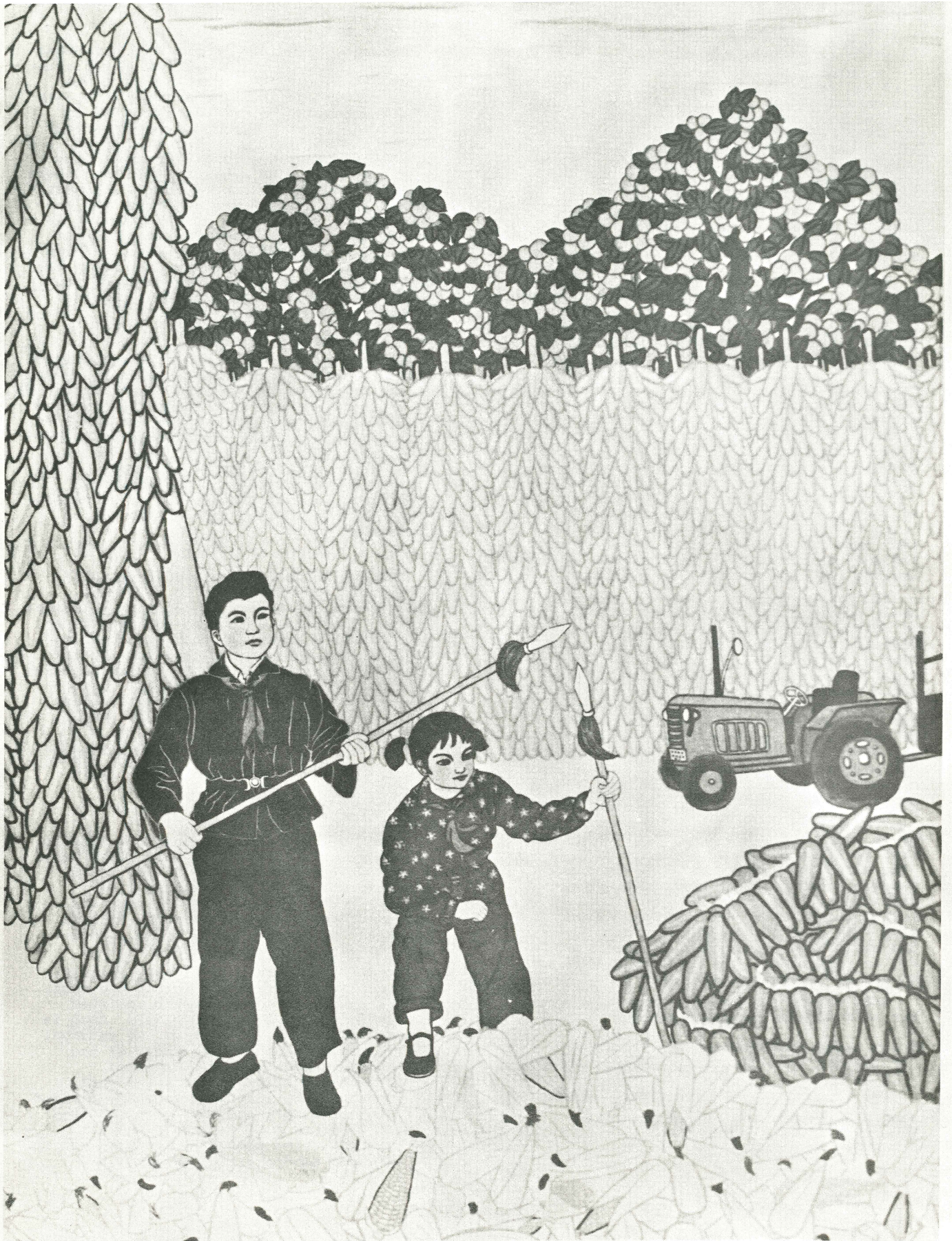


# ARTISTS REVIEW

Vol. 2, No. 1, September 29, 1978.



