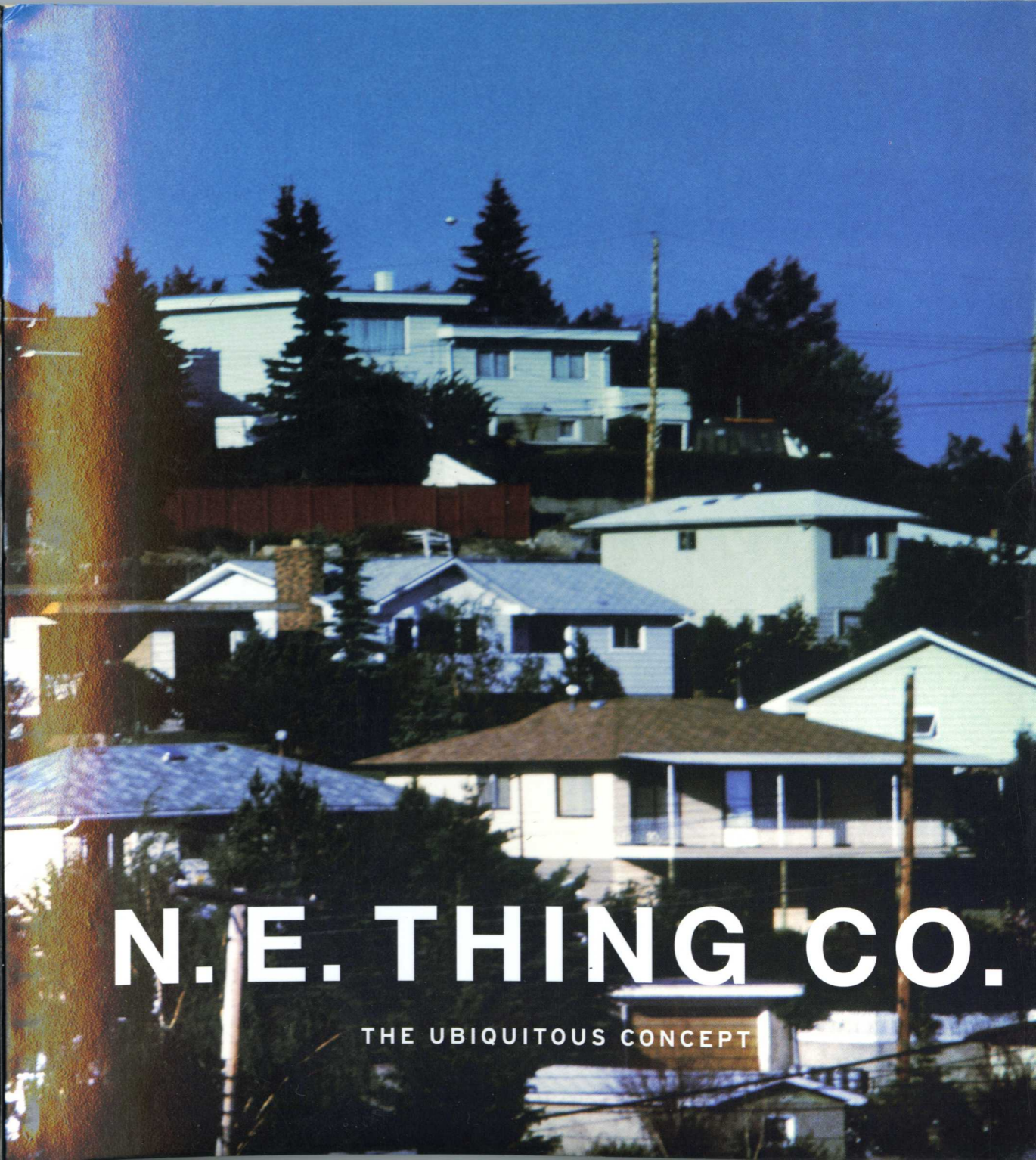


N. E. THING CO.

DEREK KNIGHT

OAKVILLE GALLERIES



N.E. THING CO.

THE UBIQUITOUS CONCEPT

oakville galleries



CURATED BY DEREK KNIGHT

OAKVILLE GALLERIES

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N.E. THING CO.

THE UBIQUITOUS CONCEPT

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see page 34-35

FOREWORD

N.E. THING CO. expresses perhaps better than any other Canadian works from the late 60's and early 70's a conceptual approach which blurred the traditional distinction between art and life. In the exhibition *N.E. Thing Co.: The Ubiquitous Concept*, Derek Knight reassesses the work of Iain and Ingrid Baxter as key Canadian figures and the global trends which continue to emanate from the West Coast.

Oakville Galleries is indebted to Derek Knight, Guest Curator of the exhibition. As Director of Oakville Galleries, I would like to thank him for his dedication to the project. His scholarly contribution to a better understanding of N.E. Thing Co. as a catalyst in their community, as well as a reassessment of Ingrid's role in the collective is timely.

