: The N.E. THING Company and Conceptual Art." *Parachute* 67 (July–September 1992), p. 15.

strategy and supported Smithson's idea by aesthetically rejecting the gallery ephemera.

The intertextual reading of the ARTs suggested here is further supported by the only

doubly certified piece, *ACT #19 Marcel Duchamp's Total Art Production Except His*

Total Readymade Production and ART #19 Marcel Duchamp's Total Readymade

Production Except His Total Art Production (1968–69) (fig. 56). The dichotomy between

these disparate claims supports the analysis presented above for NETCO's rejection of

Smithson's "Non-Sites." Except for his readymades, Duchamp's work may be organized

into three simplified categories: his early work, which, while challenging prevailing

modes of art, were produced in traditional art media; his works and collections of notes

related to his *Large Glass* project; and collections of notes and reproductions related to

his readymades. While this is a simplification, it indicates that the firm's principals were

well-versed enough in Duchamp to recognize the correlation between Duchamp's use of

reproductions and their preference for the photographic medium as a suitable medium to

communicate to the broadest audience possible.[67] NETCO's rejection of Duchamp's

readymades supports the claim that the company was attempting to uphold a view of

Duchamp's readymades as the elevation of the ordinary into an art framework that

challenged the frame for viewing art and the role of the art object itself. Fleming argues

that "by rejecting the acceptance and reverence that the art world afforded the

Readymades, NETCO was attempting to give them back the neutrality Duchamp wished

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[67] In a September 2010 telephone interview with the author, BAXTER& recounts meeting curator and gallerist Walter Hopps and staying at his Pasadena Home in 1966 or 1967, at the time he was producing his vacuum forms. Hopps founded the Los Angeles–based Ferus Gallery and, while working with the Pasadena Museum of Art, was responsible for the first retrospective exhibition of Marcel Duchamp.

them to have."[68] In the photo-documentation of the twin ART-ACT, a partially visible set of hands holds up a stack of books related to Duchamp, with the top-most opened to a photograph of Duchamp smoking. In a reference to the Man Ray photograph of dust "breeding" atop the surface of the *Large Glass*, the portrait of the elder artist is dusted with snow.

In contrast to the ARTs, the ACTs were presented typically as photographs of defeatured landscapes: industrial settings, abandoned or overlooked urban structures, agricultural and lumber harvesting sites, even the moon, as seen from the Apollo 8 spacecraft's television broadcast. Looking at such works as *ACT #29 Storage Tank, Ballantyne Pier Area, Vancouver, B.C., Canada 1968* (fig. 57) or *ACT #13 Fallen Logs, 30 Miles East of Hope B.C., 1968* (fig. 5), it is tempting to view these scenes of industry (shipping and timber, respectively) in a manner similar to Ed Ruscha's photographic project—epitomized, perhaps, in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963)—or as akin to Robert Smithson's ecological and entropic commentary Non-Sites project. Either (or both) of these directions illustrate some of the varied concerns in NETCO's works, but neither sufficiently explains the company's goals in these works.

A closer look at some of these works allows the viewer to begin to understand some of the varied layers of meaning and messages behind them. *ACT #128 Entrance Railings, North Vancouver, 1968* (fig. 58) presents the image of a suburban home's façade at dusk, so that the flash of the camera lights up the two handrails flanking the

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[68] Fleming, *Baxter²*, 1982, p. 40. Fleming notes that a third category, Aesthetically Neutral Things was proposed but abandoned due to the company's belief that Duchamp had sufficiently covered this ground.

concrete stairs going from the street level down to the house grade level. There is nothing

remarkable about the composition, nor is the residential architecture particularly eye-

catching. Images such as this require the viewer's attention due to their condition of

aesthetic indifference. Much like the *Ruins* lightbox described above, this dialogue

between the image and the viewer is the purpose of these works: to call the viewer to

consider the everyday as a potential art framework, an alternative to a gallery setting. In

this case, the point may lie in the surprise discovery that the railings become two bright

arrows pointing upwards to the house. Admittedly, such a discovery can be a let-down for

some, but this is part of the game NETCO constructs—to understand in one's own terms

how to interrogate and interact with the displayed image, and to take this process of

discovery out of the gallery and into the world at large. Much like Levine's arguments

about aesthetic authority, success and failure are a posteriori aesthetic judgments which

are not central to the conception of the firm's works.

Because NETCO is investigating the nature and breadth of sensitivity

information, they often cancel out the object status of their silver-toned photographic

ACTs by presenting them as photographs documenting other visual communication

systems. *ACT #41 Log Structure, Photo in Tillamook County Museum, Tillamook

Oregon, 1967–68* (fig. 59) is exactly as the descriptive title suggests, a photograph

documenting another photograph. The NETCO image shows the subject photo obliquely

so that the viewer can still see the image while recognizing it as a framed photographic

object. *ACT #107 Triangular-Shaped (VSI), Telecasted View of Moon's Surface from

Inside Apollo 8 Spacecraft, 1968* (fig. 60) features a close-up of a television set

broadcasting the image feed from the American spacecraft orbiting the moon.[69] A third

example is *ACT #53 Saskatchewan Prairie, Wheat Harvest Season, Near Regina,*

Saskatchewan, 1968 (fig. 61), which is a photograph of a magazine illustration in which

three threshers cross a hay field, emerging from the gutter of the magazine binding.

In each of these examples, the documentary characteristics of the presented

photograph are reinforced by the inclusion of other visual media in the frame—another

photograph, a television screen, a magazine. Furthermore, all of the ACTs and ARTs

feature their respective descriptive titles written on the print's surface in felt-tip pen

alongside the company's official seal. Both of these overlays prevent the viewer from

engaging the works as fine art objects due to their corrupted surface. Instead, they read as

documentary evidence, a system designed to pass along visual information, which is

amplified by displaying the prints mounted to the company's favored background, their

grid patterned "Information" sheets.

If this extended examination of N.E. THING CO.'s varied works seems

alternately cursory and overwhelming, it is only because of the enormous breadth of

activity the company engaged in during its existence. Its unwillingness to present a linear

progression in a single style and its consistently humorous approach are two of the major

reasons behind its unfavorable criticism, and most likely the cause of their noted absence

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[69] The space-age theme is also taken up in *ACT #201 the World's and Moon's Longest Telephone Call. Content Ignored. Photo Taken at the Time of the Call From TV in Prince Edward Island, 1969* and *Simulated Photo of the Moon's "Sea of Tranquility" Filled with Water and the N.E. THING COMPANY's Sign Placed Beside It, August, 1969.*

in many recent revisionist studies on Conceptual Art.[70] Their consistent criticality of art systems and traditional modes of art place them firmly in the conceptualist camp. Yet the enormity and intentionally varied "quality" of their output, coupled with the jokey, punning veneer that overlays so much of their works, is enough to give any student of the period pause and question the firm's seriousness. Regardless of their perceived level of criticality, NETCO's works and its supportive statements (though few when compared to other Conceptual artists, who are frequently known for not only their works but also their critical writings) illustrate an extensive program of investigations into the modes and mediums of culturally encoded communication systems that encompass or parallel visual art.

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[70] William Wood suggests that NETCO's disappearance from revisionist studies of Conceptual Art is a result of the company's dissolution in 1978, which "put the NETCO name out of circulation." See William Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary: The N.E. Thing Co. and the Revision of Conceptual Art," in Shaw, Watson, and Wood, eds., *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, 1993, p. 18, for his extended discussion.

Chapter 4: IAIN BAXTER&'s Post-NETCO Collaborative Pursuits

"The main advantage in translation is the creative effort it fosters…."
Marshall McLuhan[1]

Throughout his history, IAIN BAXTER& has frequently chosen to work

collaboratively. During his undergraduate studies in zoology, he assisted faculty members

to produce the first field guide for the Northern Rocky Mountains. Together with Gaylen

Hansen, an instructor in the Washington State University Master of Fine Arts program,

he created systemic games of arrangements based on Italian painter Giorgio Morandi's

still life paintings of bottles. IT, the short-lived collaboration between BAXTER&, Ingrid

Baxter, and their friend John Friel, served as the immediate antecedent of N.E. THING

CO. As this study has shown, NETCO was not only a partnership between IAIN and

Ingrid Baxter, but also the basis of such temporary, piece-specific collaborations as the

company's 1969 exhibition *Trans-VSI Connection: NSCAD-NETCO*. BAXTER&'s

practice is characterized by a strong sense of individualism and a willingness to

contradict the preconceived necessity that artists work within clearly identifiable styles

and challenge predispositions to object-centered definitions of art, but BAXTER& has

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, reprint (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 72.

also defined the processes of art production and reception as group efforts between artists

and viewers.

In 1978, Ingrid and IAIN Baxter dissolved both their marriage and NETCO.

BAXTER& returned to producing art under his own name, to which he added an

ampersand in 2005 and decided to use capital letters exclusively for its spelling in 2009.