CHANG FANG-HSIA, It's Our Turn to Guard The Grain at Lunch Time



A NOTE ON THE CHINESE PEASANT PAINTINGS  
at ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

"A painter or an intellectual may be paid the same as a factory worker but in his consciousness he still believes he is on a higher level because he works primarily with his mind, while the worker believes that manual work condemns him to an unthinking and unfeeling existence. It was the attack on this great 'division of labour' by millions of people in their specific situations -- farms, factories, schools, hospitals, universities, theatres, etc. -- up and down the country which constituted the Cultural Revolution."\*

As soon as you talk about social or political goals, most Western artists respond with fear. They seem to be afraid that their brains will be taken over by the government, that their personalities will be formed by bureaucratic committees. They feel their own freedom to make personal statements is in conflict with a social or political outlook in art or life. But what actually occurs is that most artists, while thinking of themselves as freely individual, produce work which falls neatly into categories: colour-field painting, formalist sculpture, systems painting, conceptual art. Their works are as much a reflection of our society as the peasant paintings are of China today, but with one exception: artists here produce work which is of no consequence to our society as a whole. Our artists are neither free nor important.

The paintings show above all the peasants' great pride in the new society. As in the paintings of the Northern Renaissance, they have the optimism of people who are beginning a better life. But where Van Eyck reflected the rise of a class, here we can see a whole society with a shared purpose. The fact that the art of our avant-garde is cut off from most of society is fitting. We see culture not as the way of life of our whole society, but as a set of attitudes controlled by a single class. As Mao says: 'Literature and art for whom?' Our art is owned only by the rich and the government.

"The main danger is bureaucratization, as in every other area of life. When control is taken by people ignorant of real-life situations, a generalizing tendency appears, making things conform to ready-made definitions. Art becomes ritualized, losing its humanity and realism. Along with this goes a condescending attitude to the public and a disregard of their capacity to understand. It leads to stagnation in art as in everything else." \*

This may be the possible danger in China, but it's already happened here.

\* Guy Brett, Introduction to "Peasant Paintings from Hu County, Shensi Province, China"

Janice Gurney

Janice Gurney is associated with the Lansdowne Artists' Collective.

Editor's Note:

"Peasant paintings from Hu county, Shensi province, China" is an exhibition by peasant (that is, non-professional) painters who are also workers in the communes of Hushien. Painting in that county began in 1958 to record the construction of a new reservoir and is now well-known to the Chinese to whom it suggests the revolutionary in the sphere of art. "We artists paint the future and also the revolutionary ideal, not just things as they are," stated one of the artists in the exhibition. Their painting is not of the typical academic impressionism combined with socialist realism but a popular art capable of recording intimately the work on the land and the pleasures of the people by those painters actively engaged in the same communal struggle.

Some premises for the work:

"The emancipation of society from private property, etc., from servitude, is expressed in the political form as the emancipation of the workers; not that their emancipation alone was at stake but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation -- and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and every relation of servitude is but a modification and consequence of this relation."

Karl Marx (1844)

"In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such things as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine."

Mao Tse-tung (1942)

REMARKS ON E.G. SERIES  
JAAN POLDAAS at A.C.T.

Excerpts from Jaan Poldas' E.G. Series are on view at A.C.T. from Sept. 18 - Oct. 1.

The series consists of 16 2m. x 2ft. paintings on masonite, and presumably derives its name from the fact that the colors of the paintings are ones Poldas has seen in Toronto, e.g., Hydro Maroon and Police Car Yellow.

1. The craftsmanship is of high quality; no flaws distract the eye or the mind.
2. Each work is monochromatic, painted uniformly on front and sides. Each is a discrete visual entity: no external references (other than those of the colors themselves) are involved.
3. The presentation is clear and well thought-out. The paintings are divided into 3 groups, and each group ordered in terms of more or less regularly stepped color changes. The work can be scanned smoothly; the viewer isn't in-



- duced to look back and forth, comparing or contrasting separated colors.
4. Poldas' decision to use colors he has seen provides a simple, solid, and imaginative conceptual basis for the series.
- Bravo.

Peter Blendell

Peter Blendell is a Toronto artist who has recently shown at A.C.T. Gallery.

A.C.T. at OPTICA -October 9 - 27, 1978

The following is a reprint of the catalogue essay for an exhibition at Optica Gallery, Montreal.

