Colony, Commodity and Copyright Reference and Self-Reference in Canadian Art

Philip Monk

The history of art in Canada is short. That is to say, there is no history. Or there are many. This is one of them. I would like to think that this is more than one history of Canadian art; that this essay could trace a significant development in Canadian art. But given the geniality that has passed for criticism in this country, anything that is produced and written about is put into a history — a history of autonomous objects, of individualistic expression, etc. It is put into a history, not given a history. If it were given a history then we might learn of its conditions of production as well as the conditions of its reception of influences. The latter is a context of misunderstanding as well as understanding. Understood, this art is more likely to make its own authentic history, not repeat one from elsewhere, consume it as a system of signs. This reception, moreover, is a response or a failure of response to its own context and history. Failure to respond is also a condition of its context.

The history I want to discuss, which may be *the* history of Canadian art, is a history of objects and subjects, where the objects have been replaced by subjects. Basically, it is a sculptural tradition, but sculpture that has been mediated by language, so that it might include installation, photo-textural work, video or ''pure'' language works. What could be taken as a formal development in this work indicates another history. And it is that which is most resistant to history and language: the presence of the work of art. Here I mean presence as the authenticity of art and hence its authority. What is presented to us in the work of art is an immediacy we experience in the work of our presence through its. What is presented to us is separate from the artist but ''copyrighted'' so to speak under his name and image (under his authority), both of which are signatures. This presence can be actually registered moreover as an *index* of the artist. In the ''examples'' through which I trace this history, the artist is ''there'' in the work as an index: as a photographic index; indicated through the indexical process of the work; or as indicated by the enunciation of an ''I''. (An index need not resemble its object, but must be modified by it. It therefore has a physical or contingent relation to what it refers to or signifies — such as a footprint in the sand or a photograph. Demonstratives such as ''this'' or ''that'' are indices, as are the personal pronouns ''I'' and ''you''.).

This presence is problematic; I do not accept its positive description above. It is problematic not only because it has been put into doubt as one of the founding metaphors of Western metaphysics. It is problematic simply for being there. What absence does this presence indicate? Why has the artist or the index of the artist become the subject of this art, emblematic of a formalization of the processes of art? What does it displace? What reference does this self-reference replace? Why has the index of the artist become the object of the spectator's view? And why can we trace this through much of the most significant

Canadian art?

This evidence is more than a theme within the history of one direction of Canadian art. More than a local version of a general indexical strategy, we could call it a theme if it did not express instead an absence of reality. The formal construction of this index as a presence or, as we shall see, a reference is a conscious or unconscious response to that absence of reality. In making the index the formal identity of the work, a self identity is asserted against that absence. If that absence defines our condition as Canadian, it helps explain why a history of art has been impossible. That is why above I called this work *the* history of Canadian art. This third history, now as an absence, has been recognized by this art somehow in its production, but not by criticism.

The conditions of existence of contemporary Canadian art are complex. Not the least is the fact of having passed from pre-modernism to so-called post-modernism without a history of modernism. The work I discuss is situated in that conjuncture between the two. Our lack of a national art history perhaps is implicated in this absence of modernism as a failure of an industrial capitalist class to arise. Our continuing colonial dependency in the transition from mercantilism to corporate branch plant management is registered in some way on every level of culture as a lack of validity given to local production. This repeats in both institutions and individuals, and the relation of individual to institution, the structure of margin to centre of a hinterland to imperial metropole. (In itself, this ''I'' is male and central Canadian.)

This work takes its place against the accumulation of absences that make our history. It attempts to suspend this history through an ontology; and it can escape its colonial nature by its acts — how and where it places itself; its recognition of the historical moment and its influences; the considered formality of its construction. In turn, however, each of these is a reaction to and product of a more consuming history than our colonialism, and that is the history of commodity relations based on the structure of the commodity.