In his post-NETCO work, he has continued to characterize art as an open-ended dialogue

between artist(s) and viewers. He has also maintained his desire to create works that

served as "'make aware' agents" that revealed their informational possibilities and limits

in order to fulfill the McLuhan perception that art should serve to counteract popular

perceptions of technological extensions as simple "make happen" vehicles that conceal

the cultural implications of their use.[2]

The preceding chapters have analyzed BAXTER&'s multivalent approach to art

as a McLuhanesque medium with which he constructs a series of games designed to

promote awareness and reflection of the otherwise banal quotidian views. These settings

include roadsides, scenes of suburban sprawl, the outdoors, and even the porous and

sieve-like nature of language itself, as elements of a larger informational system inscribed

in culture and its interactions with nature. After the cessation of the N.E. THING CO.

project, BAXTER& continued to develop works relating to these core concepts. This

chapter examines these post-NETCO works and the critical discourse developed by them

in order to reinforce the continued centrality of these ideas to BAXTER&'s artistic and

life philosophies. Throughout this analysis of his works, key issues will mirror those

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[2] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* p. 48, for his description of media's role as enabling action rather than perception.

covered in earlier chapters, particularly BAXTER&'s systemic view of art, including its

McLuhanesque relation to other systems of power and informational exchange, and his

desire to investigate language from a multisensory approach that refutes conventional

aesthetics.

Land Reclamation and Artist Hybrids

The 1979 Seattle Art museum exhibition *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture* provides a clear example of BAXTER&'s continuing interests in collaborative

modes and his desire to foreground an ecological perspective. Reviews of his role in the

exhibition also underscore a recurring lack of contemporary critical understanding of his

work's goals despite the fact that this exhibition fell so closely on the heels of NETCO's

dissolution that its Conceptual Art program should have been well-recognized. The

Earthworks exhibition emerged from the King County, Washington, Arts Commission's

desire to rehabilitate and repurpose a number of idle gravel pit mines across this

Washington area, as well as artist and commission member Parks Anderson's desire to

hold a sculpture symposium with internationally recognized attendees.[3]

For the exhibition, BAXTER& played two roles: a jury member partially in

charge of selecting artists to be included, and a participating artist. Much as in his earlier

NETCO attempts to develop the role of artist-consultant, as well as his efforts to

transcend or transgress cultural perceptions of artists as counter-cultural agents by

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[3] Matthew Kangas, exhibition review of *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture*, *Vanguard* 9 (February 1980): 16.

assuming the role of businessman,[4] BAXTER& was seeking to expand the potential artist's position beyond that of simple producer of art. He served as de facto curator along with his fellow jury members, and he was prepared to serve as artist-cum-organizer by negotiating his project's realization with surveying crews, landscape architecture firms, and draftsmen, had it been constructed.

Transgressing the limits of the artist's role is an ongoing modus operandi for BAXTER& and his contemporaries. During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of artists such as Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, and Robert Smithson merged artist and critic roles to allow them to direct their own work's reception by providing analytical frameworks that frequently contradicted those supplied by the art press. These conceptually oriented artists were continuing the prior efforts of such artists as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, who described discursive models for their Minimalist sculpture that challenged the formalist perspectives of the well-established critic Clement Greenberg and his followers and their insufficiency in dealing with this rigorous three-dimensional work and its very spare aesthetic.[5]

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[4] BAXTER& inhabited an entrepreneurial role as the NETCO copresident, as well as through the firm's ownership of both the first Vancouver-based Cibachrome lab and the short-lived Eye Scream restaurant.

[5] The emergence of artists in the art press is a complex issue that has been treated in a number of texts, including Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), pp. 4–5. Here Colpitt briefly suggests reasons behind the rise of critical essays and statements by Minimalist artists: that this generation of artists were the first to be university-educated rather than academically trained, that this art relies heavily on a textual rather that visual foundation, that these artist-critics were pursuing writing as solely a means for money, and that these artist-critics were, as stated here, clarifying their own positions against those provided by unknowing or even hostile critics.

Robert Hobbs likewise argues that the rise of university arts programs, which added a liberal arts perspective alongside fine art instruction, contributed significantly to the rise of artists as art writers in his essay, "Affluence, Taste, and the Brokering of Knowledge," *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 2005, pp. 200–222.

The artist-critic role, developed in Minimalism and Conceptual Art, extended artists' power positions by affording them opportunities to clarify their judgments through the art press while submitting their art to the gallery system.[6] They were not wearing two distinctly different hats separately, but both simultaneously. This true hybrid is a necessity for artists wary of being misunderstood by an art journalism institution striving to remain current with the constantly advancing and transforming new art, or for those whose philosophical underpinnings lead them to express their investigations and research through both the artist and the critic roles.

Instead of becoming an artist-critic, BAXTER& pursued other amalgamated roles throughout his tenure as copresident of NETCO and after its dissolution. For *Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture* BAXTER& served as both participating artist and curatorial board member. Artist-curator is a familiar fusion, if only due to its inverted manifestation by such curators as Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub, and Kynaston McShine, who through their exhibition design and organizational strategies became characterized as curator-artists, rather than curators *of* artists.[7] BAXTER& used this role to help determine the participants of a project whose ecological underpinnings he had historically

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[6] This argument relies in part on similarly expressed positions found in such texts as Frances Colpitt, "The Formalist Connection and Originary Myths of Conceptual Art," in Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 28–49, and Blake Stimson, "Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste," *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, pp. 282–304.

[7] Peter Plagens, in his review of Lippard's *557,087*, states, "There is a total *style* to the show, a style so pervasive as to invite the conclusion that Lucy Lippard is in fact the artist and that her medium is other artists." See Plagens, "557,087," *Artforum* 8 (November 1969): 67. Ken Allen describes Kynaston McShine's role in his *Infomation* show (MoMA, 1970) as having "critically reversed the curatorial distinction between commentator and creator and adopted the position of curator as managing artist." See Allen, "Understanding *Information*," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, 2004, p. 146. Allen also notes Plagens' essay on Lippard as well as Jack Burnham's similar distinction of Seth Siegelaub on p. 164, n. 10.

considered important. It is significant that many of the artists chosen for the exhibition were themselves artist hybrids, including Herbert Bayer, a former pupil of Wassily Kandinsky who developed his role into an artist-consultant by merging the artist and graphic designer positions from the 1950s to 1970s in the series of ads "Great Ideas of Western Man," funded by the Container Corporation of America, and the aforementioned Robert Morris, an artist whose work was both a source of investigation and critique for BAXTER& in NETCO's *ART* and *ACT* projects.

BAXTER&'s other function, the artist-as-project manager, came as a result of his own entry to the exhibition, *Tolt River Steppes* (1978) (fig. 62). Working with landscape architects and experts in erosion and drainage, he developed a plan to transform an erosion-plagued area near the Tolt River in the largely rural King County town of Carnation, Washington, into a physical exercise and rehabilitation site for the local population. The plan consists of a C-shaped amphitheater cut into the earth, much like the ancient Greek model of conforming to the dictates of the landscape through excavation, instead of the Roman model of instituting control over the landscape by concrete-and-stone construction. At the base of the amphitheater's central depression were twin ovoid mounds arranged in a figure-eight pattern, which BAXTER& imagined as a form of obstacle course, and a wheelchair-accessible entrance connecting the amphitheater to a parking area.

BAXTER&'s plan incorporates several concerns carried over from his work with NETCO: a focus on land as a site of recreation and travel (itself a form of recreation), the opportunity to restructure a landscape damaged by human activity, and a desire to

integrate non-art specialties into an art that produces interactive "sensitivity information."

NETCO explored recreation as a medium for creating art in its skiing works, its

photographs taken from its principals' family car on vacations, and its sponsorship of a

youth hockey team in Vancouver. Industry and its restructuring of the landscape were the

themes of such works as *Portfolio of Piles* (fig. 54), several of the aforementioned travel

photos, and many of the *ACT* pieces. Observation and interaction with land—frequently

such marginal landscapes as agricultural and industrial sites—were constant subjects of

importance for NETCO, and they remained so with BAXTER&'s *Tolt River Steppes*

proposal for this rural dairy farming region of Washington. By bringing together such

experts from non–fine art realms as landscape contractors and irrigation specialists,

BAXTER& availed himself of the potential for developing an intensely participatory

work.

This work, however, was viewed negatively by even well-intentioned critics.

Noted west coast critic Matthew Kangas discerned some logical flaws in the work. He

states:

> Though available in principle to non-handicapped persons as well, it is
> further questionable whether nearby residents of the King County dairy
> farming region are in need of segregated fitness complexes in quite the
> same way their flabbier city cousins are.[8]

Kangas recognizes that the complexity of BAXTER&'s position consists of controlling a

significant erosion problem on a site geographically remote from urban population

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[8] Kangas, 1980, p. 20. Kangas acknowledges the generally hail and robust physical stature of a dairy-farming population, yet in doing so works on the assumption of the stereotype. Personal knowledge and experience with dairy farming regions in South Carolina, for example, suggests that a similarly broad range of fitness levels exist in both the provinces as well as the urban center.

centers while simultaneously developing an aesthetic space that the local population can appreciate in order to prevent the earthwork from becoming itself just another "environmental blight," a cast-off human alteration of the land. According to Kangas, BAXTER&'s proposal falls short of this monumental task. He contends, "Baxter's plan is hindered by geographical location and an overemphasis on function rather than artistic form."[9] While Kangas' criticism of this work on the basis of aesthetics may be valid, it overlooks BAXTER&'s long-standing development of sub-aesthetic modes in his art as a means to deflect criticism away from form in order to focus instead on informational content. Because he reconceptualizes the definition of art not as an object but as a process of realization and awareness of one's surroundings—his "sensitivity information"—his conception of the "art" for this earthwork was not its form, as Kangas maintains, but the activities of the viewers/users allowed by its function and setting.