If one talks of painting in Toronto, or rather of painting as painting, one is forced to discuss the criteria for engaging in that discipline or interpreting its products. The question of painting as painting is a question of value: does one affirm sensibility or methodology, subjectivity or some relation to objectivity? Toronto generally is thought to have a "school" of painting which concentrates on colour, and whose qualities and attributes are lyrical and abstract, with occasional tendencies to expressionism -- the "Toronto sensibility" in short. This view is upheld by the newspapers, the magazines, the vested galleries, and one of the universities; and in a more recent and stylish form perpetrates the illusory myths and glamour of the Painters Eleven. The painting is modernist as defined by Clement Greenberg, but now the formalist-ethical vigour, critically elaborated by Michael Fried, is depleted and suspect as a concept and is often replaced in painting by the mere husk of decorativeness. What seemed necessary and compelling in 1965 is no longer relevant today.

At this earlier date, Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland combatted the subjective "self-expression" of Abstract Expressionism through a more objective concentration on structure and the handling of colour and surface in their work. Those following, who tried to maintain the traditions of modernism, saw the objective conditions of production in contemporary art pass to so-called Minimalist art and its progeny. For formalist artists, tradition was closely guarded under the shibboleths of "quality" and "taste." Above all, their art still promoted the subject in the artist as the originator of expression and in the spectator as the receptor of the act in a pure state of aesthetic sensibility of "cognitiveness-without-cognition." In Toronto, both subjects -- artist and spectator -- have been formed by a specific historical reading and by the social conditions of modernist art in general and the Toronto art scene in particular in its capitalist milieu.

If commodity fetishism reproduces social relations in products "whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses,"<sup>1</sup> then art whose process of production and objective materiality oppose reification -- or the creation of

metaphysical value in an object or form -- can only serve knowledge of the objective conditions of reality. This art similarly opposes subjectivity affirmed as subjectivity in favour of observable systems of production and objectivity in a dialectical interaction with materiality (or its equivalents in painting -- surface, structure, context, systems of ordering). Under the same compulsions, Conceptual art abandoned the object partially in the belief that it was tainted as a commodity or could not help be turned into a commodity in our market society. But Conceptual art shared other concerns with an object art, Minimal, systems or serial painting, including the work in the present exhibition, namely, the rejection of expression and subjectivity. As Sol LeWitt wrote: "To work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. . . . The plan would devise the work;" and "the artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion."<sup>2</sup>

The four artists in the present exhibition similarly are concerned with the objective factors of their art and with finding means whereby the material itself (whether in its materiality or relation to structure), through the artist's adhering to and following (in the temporal sense also) certain rules or demands, or developing the work within a certain context, creates its own result or image. Thus for Ric Evans, the composition produces itself given an initial decision that the artist makes and then is compelled to follow according to the demands of composition within this one work. For John Howlin, a set of arbitrary decisions within a structure of syntactical rules creates variable compositions. Regular and knowable forms develop in a physical context in Robert McNealy's work. And Sam Perepelkin's compositions are the outcome of the systematization of a chance technique. In these concerns and the lack of interest in colour -- where colour is simply coding or spatial devices for Howlin or a fundamental necessity for Evans and McNealy since a surface must have colour -- the works at hand manifest a basic opposition to that of the so-called Toronto sensibility.

Exact reconstruction of the ordering of the image may be impossible in the chance determinations of Perepelkin's paintings, but a system is intuited. In Howlin's New Order, if one does not know the precise syntactical rules, one can at least understand the relations. For Ric Evans the procedure is evident in analysis or examination of the paintings. It develops from canvas to canvas in a temporal sequence. Composition changes from canvas to canvas. Initiated by the artist, composition makes itself and the painting. By isolating one component -- in this case, composition -- the artist does not reduce the painting to that alone. A reductivist painting is impossible because painting remains as painting -- as a delimited surface of colour. The intentional content of Evans's work is composition. Yet this intention does not



restrict composition to an unchanging ideal of static laws. As internal content -- as opposed to hidden overall structure -- the composition is dynamic and develops within its context. In the particular examples exhibited here, the large triangle along with the constant diagonal, in each case, generate the smaller triangle in the course of execution and determine its size as the large triangle progressively increases its own area. (Each variation of the series comprises nine canvases.) Although there is a sequence from canvas to canvas, consequences are not logical. Contrary to one's expectations that the small triangle will increase in like ratio to its parent triangle, at one point the progression levels out and the triangles decrease in size but do not coordinate in shape with their counterparts of near equal area at the beginning of the sequence.