''What is characteristic of the capitalist age,'' writes Marx, ''is that in the eyes of the labourer himself labour-power assumes the form of a commodity belonging to him. On the other hand it is only at this moment the commodity form of the products of labour becomes general.'' We presume the artist privileged to escape the commodity relationship in his work which maintains its organic process and immediacy in the unity of the product. But that privilege and unity is achieved at a price: it is predicated on turning the individual into a subject. It is not necessarily that the artist's labour is a commodity that belongs to him, but that he becomes a *legal* subject. Copyright is the sign of this surrender. The index is its alibi. Copyright supports, the index confirms identity and presence. The absolute relation of

immediacy of presence is secured by the index of the artist — the contingent evidence of his presence. This signature in turn assures the work's value. The museum is the work's (this presence) absolute validation, its signified. The gallery is its means of circulation — its signifier. The viewer is formally excluded; his or her function is to reassure this presence and authority by a consumption and confirmation.

The history of this art is not mere repetition. We find a general tendency from self-reference to reference. Reference and self-reference are opposed: in absolute terms, a work cannot refer to itself and outside itself at the same time. Any interrogation of the formal conditions of self-referentiality is bound to lead to the problems of referentiality in general (by which I mean, for example, the relation of a word to a thing or an image to an object or event). The nature of an index is such that it can register a presence or indicate a reference, and thus lends itself to both reference and self-reference.

Michael Snow's work has remained consistently self-referential. In many ways his photographic and sculptural work from the late '60s set the terms for the serious younger Canadian art that was to follow. The work after is a surfacing from Snow; it is also a move towards reference. Among the terms was the index. *Authorization* (1969) uses ''photography in a very enclosed way so that there is nothing outside the work itself that is used in the photograph'' (Snow). This work is a record of its process of making: it is an index of it. The set-up of a camera in front of a mirror ensures that the photograph will record nothing outside the work. The mirror indexes the photographer standing in front of it; the consequent photograph is an index of the reflection; and each photograph is a temporal index of the process of the work's construction. Since Michael Snow is the photographer, his image as well is integral to the piece.

The index of the artist presents itself naturally within the formalism of this piece: he was contingent to its construction. His image also appears ''accidentally'' in the photographic documentation of *Authorization* and *Scope* (1967). *Scope* absents the object of view in favour of the structure of viewing (it is a construction and frame for looking). The accident of Snow's appearance, however, is the *unconscious* of this work, and all his other presentations. The index of the artist's presence, even when he does not figure in this phenomenological work, is the guarantee of our own. The name of the artist is never separate from this presence: Snow's film *Presents* (1981) is both ''Michael Snow presents'' and the present moments (presence) of its viewing.

The artist, Michael Snow — his image, his name, his history and that of his work — becomes a formal constituent of his work. He ''appears'' through means of the photographic index in *Venetian Blind* (1970), *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974) and *Cover to Cover* (1975). Or he is referred to in his absence by his name, as in

So is This (1982), or its variants, e.g., ''Wilma Schoen'' in *Rameau's Nephew* (1972-1974). With Michael Snow, we have more of a self-given history, which does not mean self-expressive, than that of any other artist in Canada. As such, his 1970 retrospective catalogue, *Michael Snow/A Survey*, is a rich social history of a *Canadian* artist as much as a document of a body of work, re-presented in the process of a book-work. Perhaps we can look into that exemplary social document for the reasons why the social referent itself is missing from his work. This is part of our history, and history of art. The social is always returned to the formal when it becomes the index of the artist. What the index of the artist always guarantees is the formal autonomy of the work.

If Michael Snow mined his own proper name and biography as formal material for his art, General Idea appropriated the *fiction* of their own history. Their name already is a copy-rightable corporate symbol. Now rather than one artist to be indexed, three terms are put into play as a system. The lens and mirror of Michael Snow have become ''mirrors mirroring mirrors'' in General Idea: a mechanical mode of production has given way to the semiotic. The former one to one relation of object to index or index to referent — as part of the mechanical process grounded in the phenomenology of perception and the apparatus of the work's construction — has been elevated into a free-floating system of signs of absolute interchangeability and self-referentiality. Any referent is excluded from this system in order that it may function.