The Sub-aesthetic, the Polaroid, and Further Hybridized Language Games

   During the late 1970s and early 1980s, BAXTER& continued to characterize art as an information transmission system by reconceptualizing traditional and nontraditional art media as modes of exchange that could encompass or stand in for the primary discursive mode of language. By using such newer technological media as televisions and Polaroid cameras, BAXTER& pursued a critical program that is presented here as an active, ongoing approach that continuously shifts between the dialectical and dialogical:

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[9] Kangas, 1980, p. 20.

some works, such as the *ACT*s and *ART*s, appear to resolve their informational content as the synthesis of opposites, while others—*Portfolio of Piles* and *2 Tons of Ice* (fig. 13) are excellent examples—remain open-ended so that any conclusion produced by a viewer/reader is considered valid.

BAXTER& purchased his first Polaroid camera at the same time he set up the visual arts department at Simon Fraser University in 1966.[10] Just as he had readily accepted the Telecopier and telefax technologies, BAXTER& found the Polaroid's quick and self-contained development process a useful and nontraditional medium for art.

Within 10 years of their initial sales, Polaroids became synonymous with instant results, immediate knowledge of how well one's snapshot turned out, a characteristic that has been replaced by the even faster and even higher definition of digital cameras. The Polaroid extends photography's mechanical and optical reproduction and its ability to achieve high-definition detail into a self-contained and self-developing object. Although it was designed and engineered for mass appeal and for speeding up or nearly erasing the time lag between taking a photograph and receiving gratification from the resulting image, the Polaroid photograph is in fact a singular object that cannot be reproduced through its own process.[11] Unlike traditional photography, which creates a negative used to later develop a positive image, the Polaroid produces the positive directly within the

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[10] Iain Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, *Instantaneous Response: Polaroid Photo Art* (Alberta: Alberta College of Art, 1981), p. 15.

[11] In a November 14, 2008, conversation with IAIN BAXTER& and Jane Corkin, his gallerist, Corkin graciously reminded me that the Polaroid can be and indeed has been reproduced. Yet this reproduction is not achieved through the Polaroid process, but through standard photographic exposure and development processes. Because of this, my contention that the Polaroid parallels other monoprint processes still stands.

camera. Therefore, the most effective way to duplicate a Polaroid is to recompose the scene and take another exposure, which will serve not as a reproduction but an analog of the original photograph. With its integral white border, the Polaroid furthermore creates its own framing device. Designed to provide users with a perimeter for handling the photograph and protecting the image itself, the Polaroid transfers a precious object status to an otherwise optically and chemically created memory aid for its average consumer.

One of BAXTER&'s earliest and most significant Polaroid works is the NETCO-era *The Idea of a Photograph* (1970) (fig. 63). This work takes advantage of how the early Polaroid pack film produced the photographic image. Each film pack contained a set of negatives and positives (generally eight each) interleaved with protective sheets and tabs. Users would pull on these tabs to bring the exposed negative in contact with the unexposed positive and the chemical developer that would be spread evenly across the negative-positive sandwich as it passed through rollers. In *The Idea of a Photograph*, NETCO retains the temporary covers on the four Polaroids that comprise this piece, thus obscuring the actual positive image (if one exists) from viewers. Each of the photos is labeled with white paint applied directly onto the covering with one of the four phrases, "Photograph," "Photograph of a Landscape," "Photograph of a Nude," and "An Idea of a Photograph," spelling out the promised subject of each hidden image.

This work bears a similarity to such conceptualist works as Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* (1967–68) (fig. 64), part of a series of small, black painted canvases accompanied by the framed statement "The content of this painting is invisible; the exact character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to

the artist [or whomever is named in the title]." Curator Ann Stephen notes that these

works by Ramsden simultaneously critique the notion of "authorship as an exclusive,

privileged insight and commodity" and remove viewers from "the usual business of

spectatorship."[12] Both the Ramsden and the NETCO works are invisible or nonexistent

images that deny their viewers' visual access, and they provide textual descriptions that

do not describe the appearance of these images. In the Ramsden work, the knowledge of

the painting's secret resides with a perpetually absent individual, the artist himself in this

example, thereby creating a closed system. NETCO's covered Polaroids invert this closed

system because they are signifiers for each component. They remain only "The Idea of

…" rather than the realization of a particular category of photography and a specific

instantiation of it. Instead of being a secret image, these four works comprise an open one

allowing viewers the opportunity to conjure their own imagery and arrive at the "Idea of

the Photograph" individually, to develop their own idea of what the image might look

like or to consider it categorically and conceptually as an abstract concept and a

potentiality. *The Idea of a Photograph* is a play on both written language and the pictorial

vocabulary of the photograph that underscores their starkly different abilities to describe

a visual setting or object. This work, like so many of NETCO's photo-based works, is

also poised at an intersection of traditional visual art genres, such as landscape and the

nude, with the analytical content of Conceptual Art, which this piece characterizes as

"photography as idea, not as object." In this work, BAXTER& is investigating the ways

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[12] Ann Stephen, "Soft Talk, *Soft-tape*: The Early Collaborations of Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden," in Michael Corris, ed. *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 87.

viewers can perceive and understand the content and message of the photographic

medium.

Many of BAXTER&'s later solo works make use of the correlation between the

Polaroid's instantaneous development and the average consumer's frequent reliance on it

for immediate snapshots by underscoring its sub-aesthetic non-art usage. In works like

Apple Trees (1980) and *Still Life with Watermelon & Saltshaker* (1981), BAXTER&

placed Polaroid pictures of actual objects on a painted ground that provided the

photographic images with a scenic context. In *Apple Trees* (fig. 64), the namesake fruits

have been photographed on a neutral background with a clear light casting a defined

shadow. These Polaroid images are superimposed on a simple landscape consisting of

two trees separated by a band of grass. The foregrounded tree is populated by Polaroids

of a single apple, while the background tree's affixed images are varied since each photo

consists of multiple apples. The single apple photographs display a near one-to-one size

ratio with their life-size counterparts, neatly filling the frame of the approximately three

inch square Polaroid image, whereas the images of the multiple apples appear smaller

since BAXTER& fills each Polaroid's frame with more than one object.

In works like these, BAXTER& creates disjointed juxtapositions of fine-art media

and the pedestrian Polaroid to explore the differences between the mimetic possibilities

of these two media. The painted forms of the trees and their surrounding landscape are

painted as simple shapes, similar to a child's schematic view of trees with a brown

crooked line for the trunk and a homogeneously tinted, amoeboid shape for the foliage.

He furthermore disrupts the possibility of viewing the painted landscape as a

representation of visual depth by placing the Polaroids, with their integral white frames, directly on the painted image. By creating a disconnect between (1) the exactness of detail and visual sense of photographic spatial depth that is a result of light, optics, and a chemical process, and (2) the hand-created, fluid, and inexact painted depiction of depth, he offers a new McLuhanesque hybrid form that questions both the nature of rudimentary photography and schematic painting.

Through this juxtaposition, BAXTER& establishes a tension between the painting and the Polaroid photograph. Both are unique: they cannot be re-created by the same means used for the original. To duplicate a painting, it must be made over again, and thus would not be an identical copy, but another original object in its own right. To duplicate a Polaroid, it must also be remade, as BAXTER& demonstrates in the slightly varied photographs of the same apple in the same setting. Whereas a benefit of the photographic process is the possibility of exact replication, the Polaroid is a single image, and this ironic joining of technology with singularity is a fact that has surprisingly yet to be discussed in relation to BAXTER&'s work. Thus, the Polaroid becomes in works such as *Apple Trees* a basis for a new exchange between radically different modes of making images.

Much like his injection of McLuhan's informational theories into his work, BAXTER&'s use of the Polaroid is a facet that is often mentioned yet rarely analyzed, and thus little understood. An interview with the noted scholar and independent curator Bruce Ferguson for the *Instantaneous Response* exhibition catalogue includes the following exchange:

B.F.: You know the [Walter] Benjamin prediction to the effect that anyone who couldn't use a camera would be illiterate in the twentieth-century
I.B.: Yes, I think that the government should give everyone a camera.
B.F.: A Polaroid?
I.B.: Yes. When they send you your tax return, they should send your new camera. I finally realized the other day what the camera is to the ordinary man. The camera is his ancestor box. His ancestor worship box. That's what it is. That's how we see how our ancestors have evolved and the clothes they are wearing. I heard the other day that there were 4000 shots per minute in the world per day. I think it's per minute or per second. There are that many images being clicked. Some people are afraid of that. I think it's OK. It gives us another way to look at what we are about.[13]

BAXTER& has always used photography as a significant strategy to provide viewers with an easily digested frame of reference while simultaneously investigating the transcendent object status of fine art and its culturally contrived separation from more commonplace information technologies. Due to its ubiquity and singularity, the Polaroid offers BAXTER& a more effective tool for expanding a high-low and fine art–popular culture discourse in his work. He recognizes both the memory-aid status of photography and its evolution into a precious yet ever-present commodity for average consumers, their "ancestor worship box." With the Polaroid, BAXTER& is able to transgress the division that has been constructed in photography as being either fine art or visual information that becomes an external memory index in order to show how fluid this boundary really is. Daguerreotypes, one of the earliest photographic formats, were presented in protective cases, therefore becoming precious object-commodities for their owners since the protective box defined a physical separation from the profane world that turned these daguerreotypes into portable shrines. The Polaroid is the modern, more portable type of

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[13] Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, 1981, p. 11.

daguerreotype due to its similar uniqueness and its integral white border that parallels the

daguerreotype cover in separating it from the world. BAXTER& points to the importance

of the white frame when he states, "Because the frame is a [sic] kind of like the signifier,

it's the slash. You have to hop over it, which is the barrier. It's the boundary."[14] He

suggests the possibility for Polaroids to become the great equalizing force that can unite

fine art and visual culture into useful information technologies.