A special thanks to all the lenders to the exhibition who have generously shared their works. This project would not have been possible without the generous contribution of The Canada Council through the Exhibition Assistance Program, the Ontario Arts Council, the Corporation of the Town of Oakville and the membership of Oakville Galleries.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Board of Directors for their on-going support towards Oakville Galleries' program and to the volunteers for their commitment to the Galleries.

Most of all, I extend my appreciation to the artists, Ingrid and Iain Baxter for their collaboration on this project. This exhibition also benefited from the commitment of Rod Demerling, Installation Officer/Registrar and Marnie Fleming, Curator of Contemporary Art towards the realization of the exhibition.

Francine Périnet
Director



N.E. THING CO: THE UBIQUITOUS CONCEPT

N.E. Thing Co. is anything¹

Founded in 1966 by Iain and Ingrid Baxter, the Vancouver-based N.E. Thing Co. (NETCO) enjoyed a degree of success rarely matched nationally and internationally among Canadian artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By most standards it was a stellar rise to fame underscored by innovations of the kind that helped seal their recognition. Noteworthy among the early works is the wrapped plastic environment of *Bagged Place*, installed at the U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery in 1966; *A Portfolio of Piles*, a photo project based on the concept of piles located at fifty-nine different sites in 1968; and, perhaps their most ambitious project, an unprecedented installation at the National Gallery of Canada in 1969, (left) which transformed the ground floor into a corporate environment. Concerning their later work, *A Painting to Match the Couch*, 1974-75, capitalizes on *Bagged Place* by critiquing the commodity fetishism upon which our lives are based; the photographs which constitute the *Restaurant Suite* series of 1977 have a biting satire demonstrating a refreshing lack of compromise even towards the end of their collaboration. They viewed the art world as a parallel consumer culture—the incorporation of N.E. Thing Co. under the Companies Act in early 1969 is significant for the direction this would encourage in their business lives. Seeming to accommodate both their conceptual and commercial interests, it culminated in 1977-78 with the opening of *Eye Scream* Restaurant on West Fourth Avenue in Vancouver. By the time they were honoured with a retrospective exhibition focusing on 1965-70 at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1982, N.E. Thing Co. had disbanded.

Characteristically Iain and Ingrid Baxter's activities remained interdisciplinary in spirit: they made photographs, staged site-specific performance and multimedia projects and established commercial ventures in the name of N.E. Thing Co. Although it is difficult to identify the one connecting thread or single common denominator, their conceptual approach, which blurred the lines between aesthetics and business acumen, cut a broad swath across the face of convention. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan's ideas on media they offered a pragmatic answer to redefining the role of the artist in the 1960s; most assuredly, it was the social, artistic and cultural milieu of Vancouver that bore significantly on the work and conceptual orientation of N.E. Thing Co. However, within the context of a burgeoning vanguard which developed from Vancouver's increased autonomy in the 1960s and 1970s, N.E. Thing Co. functioned as a catalyst for more than just their own interests. Their concern, for example, with the environment and their interest in ecology contrasts with the urban character of their work in the 1960s. Equally, their concern in the 1970s for broadening art's appeal through popular or mass-marketing techniques finds affinity with both public relations and advertising.

Consequently the current exhibition *N.E. Thing Co.: The Ubiquitous Concept* revisits the period 1966-1978 with a focus on recapturing both the vitality and originality of N.E. Thing Co.² It will also emphasize one of the more successful collaborative

1. Iain Baxter, Sept. 7, 1967. Quoted in *Statements: 18 Canadian Artists*. Regina: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1967, p. 14.

(left)
N.E. THING CO.
Environment, 1969
Installation: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, June 4-July 6, 1969.
Photo: Courtesy National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

2. Eric Cameron refers to N.E. Thing Co.'s information sheets as "ubiquitous" in an unpublished English version of an article which in French is translated as "des omniprésents feuillets informatifs," see *Vie des Arts*, XXVI, no. 105 (Winter 1981-82), p. 91.

enterprises in recent Canadian art history as well as revisit an influential forerunner to the present generation of Vancouver artists. However, some reassessment of this collaborative process between Iain and Ingrid Baxter is necessary to achieve a greater understanding of what Ingrid's role might have been, since it is not well understood outside the perfunctory label of Co-President. Questions about her function and how we should measure her contribution remain unanswered.