We all know the story of General Idea: ''This is the story of General Idea and the story of what we wanted. We wanted to be famous, glamourous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamourous we could say we were artists and we would be.'' As the last statement indicates, this enunciation strategy is tautologous — a mirror image of itself, the mirage of a constitutive act. On the model of fashion, General Idea have done much to create a scene and a place for art in Toronto. Their work, however, is marked by the consequences of that necessity: it reflects the lack it signifies — the position of art in Canada. The necessity of making a scene, of creating their own institutions of support and distribution have infiltrated their work as a metalevel. This meta-level is the form and content of the work; its enunciation is the simulation of its own effects. General Idea's resort to ambiguity, the multiplicity of meanings, an expanding system of verbal paradoxes, and their own self-referencing system has a tendency to raise the work in its entirety to a metalevel that is ideology itself.

The fetishistic self-referential formality of this closed system has its consequences. In a system where signifiers exchange among themselves outside of any relation to a real or referent, no critique or reference can take place. The model of this system of value is based ultimately on capital. General Idea's strategies of meta-language, appropriation and artificiality, ''borrowed'' from Roland Barthes' essay ''Myth Today'', reproduce the effects of semiology itself: the tendency to distance itself from the real by instituting itself as a formal system of value (which it justifies all the same by reference to its ''language-object'' to which it stands as a meta-language). ''The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion'', as a third-order semiological system, is thus an expensive construction and luxury for us. Like myth, as a system of value, there is no adequation between it and the real; it is referentially self-sufficient, although ideological. It has no referent other than its own construction and past history, composed of a string of signifiers, a pure fabrication that does not need a referent: ''We've tried to under-

Michael Snow, *Scope* (1967), stainless steel/glass, 175 x 396 x 91 cm, wall panels, 137 x 71 x 28 cm, coll: National Gallery of Canada
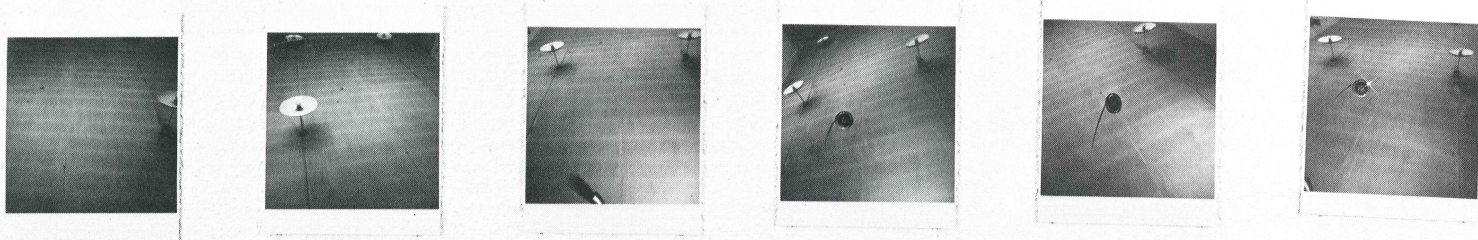
Robin Collyer, *Something Revolutionary* (1978), 6 colour photos, each 35.6 x 27.3 cm, courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto

line the fact that there is nothing behind it. No verso to speak of. The task of stringing together enough evidence to present the case is a labour of pure fabrication.'' The referent is lost in favour of the system itself: its own history, and the story of General Idea, becomes the function of this system. As a recent statement on the Pavillion's ''room of the unknown function'' (itself a statement emblematic of its own formality) puts it: ''the three artists of General Idea have re-introduced destruction into the architectural process. In their long-term project, the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, ruins are created as quickly as rooms are built. Accumulated layers of function and meaning slip in and out of focus, creating a shifting constellation of images which is the Pavillion itself.'' The system can accomodate destruction because it enters the system as its mirror image, as its absolute reversibility which is always already inscribed in the logic of the system.