Another of BAXTER&'s Polaroid strategies relates to his purposefully absurd

tactics used in such works as *Pneumatic Judd* (fig. 3) and *Extended Noland* (both from

1966). These works present two related strategies of critiquing the fine art object by

choosing existing works and re-creating them either in a different medium, such as

inflated vinyl, or by copying another artist's work and adding other elements to it.

Extended Noland belongs to this latter category by remaking a Kenneth Noland chevron

painting and attaching long, colored ribbons to the canvas that extend the painted stripes

beyond the boundary of the canvas into the real space of the viewer. BAXTER&'s later

Polaroid extension works, like *Still Life with Watermelon and Saltshaker* (1981) (fig. 66),

present the Polaroid as a fine art component, which he affixes to a sheet of paper. The

fragments of watermelon seen in the frames of the Polaroid images are extended through

pencil and watercolor in order to complete images of an entire slice of the fruit. Here his

extension of the cropped photographs of the real fruit is filled in, or completed, in the

fictive space of the drawn image, thereby creating a visual and metalinguistic tension

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[14] Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, 1981, p. 22.

between the Polaroid's "reality" and the delineated space created by drawing and watercolor media. [15]

BAXTER& further surveyed the Polaroid's potentially McLuhanesque role as a fine art–visual culture hybrid in his use of the large format Polaroid camera, a rare type of view camera that shoots a 20-by-24-inch image. In his *Handwork* series from the early 1980s, BAXTER& photographed his hands in different configurations to create images from the space enclosed between his fingers and palms. *Handwork—Yellow Abstraction* (1981) (fig. 67) presents the viewer with an image created with both forearms and hands, folded at angles with each hand's fingers just touching the other. The negative space enclosed by the hands is painted yellow. This series superimposes the idea of shadow puppets, something a school-aged prankster might create on a screen while the reels are being changed in the projector, onto the idea of the photograph as the shadow of nature, in order to see what useful information will emerge from their collision. Instead of the shadows of hands, we see them well lit and in crisp photographic detail. This is the inverse of the shadow puppet, and the interplay between the hands and the representative space they enclose adds another layer to the concept of photographic representation as simulacral shadows.

These pieces furthermore present wry parodies of fine art craft. Choosing the word "Handwork" for this series, BAXTER& presents a layered visual and linguistic game of defining art. Handcraft methods of pictorial construction are the traditional purview of fine art and the most frequently given argument against viewing photography

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[15] For a different perspective on these Polaroid collage pieces that nevertheless informs this analysis, see David Silcox, "Art is All Over," *Passing Through*, 2006, p. 22ff.

as a fine art medium in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The *Handwork* series are large format Polaroids, but their pictorial elements are handmade: they consist of photographic images of hands delineating shapes and voids but also paint or ink applied by hand to each print's surface.

In works like these, BAXTER& revels in the possibility to inject humor to counteract the presupposed seriousness of fine art. The Polaroid Company has invited several artists to use the large format camera, including the British Pop painter David Hockney and American Conceptual photographer and filmmaker William Wegman. Wegman is widely recognized for using the large format Polaroid to create comic structures that feature his dogs as subjects and comic foil actors. With his large Polaroids, BAXTER& poses both the medium itself and the realm of fine art as comic foils more common to burlesque joking structures because of their supposed seriousness.[16]

The art press has treated much of his post-NETCO Polaroid work with confusion or derision. Criticism of two 1980 group shows *Pluralities 1980* and *10 Artists* is representative of this trend, though the critical perspectives range from the individual artists' works to the controversy surrounding the curatorial selections of these two exhibitions, which were intended to be important surveys of serious Canadian art. Examples of this latter view stemmed from the fact that these two shows included more artists whose work found currency in the 1960s than younger, more recent artists. One specific review of BAXTER&'s works in the *10 Artists* exhibition is helpful for this

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[16] The comic foil role in a comic duo is also frequently referred to as the straight man or a feed.

study's examination of the critical misunderstanding of the artist's work. Kenneth Baker,

in his review for *Art in America*, writes:

> Baxter, who works in Vancouver, does things that are too slight, too joky
> and too esthetically indifferent to hold our attention for long. His best
> work seems to expire as soon as you see its 'punch line,' while his less
> energetic efforts appear to have no punch lines at all. And because he
> treats visual mediums as mere conventions, his work leaves you with little
> to look at once you've seen its point.[17]

Clearly, Baker takes issue with BAXTER&'s use of humor in his works. Baker is

included here not only because his criticism is representative of the range of opinions

expressed about the work and these exhibitions but also because Baker displays a much

greater understanding of the Canadian artists included in these shows than his colleagues.

Much of BAXTER&'s work does indeed rely on a network of punning humor and punch

lines. Critic Lucy Lippard notes that "His well-honed sense of the absurd led to a

category he called 'Quality Frivolity.' It's not always easy, or necessary, to tell if Baxter

is being silly or satirical."[18] His use of humor is not meant to detract from his critical

inquiry. Instead, it is used to disarm viewers so that they engage the works more readily

than a humorless and intellectually imposing presentation which distances itself from

many viewers because it requires an elite spectatorship that can understand it.

Here the Polaroids, as noted above, demonstrate BAXTER&'s sense of wonder at

the everyday subject that exemplifies what he termed "the infoscape," or his continuing

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[17] Kenneth Baker, "Report from Toronto: Ten Canadians Abroad," *Art in America* 69 (March 1981): 54.

[18] Lucy Lippard, "3 Minute Photos," *Passing Through: Iain Baxter& Photographs 1958–1983* 2006, p. 11.

belief that if art is indeed all over, as featured in one of the many NETCO buttons,

popularly used media such as the Polaroid can aptly explore this art infoscape and readily

present it to average viewers in a comforting, familiar form. Because they rely on the

instant camera, used by many to document their lives, families, and memories, these

works detract from the high seriousness of art photography, a medium that separates itself

from its more commonplace usage. In his review of the *Pluralities* exhibition, critic

Robert Handforth describes BAXTER&'s works as "appear[ing] half-heartedly executed

and, in 1980 at any rate, utterly devoid of originality."[19] The irony of this style of

criticism's explicit focus on the visual presentation of BAXTER&'s works, including

those produced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is that this is also the era in which the

appropriation art of Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince found currency.

The sentiments behind Baker and Handforth's criticisms parallel such earlier criticisms as

Terry Fenton's and Jane Livingstone's 1968 reviews noted in this study's previous

chapters.[20] BAXTER&'s art typically requires a visual component, yet standard

aesthetics are not an overriding concern. Some of BAXTER&'s images can be extremely

powerful, while others revel in an ordinariness and sub-aesthetic nature that resists

developing into a new aesthetic category. The images and works that fall into this latter

category, which includes many of the smaller Polaroid works, vary in their overall

successful fulfillment of the originating concept. However, the key elements of

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[19] Robert Handforth, "*Pluralities/1980/Pluralités*," *artscanada* 37 (December 1980–January 1981): 36.

[20] See Terry Fenton, "Looking at Canadian Art," *Artforum* 7 (September 1968): 56, and Jane Livingston, exhibition review, "Iain Baxter, Gallery 669," *Artforum* 7 (October 1968): 67.

BAXTER&'s overall practice are his overriding primary interest in the concept or idea

for a work and his secondary interest in producing pieces and disseminating them into the

public sphere. Everything else—success, failure, praise, criticism—comes after these two

goals. In a 1981 interview, BAXTER& described his process by stating, "I've been

criticized for not editing out stuff, but I don't mind. I just like to show how I am.… It's

[about] not being afraid to just put it out there."[21] He elaborates his attitude in the same

interview in the following way:

> I don't care about that stuff [the possibility of a single work turning into a
> style]. … We all have styles. In fact, one of the criticisms of me by others
> has been that I don't spend enough time with something. They say he has
> so many ideas and he never completes this one and he never does that,
> and, you know, that might be my style. In fact, I hope it is my style,
> because I want to show that it is possible to go through one's life, and
> down a visual channel, down a visual highway, but you have all these little
> off roads that you can go on. And maybe there might not be a lot of depth
> to each of these roads, but they give you ways of looking at something.[22]

This mindset, which comes off as very cavalier, is the reason behind his greatest

successes—the conception and completion of his most recognized and respected works—

as well as his more vitriolic criticisms. BAXTER& states that his willingness to try

anything comes out of surviving a serious automobile accident in his late teens. The

realization that he could overcome breaking his neck, which could have caused either

extensive paralysis or death, led him to feel free to attempt anything he could think of

without the fear of failure.[23] This care-free, but not care-less, attitude has led him

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[21] Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, 1981, p. 20.

[22] Baxter, interview with Bruce Ferguson, 1981, p. 17.

[23] IAIN BAXTER&, interview with the author, November 17, 2008.

throughout his long-standing desire to infiltrate systems in order to critique them from within. While he views the process of understanding the nature of art as it relates to a wider cultural field as a very serious proposition, he rejects the need to let this seriousness and fear of inconsistency or failure paralyze him. Instead, he pursues his desire to continually devise and alter straightforward and accessible communicative vehicles for opening up a dialogue with viewers, regardless of their background.