John Howlin conceives of the structure of his painting as analogous to that of language. The determining of the image in painting by a set of rules is equivalent to an individual speech act occurring within the structure of language, to use Saussure's model of *langue/parole*; the expression is individual and particular but contained and conditioned by the greater whole that forms its structure. And the adaptation of developing systems of rules for painting from series to series is similar to the transformation of language as a total system that is complete at every moment in its history.

On a simpler level, Howlin posits the abstract elements of painting -- line, colour, shape -- as a vocabulary similar to language. These elements can be combined according to syntactical rules so that a final image is formed as a coherent "sentence," to continue the analogy. The totality of the rules inhere within a schema or system. Finally, Howlin conceives that these systems or schema are adapted or incorporated into new systems or schema which at each point in time present a complete synthesis -- a synthesis that is comparable to adapting systems of knowledge created by man. Although philosophers of science suggest that these systems develop through epistemological breaks, in everyday experience this accumulation or adaptation of knowledge occurs.

Like Evans's compositions, Howlin's are unpredictable given the same set of rules from painting to painting or within one work, as in *New Order*. In each panel of this work, two arbitrarily placed grids, each covering half of the six canvases, along with predetermined rules for the deployment of line, condition the direction of lines and their ensuing overall configuration. Order must be intuited by observing the relations established between the different grids. Each panel with its particular configuration reveals the unpredictable possibilities latent within this system. As in the structure of language where there is a range of possible individual expression, so in this work a whole range of specific forms can arise.

We have been discussing the works of this exhibition as if they were all paintings. Robert McNealy's work, neither painting nor sculpture, is between both. This is not to maintain, however, that it does not find itself within the tradition of painting. In fact, McNealy has come to the present work through paintings made for a specific context. In this context, placement was determined by the setting, and the paintings' proportions and inner structure were conditioned by a conceptually imposed grid on the wall of the space for which the work was made.

In the present work designed for Optica's space, the wall has been directly acquisitioned as surface in an absolute contextual relationship. Instead of the canvases placed in different locations on the wall, the wall itself has been used as the ground for painting. And instead of a grid imposed on the wall, a more dynamic orientation has been determined for the lozenge-shaped painted area. The shape of the lozenge itself is something that is immediately recognizable (even in its incomplete state) and knowable, and has a history, as do the geometric relations established on the wall by the shape. The fact of painting on the wall also aligns the work to a long tradition of wall painting. The geometric relations in the work are clearly established and evident; but they are established within the context of this wall and observed in situ by the spectator in a physical space. The context is further actualized by the removal of a triangular area from the lozenge and by its assumption of sculptural form -- but it is, literally, the thickness of the wall from which it was "lifted." The form has the materiality of the wall as surface, and as section. The painted lozenge reveals a sense of surface, the plaster section the sculptural weight of surface.

Sam Perepelkin's previous work was concerned with the way in which man creates systems to order the transmittal or analysis of information, the necessary reduction of content to form, and the disorder that develops with the information's disintegration by adaptation to other means of reproduction. The present work again approaches the chaos of experience and imposes a pattern upon it. Except now what is systematized is chance technique rather than an order of representation.

A hidden grid exists in the paintings, intuited by the spectator but obliterated by the random structure of lines. (The grid also extends beyond the physical limits of the canvas.) A chance system of relations between numbers determines the length and direction of the lines, and in some cases chance also establishes their width. At issue here is the question of how far can one take order to disorder; or does it order events in some way? The question of chance and entropy is dissolved if one does not look for continuity. Entropy, at each point in a "disintegrating" system, can be considered an order if it is observed outside of a continuity. That is, at each moment it may be considered a total system



with particular laws. Some order can be intuited in Perepelkin's paintings particularly due to the underlying order of the grid.