Robin Collyer's sculptural ensemble *I'm still a Young Man* (1973) was pivotal in the change from formal objecthood to referentiality. The personal pronoun ''I'' of the title referred to the proper name of the artist; but the title as a whole gave a sense to the work through its referents in the work and their references. But it is another work that uses an ''I'' less positively that is relevant here. In *Something Revolutionary* (1978), a text of six phrases accompanies six colour photographs — upside-down shots of a ceiling, the latter three through which a film reel spins. The text reads:

I am unimpressed by recent movements
I need a new direction
Something to believe in
To have faith in
An activity to turn to
Something revolutionary.

We are immediately disoriented by the photographs, an alienation that is furthered by the statements, which seem to talk down to us, and which we have a hard time applying to the photographs. In spite of that disjunction we can cue the phrases to the photographs by applying the literal definitions of ''movement'', ''direction'', ''turn to'' and ''revolutionary'' to the progressive tilting of the photographs and to the turn of the film reel. In the context of the statements, however, these words have a metaphorical force, and they refer to values. The narrowing of semantic reference by the purely physical ''interpretation'' or illustration given by the photographs reinforces the impasse between content of expression and action. Action remains suspended, in the air. We cannot stand to this upside-down space nor act on these statements — make them performative. Even the implied continuity to the sequence, which is reinforced by the sequence of phrases, is denied, not only in the gap between the discontinuous spaces of the photographs in presentation, but, as Philip Fry has pointed out, within the photographs as well as in the implied narrative of the spinning reel. The sequence does not necessarily describe an event; it is a fictional construction more than the indexical process we find in *Authorization*.

If objects have moved towards language mediated by reference in Collyer's work, because they have become language in some cases does not mean that the work parallels and repeats the evolution of the commodity from object to sign system. Reference intervenes, as problematic as it was expressed in action in *Something Revolutionary*, to reduce the general commutability and nihilism of signs, products and people that is our alienation in everyday life.

In 1978, Andy Patton started a series of language posters that were contingent to their sites. The first were descriptive, except the gap between description and site, between language and its referents, was intended to demonstrate the inadequacies of convention in general. The poster and site met in one word only with the repetition of an actual word in view in that loca-tion. It was as if that one word carried the whole weight of difference, as language strained at identity, as if the inadequacies of language in that site disputed the direct relation of work to spectator in the gallery. Instead it aimed for the audience of advertising — mass and accidental.

These posters appeared, disrupting the ''naturality'' of their industrial, urban settings; but they offered no message. They did not address us. An act put them into a site, but an intention or a voice behind this writing was absent. Patton's poster of November 1978, made for the Toronto civic elections and placed over mayoralty posters, directly addressed a viewer through an ''I''. Yet this ''I'' was tentative, unhappy with both the inexpressibility *and* objectivity of language. Against a form of political advertising that called for a referendum response on the part of the viewer/voter — a yes or a no to this face and name (the same stimulus-response of product advertising; the same face and name of the indexical art talked about here), Patton inserted an individual voice. This insertion cuased a wavering of advertising intent. It also pointed to questions of legitimacy which ultimately are questions of property. The election posters were legal, Patton's ''defacing'' illegal. The poster directly confronted this apparatus of legitimacy rather than inhabiting its structure as a pseudo-advertisement. As uncertain as its message was, this direct, self-representational speech forced a halt to the equivalence and interchangeability of advertising and political messages that also speak with an ''I'' or address the viewer with a ''you''. Addressed as a ''you'' singly or collectively, our function is to buy the image; we are alienated from this political process while having a function within it and for it.