Reflections of the Mirror-Void

In the period between 1979 and 1982, BAXTER& was invited by the Polaroid Company to take part in a number of exhibitions, including the 1981 *Polaroid Works* group show at the Gemeentemuseum held in Den Haag, Holland, and the 1982 project *Instant America*, a 12,000-mile tour throughout the United States during which he shot and exhibited Polaroids of local settings and people (fig. 68).[24] In the *Reflected Beauty Spots* series, BAXTER& traveled to such cities as Paris and San Francisco, where he created works that challenge the conventions of landscape photography by merging the widely used photographic form of the travel snapshot and a highly conceptualized investigation of personal and regional identity. The format for these works is illustrated by such examples as *Reflected San Francisco Beauty Spots (Pyramid Building)* and *Reflected San Francisco Beauty Spots (Buddha in Golden Gate Park)*, both from 1979. In

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[24] These two exhibitions also led to such smaller, one-artist shows as *Iain Baxter—Polaroid Photo Art*, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, and Iain Baxter, *Instantaneous Response—Polaroid Photo Art*, Alberta College of Art, Calgary, Alberta, both from 1981.

each image, a volunteer is depicted on the street holding a circular mirror before his or her face. The mirrors frame the tourist attractions named in each work's subtitle description.

These pieces continue Baxter's use of mirrors from the NETCO *Reflected Landscape* series (fig. 8) a decade prior, yet present more complex images through their inclusion of anonymous human subjects and urban settings. They assume and transform the conventions of tourist photography to construct a punning etymological game that equates the two connotations of the phrase "beauty spot"—"A spot or patch placed upon the face … originally intended to heighten by contrast the charm of some neighbouring feature," and "A feature or place of special beauty."[25] This homonymic relationship is made explicit in the *Reflected Paris Beauty Spot* exhibition, which contained large format Polaroids of a nude model covered with Polaroids of a mirror reflecting such "beauty spots" as the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame (fig. 69, 70), as well as the smaller Polaroids as well. BAXTER&'s preference for double entendre is easily understood, yet these works' more challenging aspects arise through his use of the mirror.

Tourist photography occurs typically in one of two forms. In one, the attraction is the subject, and any pedestrians caught in the photograph's frame are unintentional and anonymous. The second form situates a human subject adjacent to the attraction, thereby forming portrait/landscape hybrids that can be presented to friends and relatives along with the formulaic phrase "Here is (person-subject) next to/in front of/with (object-subject)." BAXTER&'s series parodies the anonymity of the human subject of this first

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[25] *O.E.D*, *s.v.* "beauty spot."

form through his use of a modern Claude glass held in front of each subject's face, thus

collapsing the two connotations of "beauty spot" to now read "A place of special beauty

placed upon the face to heighten the charm of some neighboring feature."

These works can be analyzed as transforming an individual's identity into a

geographical marker, so that a subject is equated to place and vice versa. Due to

BAXTER&'s continuous references to Zen, it is also appropriate to understand these

works through the mirror as the symbol of the Buddhist void, which describes both a

space ready to be filled and an individual free from the confines of their ego. The image

of the stone Buddha within the mirror in *Reflected San Francisco Beauty Spots (Buddha*

in Golden Gate Park) (fig. 71) signals his reliance on this Eastern practice more clearly

than others from this series. This piece presents a human subject whose individual ego is

obliterated and overlaid with an image of the enlightened Buddha, but it is not solely an

essay on satori. Because it is a staged photograph, its construction of relocated identity

remains superficial rather than actual, and it becomes but one aspect of BAXTER&'s

hybridizing mosaic of Zen thought and a McLuhanesque approach to both the actual

medium of the work, photography, and the varied media presented therein.

The other example of this series, *Reflected San Francisco Beauty Spots (Pyramid*

Building) (fig. 72), presents this association more succinctly. The mirror frames the

building as well as all the trappings of North America's technological culture that are

often overlooked as incidental: street lights, telephone and power lines, and the cable

car's network of wires. BAXTER&'s acceptance of McLuhan's calls for awareness of

how technological innovations affect a culture requires that these details not be

overlooked. They are a constant subject since BAXTER& never removes them from the frame of his street photography.[26]

Ecological Works

While BAXTER& has never attempted to insert an overtly political message within his art, he has pursued the concept of ecology in both of its two connotations: (1) the study of balanced and imbalanced relations within natural systems, which he has developed from his undergraduate zoology studies into an overarching McLuhanesque perspective of culture and its interactions within itself and with the natural world (a system acting within another system), and (2) the environmental advocacy movement for conservation issues, which was popularized in the mid- to late 1960s.

A nascent environmental concern in the United States can be dated as beginning in either the pre–World War I era under President Theodore Roosevelt's administration or from the post–World War II era. However, the genesis of the modern environmental or ecology movement reactions is widely dated from the public reactions to Rachel Carson's 1962 text, *Silent Spring*, which studied the effects of indiscriminate use of such pesticides as DDT on bird populations and its potential impact on human health issues.[27] In contrast

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[26] This point, that he always sought to include power lines and street lights in his photography, was raised by BAXTER& and Jane Corkin in an interview with the author, November 14, 2008.

[27] Few accounts of the rise of the ecology movement mention anything other than Carson's text as the modern ecological concern's initiating force. For a broader perspective on the history of the environmental movement in North America, see Samuel P. Hayes, "The Environmental Movement," *Journal of Forest History* 25 (October 1981): 21–24, which briefly outlines the history of the movement and key legislative acts in the United States; George Sessions, "The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review,"

to a more anthropocentric view of conservation and land management, this new approach

viewed humanity as merely one factor in the larger ecosystem rather than its preordained

superior and subjugator. The modern ecology movement developed largely as a grass

roots nonhierarchical field. Its political advocacy, which included Secretary of the

Interior Stewart Udall's best-selling text *The Quiet Crisis* (1963), led to such United

States legislation as the Clean Air Act of 1963 (amended in 1970, and later in 1990) and

the Clean Water Act (1977, an amendment of the 1948 Federal Water Pollution Control

Act, revised 1972), as well as the 1970 formation of both the Environmental Protection

Agency and Earth Day.[28]

The modern ecology movement has many philosophical sources, including the

Buddhist pursuit of harmony in nature.[29] As this study has shown, BAXTER& presents a

Zen perspective throughout his work as a means to deemphasize an egocentric view and

encourage viewers to broaden their culturally contrived perspective of art as separate

from culture. BAXTER&'s ecological concerns were less overt during his tenure with

NETCO than after, although Lucy Lippard notes that BAXTER& introduced her to this

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Environmental Review: ER 11 (Summer 1987): 105–125, which provides a more in-depth history of the rise of the anti-anthropocentric viewpoint of the modern environmental movement by chronologically summarizing key essays and texts of this movement; and David L. Sills, "The Environmental Movement and Its Critics," *Human Ecology* 3 (January 1975): 1–41, which examines the history of the movement, its constituents and their aims alongside the views of their significant critics.

[28] See Stewart Udall, *The Quiet Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1963). President John F. Kennedy provided the introduction for this text. For more on the EPA and the legislative acts under their administrative purview, see their Web site, http://www.epa.gov/history/index.htm (accessed 12 January 2011).

[29] See Sessions, "The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review," 1987, pp. 107, 109, 113, and 119, which discuss how ecocentric writers assumed the Zen Buddhist perspective of such writers as Aldous Huxley and Allan Watts.

environmentalist practice in the late 1960s.[30] Such NETCO works as *¼ Mile Landscape*

(1968) (fig. 9), *Territorial Claim* (1969) (fig. 49), and *Paint into Earth* (1966–68) deal

more with direct appropriation or interaction with land as a site for artistic action than a

call for ecological awareness. *Paint into Earth* (fig. 73), which presents itself as

documenting the location and act of "one quart of white outdoor paint poured into a

circular hole of one quart capacity," critiques the history of painting *en plain air* more

than the history of humanity's domination over the natural world.[31]

    After NETCO, however, BAXTER& began constructing more direct ecological

commentaries. Some of his most overtly ecological presentations include his *Animal*

Preserve series and other related found-object still lifes that begin around 1990 and

continue through 2008 (fig. 2, 74). Works in this series are created with plush toy stuffed

animals, typically procured from secondhand or discount stores, which are either placed

in repurposed cages or in canning jars filled with distilled water. While they seem to be a

significant departure for BAXTER&, these works refine the ecological and consumerist

issues that have informed much of his work since the 1960s. These pieces examine

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[30] See Lippard, "You Are Now in the Middle of a Revisionist History of the N.E. Thing Co.," in Shaw, Watson, and Wood, eds., *You Are Now in the Middle of an N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, 1993, p. 59, where she states, "[*Portfolio of Piles*] is a compendium of the Baxters' preoccupations, their particular blend of local and global, matter and anti-matter, ecology and electronics, permitting them to comment on art … the environment and ecology (it was from Iain that I first heard the term)…."