Mel Bochner wrote on Sol LeWitt that "by controlling so rigidly the conception of the work and never adjusting it to any pre-determined idea of how such a work should look, LeWitt arrives at a unique perceptual breakdown of conceptual art into visual chaos."<sup>3</sup> To an extent, this happens in Perepelkin's work, but reducing subjectivity and objectifying technique, idea and material can never produce chaos in any enterprise that has first passed through a man's brain.

All of the works in the exhibition deal superficially with mathematics and geometry and impute a totality to the systems created. However, the systems only exist in particulars and are eccentric to human invention; and their totality in each case is only a structural whole of figure and is capable of dissolving into new systems. As LeWitt wrote, "Conceptual art doesn't really have much to do with mathematics;" and besides "rational judgements repeat rational judgements."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Lukács noted, mathematics and geometry imply "the knowledge of the world as a totality."<sup>5</sup> Rather than treating the world as a totality in identity with the human subject, the present work pursues reality in a non-identical and discontinuous manner.

#### Notes:

1. Karl Marx, Capital; quoted in Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 86.
2. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art"; "Sentences on Conceptual Art," in Alicia Legg, ed., Sol LeWitt (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), pp. 166, 168.
3. Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism;" reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., Minimal Art, a Critical Anthology (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 101.
4. LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art"; "Sentences on Conceptual Art," pp. 166, 168.
5. Lukács argued against "the idea that the object of cognition can be known by us for the reason that, and to the degree in which, it has been created by ourselves. And with this, the methods of mathematics and geometry (the means whereby objects are constructed, created out of the formal presuppositions of objectivity in general) and, later, the methods of mathematical physics become the guide and touchstone of philosophy, the knowledge of the world as totality." History and Class Consciousness, p. 112.

Philip Monk

Philip Monk is the current editor of Artists Review.

#### HOWARD SIMKINS at SABLE-CASTELLI GALLERY

Howard Simkins seems to have made a severe departure from his earlier manner of painting. For some artists this can be a potentially disastrous gamble. The public doesn't want the anxieties produced by unexpected changes in an artist's product. After all, modern living is hair-raising enough. It's very calming to enter a gallery and see the customary product. The public enjoys a few new wrinkles, provided it's mostly the same old thing. Car manufacturers understand this: so do artist-businessmen.

The public also appreciates expertise. They applaud single-minded devotion to a small area of research. They worship the scientist-artist who specializes, undertakes research and exploration, who periodically presents his findings in an atmosphere redolent of test-tubes and lab coats. The aura of science is used to prop up the sagging reputation of art. What can you learn from a painter who gives up one area of specializing and begins all over again?

I don't believe Howard Simkins has ever engaged in either the business or science ploy. He seems to have been impressed by the Caro sculptures at York University, and to have occupied himself with many attempts to translate Anthony Caro's sculptures into paintings. If this was, indeed, what he was attempting, they were very "loose translations" which told us much more about Howard Simkins than Anthony Caro.

The new work, according to a reporter in a Toronto paper, is some sort of map-making. This will reassure the public, but when they begin looking at these "maps" I'm afraid they'll feel a bit lost and start looking around for a policeman.

In fact, the only characteristic that these paintings share with maps is the use of symbols. For instance, there are a number of images of cows. Not cows, like those which infected many Canadian paintings in the early part of this century, nor like Warhol's cow wallpaper, but rather silhouettes of cows. These images apparently are derived from the cow symbol for Cow Brand Baking Soda. In Dateline, the design is transferred whole, including the blobs that litter the ground beneath the cow. Only the colours have been changed.

In Bermuda, concentric circular motifs are imposed on the cow image, along with some stencilled letters which, on the left side, spell out CBC BBC CBS ABC NBC. The circles are radio waves?

In Byzantine Cow, stencilled numbers appear, many in sequence, but most numbers have been painted over, erased, leaving only ones and zeroes. Is this a reference to the 1,0 of computer theory?

There is a strong element of whimsy in the cow image, in the pigs, toy boats, and Florida palm. The idea of a cow's rear end crossing the dateline is hilarious. The compass points are askew in Klondyke making it impossible for the sailor-viewer to get his bearings. We are all left