The direct speech of Patton's poster, however, is only the simulation of directness. It does not refer outside itself or lead pragmatically to action: that reference and reality is still problem-
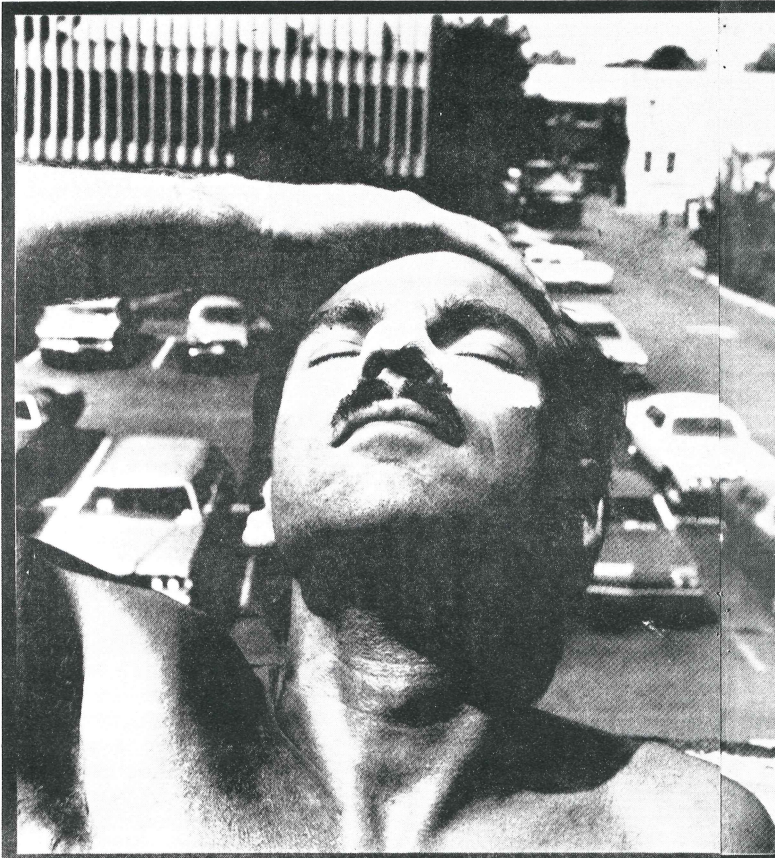
There's instability in my self image. Jerky transitions in my mechanical method of survival. Close shaves. By the skin of my throat I get away.

Opposite page: envisioner Tom Sherman. It's easy to see what people do in their homes. In their homes they are 'home' inside an enclosure of hand-built walls. They are home comfortably reading newspapers and magazines or watching TV. When they eat they listen to music on the radio. When they talk they play records on their stereo. The ones who go to a lot of movies read novels when they stay home. Those who watch quite a bit of television love to thumb through magazines at the newsstand. People in their homes, they all get a big kick out of a good coffee table picture book.

What pisses me off is the way people tend to generalize when they don't know what they're talking about. The only way to cut through their general babble is to ask specific questions of detail. That's a good way to catch a liar, too. But those I see rambling through their entire lives locked in the general mode of conversation, they are not necessarily dishonest people. In my case I speak in generalities when I lack the facts. Sometimes I write in the dark. With my eyes closed I miss the rich field of vision in front of my nose. Blind by my own wish I am not obsessed with the process of burrowing into pockets of detail. My fascinations I do not pigeonhole. I'm afraid I remain the cold, distant, insensitive generalist; the one with the questionable moves; sneak a glance at my slippery tongue as I state the following words from a point in my personal view: I would rather hash it up with a good liar than converse with a person who keeps still because he doesn't know. Or I run into collectors everywhere, so particular and precise their character — so warm and eccentric they are!

To appear authentic in conversation and print I enrich each sentence I pronounce with a bit of general detail; perhaps I quote a number or tell a temperature or exaggerate the adversity of conditions affecting my physical body. For instance it burns my ass to hear people advertising their '1 of a kind' identities.

TOM SHERMAN

Tom Sherman, *Text Print* (1977), courtesy: File Magazine, Toronto

atic for it. It intervenes as an act by interfering with the structure of the political poster. But by situating itself in a place where it cannot act — in that political process; by accepting that "site" of the poster for its intervention; it expresses instead an inability to act (much as that inability expressed in *Something Revolutionary*). No longer is it a question of the inadequacy of language here: language is the only place for this subject to act.