[31] *Paint into Earth* was conceived prior to BAXTER& and Lawrence Weiner's first meeting during their *Art within the Arctic Circle* trip to Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in 1969. Weiner had produced a similar piece for his December 1968 *Statements* exhibition curated by Seth Siegelaub that is described by the following: "One hole in the ground approximately one foot by one foot/ One gallon water-based white paint poured into this hole." *Statements* (New York: The Louis Kellner Foundation, in association with Seth Siegelaub, 1968) is the first exhibition for either Weiner or Siegelaub to exist solely as a book/catalogue. In another Siebelaub exhibition, his *March 1969* show (also referred to as the *One Month* show) Weiner provided his work *An Object Tossed from One Country to Another*. In response to this piece, NETCO created their extension *And Back Again* and later enacted both the Weiner original and its extension by documenting a camera thrown across the Canadian border and back into America.

humanity's presumed dominion over nature and imply an inquiry into how well this responsibility has been assumed. While the content of this series is a highly critical, politicized reflection, the use of the stuffed animals prevents these works from becoming dogmatic diatribes and continues BAXTER&'s Pop-inflected appropriation of mass culture ephemera. The google-eyes, bright colors, and comforting reassurance of the child's toy status of these objects translate BAXTER&'s very real concern for human interaction with the natural world into visually stunning yet humorous displays. They continually waver between a good joke accessible to all and a medium that implores viewers to explore their layered messages.

With the *Animal Preserve* series, BAXTER& appears to have moved away from his conceptualist past because these works seem fairly rooted in their object status. But these pieces do not rely solely on an ontological premise since they can operate as multiples, variations on the same theme or generative conception. This fact alone does not confer a conceptualist mantle, in the nonhistorical sense, as systemic works predate the origins of Conceptual Art, yet this series is still rooted in BAXTER&'s McLuhanesque Pop-Conceptual mode. BAXTER& defamiliarizes the stuffed animals by placing them in an art context and preserving them, as the series' title suggests, in jars and industrial containers and shelves more commonly found in shipping companies' warehouses. Through his defamiliarization strategies, the plush toy animal subjects cease to exist only as themselves. Instead, they become actors in the collaborative dialogic game that he constructs in these assemblages.

His use of toy animals places the *Animal Preserve* series in a dialogue with such artists as Mike Kelley and Annette Messager, who both have used and modified stuffed animals in their works. Mike Kelley typically sews these bought toys together to produce disturbing assemblages (fig. 75) whose meanings are left for the viewers to decide. They have been described in terms relevant to sexual abuse of children and repressed memory or to the perceptual distance between these toys' cute and cuddly appearance and how they can actually function as monstrosities.[32] The French artist Messager uses dolls (fig. 76) not to express a disdain for consumerism or societal issues, but to create what she terms "effigies," a metaphor for lost childhood identity.[33] Her work with dolls juxtaposes surrealist predispositions with conceptual modes.

In contrast to these artists, the implicit criticism of the *Animal Preserve* series is not simply that of consumerism, but how rampant development affects the natural world as well as how North American culture creates alternate views of wildlife by translating it from actual organisms to cartoon actors of children's whimsy. Presented as collections of toy animals, these works correspond with such preexisting modes for interacting with wild animals as hunting lodge trophies, natural history specimen collections, and zoos— all of which express an anthropocentric view of humanity as conqueror or collector of the natural world. Additionally, BAXTER& retains his interest in McLuhan through these

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[32] See Rosalind Krauss, "'Informe' without Conclusion," *October* 78 (Autumn 1996): 89–105; Lynne Cooke, review of *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, Whitney Museum, *Burlington Magazine* 136 (February 1994): 38–39; and Elisabeth Sussmann, ed., *Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994).

[33] For more on Messager, see Annette Messager, ed. *Annette Messager, the Messengers* (Munich and New York: Prestel, in association with Centre Georges Pompidou, 2007).

works' translation of existing extensions into a visual art system. As fine art, they exist as a medium whose content is not only plush toy animals (whose content is both the natural world and the world of play), but also the news report, a standard source of information about ecological crises. BAXTER& maintains McLuhan's idea that art's purpose is to reframe another source of information by providing an audience a potentially more digestible framework for the information presented. He disarms viewers' myopic experience in reading news articles or viewing broadcasts by presenting instead safe and fondly remembered children's toys or carnival prizes. Thus his humorous approach to these nostalgic objects opens these works up to more active participation and reception, a truly collaborative enterprise. Regardless of these pieces' object status, their generative conception and resulting cooperation of artist and viewers is the work.

BAXTER&'s 1996 accumulation piece *Techno Compost* (fig. 75) constructs a collaborative work-as-ecological commentary from a different vantage point than the *Animal Preserve* series. Consisting of a chain-link fence to contain cast-off electronic appliances, *Techno Compost* provides viewers a clear framework for examining the cultural paradigm of planned obsolescence through this accumulation of old lamps, stereo components, computer peripherals, kitchen appliances, and musical instruments. BAXTER&'s preference for collaborative constructions of meaning is present in this piece, but he extends this idea by asking viewers to not only contribute intellectually but also physically. All of the components were added by the viewers themselves.

Situated in the atrium of a shopping mall, this installation creates an ironic tension between being placed physically in a space devoted to consumerism while being an

accumulation of technological refuse. In its collaborative system of construction, it recalls BAXTER&'s *2 Tons of Ice* performance from 1965, in which he also asked viewers to meld spectator and accomplice roles. Both of these works also share a relation to the concepts of destruction and disappearance that are featured in the extended title of *2 Tons of Ice*, although *Techno Compost* adds a more concrete ecological component to his earlier work's realization of Buddhism's acceptance of such natural processes as decay. *Techno Compost* parallels such works as Robert Morris's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969) because each of these installations' appearance changed throughout their duration. However, BAXTER&'s work relies more on an epistemological investigation of meaning than a strictly phenomenological experience due to its embrace of viewer's physical and intellectual collaboration.

Visual and Digital Language Systems

BAXTER& retains his profound interest in McLuhan in his art of the late 1990s and 2000s by channeling it into a conceptualist practice that mandates an active participation between the artist and viewers to complete the work. Three works or series help to elucidate this point: the addition of the ampersand to his name, his painted televisions, and his binary code works.

In 2005, BAXTER& legally changed his name to include the ampersand, and decided in 2009 to spell his name in all capital letters so that both the 'BAXTER' and '&' components are typographically equal and can be read as a single entity. He has accorded

the conjunction 'and' a central importance to language in his declaration, "The word

'and' is like the DNA of language; it holds it all together."[34] Since DNA forms the

genetic foundation of all organisms and is AND spelled backward, BAXTER&'s

connection of these two words confers a crucial communicative role on the ampersand.

This addition to his name was intended to signify the open-endedness of his life and

work. It suggests a tacit ellipsis that viewers must fill in, thereby actively participating in

the construction of meaning. Because it assumes an elliptical role, it relates to Alan

Fleming's "Please Complete and Return" logo designed for NETCO in 1968, which

featured six dotted lines to be filled out by any willing participant.

This open-ended quality to his name, which reinforces his desire for collaboration

and his characterization of the "&" to serve a linguistic role akin to DNA, neatly ties into

his long-standing use of visual and textural puns. These puns make his serious intent or

message more potent by translating it into humor and even absurdity. McLuhan saw a

relationship between art and game theory, noting, "Art, like games, is a translator of

experience. What we have already felt or seen in one situation we are suddenly given in a

new kind of material."[35] BAXTER& has expressed his consistently humorous reappraisal

of the limits of art and life through the foundation of the N.E. THING CO., through the

reordering of his and Ingrid Baxter's familial life and the nomination of their children as

works of art (*And They Had Issue*, 1968), through his consultation appointments (e.g., his

1982–83 stint as creative consultant to the president of Labatt's Brewing Company), and

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[34] BAXTER&, telephone interview with the author, January 30, 2011.

[35] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 242.

through his post-NETCO collaborations with his wife Louise Chance Baxter. It should be no surprise then that BAXTER& creates another work simply by changing his legal name, thereby reaffirming his conceptualist heritage by transgressing an object-centered definition of art. The ampersand as signifier has also served as the source for a continuing series of works, both linguistic and sculptural, that include his blue "&" tattoos on each hand, *A Pile of Ands* (2008), and a proposed series of works in which such historically significant documents as the Magna Carta and Declaration of Independence are reproduced—deleting every instance of the word "and."

The painted television series, largely produced in 1999, consists of small, older-model television sets on which BAXTER& has painted a stylized landscape (fig. 76). These pieces are displayed turned on, but de-tuned to broadcast static and white noise. The visual "snow" is somewhat visible as the landscape ground, becoming either part of the sky or body of water depending on the painted setting. The broadcasting of snow has a double function in these works: to clarify the televisual medium's characteristic properties of display and form another layer to BAXTER&'s continual process of illustrating the merger of the landscape and infoscape that surrounds viewers. As noted earlier, McLuhan saw television as a "cool" medium that required active participation on the part of the viewer to complete the multisensory synesthetic experience. The medium of television is the icon of electronic communications not only because it relies on a network of broadcast and receiver components but also because the audio and visual components are broken down electronically and reassembled at their terminus. McLuhan states, "The TV image offers some three million dots per second to the receiver. From

these he accepts only a few dozen each instant, from which to make an image."[36] Because

BAXTER&'s painted televisions broadcast snow, however, there is no clear receivable

image to lose viewers' attention. They see the television signal as the component pixels,

the electric light that McLuhan stressed as pure information with no content. BAXTER&

has accepted McLuhan's views of television, especially his metaphor of the technology

as "light through" rather than "light on," which McLuhan suggested as the participatory

necessity inherent to both the illuminated manuscript and the television medium.[37]

BAXTER&'s acceptance of this metaphor formed the basis of his interest in Cibachrome

light boxes that began in the late 1960s, just as it is present in these works. With these

painted television works, BAXTER& finds a new dimension to his process of exhibiting

the parallels he discerns between the natural landscape in which human culture exists and

the informational landscape it creates around its members. McLuhan postulated that film

viewers become the camera while television viewers are the screen. [38] BAXTER& returns

to this idea by suggesting that viewers can view the painted landscapes placed upon these

screens as being overlaid metaphorically on themselves and recognize the juxtaposition

between electronic signals and painted representations as the metaphoric space

circumscribing their everyday existence.

      In his binary code pieces, BAXTER& carries McLuhan's ideas on art as well as

the developing computer age one step further. These works from the late 2000s are

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[36] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 313.

[37] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 313: "The resulting plastic contour appears by light *through*, not light *on*, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture."

[38] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 312.

painted plywood or bare metal sheets pierced by rows of ones and zeros that spell out each work's title in binary code. Two such works represent his continual juxtaposition of visual and linguistic information systems in order to collapse the perceived divide between the landscape and infoscape: *Digital Conversion Series: LANDSCAPE WITH SAILBOATS* (2008) and *Digital Conversion Series: MASTURBATING LIFE MAKES ART* (2008).

LANDSCAPE WITH SAILBOATS (fig. 77) presents an idyllic waterscape with land masses and sky gesturally painted on a full four-by-eight-foot sheet of plywood. The title of the work, translated into binary code, is routed into the plywood ground of the work and creates an unstable figure-ground relationship between the fictive space of the painted image and the actual cut surface. The resulting perceptual discontinuity poses the question "Which component is overlaying the other?" The inclusion of text in visual art has a long history beginning with Cubism and Dada in the first decades of the twentieth century, through the mid-century neo-Dada of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as textual Conceptual Art pieces by such artists as Kosuth, Weiner, and BAXTER& himself. The use of the title as a component of the work mirrors Kosuth's *Self-Described and Self-Defined* (1965), in which a neon light spells out the title of the work and expresses its recursive potential by defining itself as "art" while using the non-art medium of the neon sign. *LANDSCAPE WITH SAILBOATS* is similarly comprised and defined by its descriptive title, yet the language used is that of the computer. Similarly, *MASTURBATING LIFE MAKES ART* (fig. 78) consists of the title phrase spelled out in binary code removals from the otherwise unmodified aluminum sheet ground of the

work. These are linguistic works that signal a broad-based cultural conversion to the digital age while simultaneously expressing a common ignorance of the language of computers. BAXTER& points out the implicit irony of the mass cultural reliance on its technological extension of the human nervous system despite a widespread inability to understand the language originally derived for the digital medium.

BAXTER&'s post-NETCO practice signals the continuing development of the core thematic investigations that he initiated in the early 1960s. He has proliferated his investigations of the gaps and fissures in an art system whose culturally contrived parameters separate it from interacting within the larger systems of information exchange and commercialism. Relying on Pop-derived modes in his use of such consumer products as toys, processes as Polaroid photography, and technological extensions of language as binary code, BAXTER& provides viewers opportunities to recognize the realm of fine art as a microcosm of the larger systems that affect and structure their daily lives. Through his original interests in McLuhan and Zen Buddhism, BAXTER& has maintained an open, non-categorical approach to art as a collaborative enterprise, requiring others' input to assist in its realization and production of meaning. BAXTER& thus elucidates how art mediates its informational content and can instigate an awareness of how technological extensions affect the nature of a culture's interpersonal interactions, its process of self-definition, and its impact on the natural world.

Conclusion

Beginning in the early 1960s and continuing through the 2010s, IAIN BAXTER&
has consistently examined fine art as a field of culturally mediated rules ripe for
transgression and transposition into broader-based systems of communication. His
multivalent cultural critique is based on a Pop Art examination of commodity, celebrity,
and marketing, which he transforms by investigating art as a mediated environment that
can be understood by a potentially broad base of viewers. Although he is serious about
his aims, he uses humor to make his message more potent and approachable.
BAXTER&'s Conceptual Art is predicated on a foundation of Zen, McLuhanism, and
Pop Art, capable of linking objects with interconnected systems of commercial and
informational exchange.

This study has introduced five generative principles that have been manifested
throughout BAXTER&'s work. Although these principles can be understood
independently, they frequently work in tandem and demonstrate ways he has absorbed his
study of Zen and McLuhan. By underscoring his early acceptance and understanding of
Zen Buddhism, it has shown how he has used this Eastern practice as a basis for his sub-
aesthetic presentations of everyday settings and mined their potential to foreground
Buddhist concepts of reality and personal identity as mirroring voids, both figuratively

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and literally. He has made these ideals apparent in such works as his *2 Tons of Ice*, many photographs of roadside scenes and attractions, NETCO ACTS claiming industrial and agricultural sites as art, as well as his use of mirrors in NETCO's mirrored landscapes and his post-NETCO *Reflected Beauty Spot* series.

BAXTER& is not, however, anti-aesthetic. The NETCO framework for ART and ACT clearly illustrate his efforts to broaden conventional notions of aesthetically acceptable limits by shifting them away from insular contemplation. Instead, he posits the idea of art as a realization of life in everyday environs. Thus, his works do not exist as discrete and transcendent environments but as parts of open systems that mirror or reflect aspects of reality. His preference for sub-aesthetic presentations of commonplace settings needs to be understood in relation to D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watt's brand of Zen and its focus on mundane existence—rather than ascetic distance and rigorous, disciplined training—as an immediate path to satori. In his work, BAXTER& creates gaming frameworks that operate similar to Zen *kōans* because they are discursive propositions viewers are invited to interpret for themselves. Had he relied on conventionally aesthetic presentations, his attempts to engage viewers in a dialogue would have been diluted by their easy acceptance of wholly familiar-looking art.

The second principle presented here focuses on BAXTER&'s creation of the "infoscape," a new framework he devises to encompass both everyday reality and the informational networks mediating it. His pursuits to draw attention to the infoscape are related to his Buddhist study and a concomitant interest in the quotidian, but it is also one of the fundamental ways he has translated and redirected McLuhan's theories. McLuhan

described a meta-environment of information technologies and its effects on human perception and cultural definition. BAXTER& extends this technological meta-environment to include not only information passed between people via telecommunications media, but also the ways this information is superimposed on the natural world. His development of the infoscape began before NETCO, with such works as the bagged landscapes and *Bagged Place*, presenting plastics metaphorically enveloping domestic and environmental spaces. It became more pronounced through such NETCO pieces as *¼ Mile Landscape* and the *Telexed Triangle* works. However, his post-NETCO art, especially the painted televisions and *Digital Conversion* series, are his most concise examples of how the information meta-environment interacts with the actual environment.

BAXTER&'s careful consideration of McLuhan's ideas led to a preference for technological rather than traditional artistic media, the third principle introduced here. He has employed television, radio, telefax, and Telecopier technologies as manifestations of the infoscape, but their use goes beyond this aim since NETCO's purposefully clichéd ad series and the telex and Telecopier pieces explore McLuhanesque views of media. In his art these technologies describe their processes of translation, transmission, and reception and clarify their ability to create instantaneous networks. Throughout McLuhan's texts, he posited the need to penetrate mediated structures in order to understand their consequences, i.e. to find the message of the media. BAXTER& has taken this as a prescriptive aim by devising representational frameworks for critiquing mass culture. He has relied on plastics, toys, and communication media as ephemera denoting aspects of

this cultural system. His photographic practice underscores how popular culture has come to rely on this medium as an external memory index. BAXTER& has also explored the structures of commercialism and business enterprise by establishing NETCO as a business entity, with Ingrid Baxter as a partner, and by assuming an entrepreneurial role through this firm and its subsidiaries, including a photo-lab, a restaurant, and a magazine. Mounting a critique of corporate culture from within is a startlingly radical approach for its time, considering that most of his peers and contemporaries were more comfortable with a countercultural approach and removed themselves from the perceived mainstream to critique it from a distance rather than from within the system itself.

BAXTER&'s continuing reliance on these frameworks clearly allies him with Pop Art's investigation of popular culture's ubiquity. At the same time, this position reinforces his connections with Conceptual Art since his use of communications technologies subverts normative definitions of art. Through his work, BAXTER& investigates and analyzes meaning and the formation of knowledge rather than limiting himself by continuing to produce and describe discrete objects. For BAXTER& and NETCO, the object presented in a gallery setting is not the art itself, but the catalyst for viewers' own investigations. Much like the NETCO logo, BAXTER& and Ingrid Baxter ask viewers to "Please complete and return."

BAXTER&'s understanding of visual art as a didactic enterprise closely aligned with language is the fourth principle described here. Before he became aware of McLuhan's writing, BAXTER& was interested in establishing pedagogical models that relied solely on visual communication. His interaction with McLuhan's theory only

strengthened his desire to examine the exchange between visual and linguistic structures. NETCO manifested this desire through its mission statement prioritizing "sensitivity information," or sensorially perceived knowledge and experience. BAXTER&'s *Bagged Place* and NETCO's *Portfolio of Piles* are two of the earliest, most concise examples of this didactic tendency to rely almost solely on visual elements. Works following these examples include his post-NETCO *Animal Preserve* series and *Techno Compost* since they serve as frameworks encouraging viewers to explore ecological perspectives by visually interacting with these assemblages.