The last posters (1980) retreat from this recognition. They take the attempt to blur the semantic markers of the conventional gallery context or sanction and to provoke a non-intentional response to its logical end with the reinsertion of the site in a site. These works were photographic reproductions of other postered sites; they indexed the nature of the poster, not its actual site; and they were grouped to make the appearance of an intention. The index here is as much a desire for absence as a desire for the utopia of pure process and presence. As I have written elsewhere, "this extreme of self-representational and self-referential act functioned through the delay of insertion and differential interruption. But it reflected a nostalgia for the site, a utopian desire for the surface of the world, for pure productivity in an urban capitalist reality."

All of Tom Sherman's work is the presentation of an "I" and an image. But now this presentation is not positive or problematical: it is the subject of the work. The presence and authority of the individual voice of the artist's "I" — the artist who speaks truthfully or imaginatively as the guarantor of the presence, truth and effectivity of the work — is undermined by another strategy that moves through the work constructing the work as a fiction and displaying it so. This becomes a model for every other presentation of information that speaks through an image as an "I" but not with an "I" and composes facts in a fictional mode, as, for instance,

news broadcasting. Here reality is constructed by the media; it is represented through the alliance of technical reproduction and codes of authenticity that operate through the simulation of reference.

Two works from 1977 and 1978 use the "same" text juxtaposed to two different images of the artist "Tom Sherman". In the first, a publication, a photograph of Tom Sherman with eyes closed, head tilted back is juxtaposed to a printed text. In the second, the video-tape *Envisioner*, another image of Tom Sherman flashes between parts of a character-generated text that is excerpted from the soundtrack. The text is the same, "Tom Sherman" is the same, but now the artist looks straight towards us with eyes open. The two images oppose insight and authority; but as the text remains unchanged, the opposition breaks down as a vacillation of the same. We are made aware of the manipulation of the codes of realism in documentary and "confessional" first person texts, texts that operate on the basis of objectivity or sincerity established by reference to certain so-called referents of detail:

To appear authentic in conversation or print I enrich each sentence I pronounce with a bit of general detail; perhaps I quote a number or tell a temperature or exaggerate the adversity of conditions affecting my body. For instance it burns my ass to hear people advertising their '1 of a kind' identities.

In analyzing all this work we do not have to accept traditional or critical categories which tend to autonomize the individual work of art. Instead, we can place these works in position against a referent and ask how each treats it. Do they reject, obscure or direct us to it? For each of these cases we have to go beyond the formal construction of the work — what is given and what is given institutional support. We have to go beyond to understand what lack that reference or lack of referent is expressing.

For Michael Snow's self-referentiality, the referent never appears; it is not allowed in the concept. For General Idea, the referent is irremediably lost in a fetishized system of value: the "we" and the multiple images of the artists no longer even serve as indexes. The loss of the referent for them is no crisis as it is for Robin Collyer. He integrates the referent into sculptural work in the gallery in order to dispute the subjection over us outside the gallery of communications systems and representations. Andy Patton's subsequent work, which took over advertising formats, recognized that action, as constricted as it might be, can take place within convention. At least that is where it is directed against us. As for Tom Sherman, that referent must serve within a fictional enunciation for the purpose of communication and not for the dissemination of personality, as the death of the artist. For all, there are broader social and economic questions to ask about the loss of the referent and the struggle to regain it.

This analysis is not completely historical; it still refers to the present. Only the dynamics of the image have changed. The new painting or new expressionism restores this same subject to art. Its (coded) expressivity is a guarantee of the work's presence and immediacy; its gestures are the signature of the artist. But this painting restores itself and the subject at a more regressive level; objectivizing technique (the mechanical record of index) or the conventions of language have not intervened as in the work discussed above. These conditions alternately alienate the viewer from the work and refer him or her to something else. That is, they work for the viewer. Painting's expressivity, on the other hand, is completely institutionalized. It restores the most traditional image of the artist for the artist's and our consumption. □