BAXTER&'s interest in visual information's correspondence with verbal or written language is more typically represented by his works that collide both of these elements for a humorous effect. *Standards 24* is the earliest example of this tendency of overlaying language and visual components, and he uses it to reduce traditional approaches to painting to an absurd series of mappable "standards," thereby emptying them of meaning. BAXTER& uses puns as titles—bagged or inflatable landscapes, ACT and ART, handwork, animal preserve, the name of his firm and its headquarters, the Seymour Plant—to engage viewers to interact with his work through humor. His proficient use of openly humorous modes distinguishes him from many of his Conceptual art peers and their preference for far more sober modes of artistic enterprise. Rather than focusing only on an elite spectatorship through unquestionably "serious" works, he wishes to engage broad audiences and finds humor a far more effective tool for achieving these aims than dry presentations.

The use of humor in Conceptual Art is widely overlooked and is a subject that requires further study. Whereas Joseph Kosuth and the Art & Language group, among others, carefully eschewed levity in their works, artists such as John Baldessari parodied seriousness and thus pricked its self-conscious afflatus. Robert Smithson is typically regarded as a serious, highly erudite investigator of entropy and geologic structures even though he pushed his examination of logical structures at times into a realm of ironic absurdity to reveal their humorous potential.[1] While Smithson's humor was veiled by his dry presentation, Bruce Nauman and General Idea used mischievous humor more openly. Undoubtedly, more examples exist than these offered here.

BAXTER&'s humor ranges from visual homonyms—as seen in the defamiliarized plush toys in *Animal Preserve* works, the *Reflected Beauty Spot* series, and the pre-NETCO extension work *Slipcover for Donald Judd*—to the malapropism of *Pneumatic Judd* and *Straightened José de Rivera*. NETCO's clichéd ads enact language for humorous effect and exemplify both BAXTER&'s and Ingrid Baxter's parodic impulse to view humor as central to human interactions because it levels hierarchies and engages diverse groups through its use in self-effacing or satiric caricatures.

Because BAXTER& understood early in his professional career the Buddhist precept of subverting the individual ego, he created a number of pseudonyms to distance his art from being read as an individual production. The first example of this fifth principle documented here is "Mr. Art Painter" for *Standards 24*. Later BAXTER& collaborated with Ingrid Baxter and their friend John Friel for the short-lived IT group,

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[1] The first study of Smithson's work to consider its underlying potential for ironic humor is Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981).

which actually provided all three of these artists with anonymity. N.E. THING CO. was both a collaboration and a work in its own right, and like all parodies, it assumed the form of an ongoing target in a shifting scale of acceptance and rejection. More recently, Iain Baxter has changed his name to BAXTER& to reflect his desire for art to be a communal enterprise. His ongoing pseudonymic strategy has provided him the freedom to create multiple and divergent alliances and strategies simultaneously. His tendency to engage manifold critiques has also set him apart from many of his peers, who typically arrive at new propositions by revising one or two plans of action, such as Kosuth's *Investigations*, Weiner's *Statements*, or Dan Graham's work with two-way mirrors.

While this study has presented new frameworks for examining BAXTER&, his work, and his contributions to Conceptual Art, it has been necessarily limited in scope. Because it has analyzed series of works to underscore BAXTER&'s generative principles, it has focused on only a few of his most pertinent and characteristic works. Furthermore, this study has clarified and described the exchange between Iain and Ingrid Baxter, but further study is needed to adequately understand this relationship and its connection to the emerging feminist perspectives of the late 1960s and 1970s.

This study has described BAXTER&'s employment of Pop Art modes for a Conceptual Art practice as a Pop-inflected Conceptual Art, and it has employed this characterization in its analysis of how BAXTER&'s work parallels aspects of his contemporaries' art and also diverges from it. This Pop affinity represents a new method for analyzing Conceptual artists that does not rely on the current preference for viewing Minimalism as this movement's clear and main precedent. The Minimalist model of

genealogy needs to be considered historiographically to clarify whether its use is applicable as a descriptive term or if it should be understood as part of a polemical position.

If Minimalism can be viewed as negating the transcendental nature of the art object and inserting the primacy of embodied, phenomenological perception, then what does this imply for Conceptual Art as its successive trend? Clearly, Minimalism did succeed, as Hal Foster claims, in removing the internalized content found in Abstract Expressionism and projecting the work out to the viewer by replacing it with an anthropocentric process of perceptual and temporal experience.[2] But Conceptual Art does not necessarily rely on the same a priori conditions. While Kosuth's *Definitions* and Smithson's *Nonsites* present their content in Minimalist containers, their individual pursuits diverged from Minimalist concerns to define systems in which viewers become perceivers of metalinguistic meaning or active participants in an epistemological discourse. Such concepts as place and perception are not necessarily absent from Conceptual Art, although they are frequently removed from a gallery setting so that viewers negotiate these ideas as intellectual abstractions mediated by documentary ephemera.

Despite such inherent differences between a phenomenological reading of Minimalism and a systems theory–based approach to Conceptual Art, the two have been historically connected through a predecessor-successor relationship. As noted in the introduction, Charles Harrison describes this perceived connection when he states,

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[2] See Hal Foster's essay "The Crux of Minimalism," in his text *The Return of the Real: The Avant-guarde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), especially pp. 38–43.

"Minimalist theory was the most coherent and the most powerful avant-garde discourse of the mid-1960s...."[3] Thus, this revisionist connection between these two art movements appears to be based on critical perspectives available during the time of Conceptual Art's origins. However, this perspective is flawed in two fundamental ways: (1) it assumes artists developing conceptualist strategies could not have discerned an unwritten critical perspective from such alternate modes as Pop Art, and (2) it places Conceptual Art's origins in the late 1960s.

While Pop Art was derided originally by critics as either neo-Dada antagonism or acritical acceptance of consumption, and was embraced by mass audiences for its thematic use of familiar popular culture icons and idioms, more recent studies have controverted such superficial descriptions. To suggest that artists (as well as viewers) of the mid- to late 1960s could not have discerned the possibility of a more satirical critical program in Pop Art beyond the largely formalist and iconographical perspectives provided by many critics overlooks the fact that the art press is essentially an analogue to art and not the thing itself. Furthermore, a reliance on Minimalism's preeminence does not allow for Ed Ruscha and his West Coast Pop heritage, even though his documentary photographic style is now widely considered as a precedent for many Conceptual artists' use of the same medium.

The second reason for opening up Conceptual Art's proposed genealogy relates to the practice of dating its origins in the late 1960s, with either Sol LeWitt's 1967 essay

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[3] Harrison, "Conceptual Art and the Suppression of the Beholder," 1999, p. 45.

"Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" or a host of occurrences in 1968.[4] This often-cited

chronological view places Conceptual Art's appearance after such seminal critical

postures for and against Minimalism as Donald Judd's "Specific Objects" (1965), Robert

Morris' "Notes on Sculpture" (1966–67), and Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood"

(1967).[5] However the convention of dating Conceptual Art from either 1967 or '68

provides no account for Kosuth's *Glass Words Material Described* (1965) or *One and*

Three Chairs (1965) and his conception of his *Definitions* in 1966;[6] NETCO's

incorporation in 1966 and its works from this same year that include *Paint into Earth* and

Chrome Poles Move; and John Baldessari's *A Work with Only One Property* (1966). The

point of this argument is not to suggest that those artists responsible for the new

perspective that would be later called "Conceptual" were creating this work at the same

time as Minimalism's beginnings. Rather, they were developing their approaches before

Minimalism established such an imposing polemical presence in the art press that

anything emerging in its wake need necessarily be deemed its derivative. Because

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[4] In 1968, Lawrence Weiner publishes his "Statement of Intent;" Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, and Harold Hurrell form Art & Language Press; and Lucy Lippard and John Chandler publish their essay "The Dematerialization of Art" in the February 1968 issue of *Art International*.

[5] The full citations for these essays are as follows: Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 74–82; Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part I," *Artforum* 4 (February 1966): 42–44; Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part II," *Artforum* 5 (October 1966): 20–23; and Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12–23.

[6] The dates for the pieces provided here result from Robert Hobbs' essay "Joseph Kosuth's Early Works," published to coincide with *neither appearance nor illusion: A Selection of Early Works from the 1960's by Joseph Kosuth*, an exhibition held at the Sean Kelly Gallery in 2008. Hobbs' essay notes the early appearance of many of Kosuth's works in the artist's notebooks and his personnel file at the New York School of the Visual Arts, which predate their first public exhibitions in 1967 to 1968. For Hobbs' complete essay, a revision of a 2004 presentation at the Courtauld Institute, University of London, see http://i1.exhibit-e.com/seankelly/55d2924e.pdf (accessed 8 October 2009).

Minimalism cannot adequately serve as an original impulse for all Conceptual artists, further study of BAXTER&'s contemporaries is warranted to determine how the Pop-inflected framework presented here may serve as an alternate model.

The realization of the Pop-inflected Conceptual Art model BAXTER& provides can also be used to analyze a younger generation of artists who transform conceptual modes after the movement's first stage of development from the late 1960s to mid 1970s. BAXTER& needs to be understood as a potential precedent for artists like Jeff Koons, who explore mass-produced commodities, or Tom Friedman, who avail themselves of openly humorous strategies. BAXTER& also needs to be considered in any examination of Vancouver photoconceptual artists not only for his use of the Cibachrome transparency and lightbox medium, but also for his photographic practice. These Vancouver artists exhibit a diverging range of approaches, from the serious and intellectual Jeff Wall to the satirical and playful Rodney Graham. However, any historical perspective of them should include their relation to BAXTER& as the originator of conceptual practice in Vancouver, his role as teacher to many on this roster including Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall, and his role as employer of others on this list, including Roy Arden, who worked at NETCO's Eye Scream restaurant.

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