Moreover, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, who were joint presidents of N.E. Thing Co., were able to demonstrate both to their contemporaries and younger associates—among whom we must include Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum, Roy Arden and Rodney Graham—the currency of both cooperative enterprise and the impact of media on our lives. N.E. Thing Co. is pivotal to the discourse on the development of photoconceptualism in Vancouver during the 1970s. For example, their contribution to photoconceptual art in Vancouver, which achieved its primacy in the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s, is implicit in N.E. Thing Co.'s early and often ubiquitous use of photography. However, this relationship is neither well understood nor has it been fully explored within the broader context of the demonstrable affinity which other Vancouver artists developed for mixed media or photo-based work. It is the author's intention broadly to survey the common attributes, thematic parallels and shifting ideologies which both characterize the differences and the similarities between N.E. Thing Co. and the photoconceptual school.

Disbanded when Iain and Ingrid Baxter went their separate ways in early 1978, it is debatable whether N.E. Thing Co. has received its measure of critical recognition in Canada. Believing in a strategy that the artist could function under the guise of the corporate model, Iain and Ingrid Baxter undertook to understand how the codes or symbols of the corporate world could be appropriated to serve both artistic and commercial ends. Initially, the founding of N.E. Thing Co. in 1966 signalled an intent to take their activities beyond the narrowly defined tenets of modernist aesthetics, which hierarchically were born of the New York school and subsumed by artists in Toronto and elsewhere. N.E. Thing Co., a concept which in the mid 1960s advanced the idea of collaboration, grew out of a brief association that produced two shows in quick succession under the anonymous name of IT in 1966: one at the Albert White Gallery in Toronto and the other at the Rolf Nelson Gallery in Los Angeles. This small collaboration comprised Iain and Ingrid Baxter and John Friel, a fellow student whom Iain had met at Washington State University in Pullman. Quick and decisive steps would then follow, first under the guise of N.E. Baxter Thing Co., then by the end of 1966 in the more definitive form of N.E. Thing Co., with exhibitions at the Victoria Art Gallery in Victoria, the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Norman McKenzie Gallery in Regina, and York University in North York.

Although the degree to which either of the two principals, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, were individually responsible for the success of N.E. Thing Co. is today the focus of some speculation,³ questions of authorship cannot diminish their sometimes spectacular results. Since much of their work originated through the agency of N.E. Thing Co., the collaborative nature of their projects—the preference for photographic, printed, or appropriated images and electronically relayed data—often overshadows

3. Nancy Shaw, "Expanded Consciousness and Company Types: Collaboration Since Intermedia and the N.E. Thing Company," in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991, p. 96.

the individual stamp of signature. It is a complex problem since the practice of attributing work to the one and not to the other has often confused the issue, leaving the impression that it was Iain Baxter who dominated most aspects of their collective enterprise.⁴ While Iain is a gregarious personality who exudes great personal charm, Ingrid is his match. He is still given to paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan whom he acknowledges as the primary intellectual influence in his life; his thinking, which travels elliptically around stellar points of interest—invariably with a popular cultural twist—is consistent with the mind of a lateral thinker. The topic of Zen still animates Iain these many years after his 1961 scholarship, which enabled both him and Ingrid to spend a formative year studying in Kyoto, Japan. The experience obviously imprinted on both of them, since Ingrid's reminiscences speak of the unique cultural and philosophical differences between North America and the Orient; she is still possessed by a strong admiration for their non-judgemental acceptance of difference. Both Iain and Ingrid are equally concerned with how history will measure up and interpret N.E. Thing Co. For reasons which partly reflect each of their individual stakes in this history, they have spoken about the need to clarify their personal recollections. Their contribution to Canadian art history is assured, but with the passage of time interpretations change, the *status quo* evolves and new questions arise. Although the essential document remains unchanged in the case of the artwork, it is the new combinations of ideas and juxtapositions which enable either a fresh critical perspective to evolve or renewed academic commitment to begin.

For Iain, whose greatest concern is that he be duly recognized among his peers, it is the originality and persistence of his vision that ensures his place. The more problematic question arises when looking to compare Iain and Ingrid Baxter with Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and the younger artists who today constitute the so-called Vancouver school, or photoconceptual movement. They include Ken Lum, Roy Arden and Rodney Graham among others. What role did N.E. Thing Co. have in shaping the popular if not the intellectual ground, or what traits do Wall, Wallace, and their younger associates share in common with N.E. Thing Co.? For Ingrid the lingering concern is the perception that she played a secondary role in company matters. Only thinking to ask this question, she contends, is to fall into that vexatious trap of stereotyping women; she must avoid the risk of being relegated by history to a role more inferior than the one in fact she inhabited.⁵ She cites appropriately in her defence the example of the British pair Gilbert and George, noting that people pay little if any attention to the division of labour between them. Why? "Because they are men," she states emphatically. In fact, she defends Iain profoundly on his openness since it was always his intention to include, rather than exclude, her. He involved her from the beginning in discussions about his work even as a student enrolled in an M.F.A. programme at Washington State University at Pullman, from which he graduated in 1964. It was a short period before Ingrid could contribute in any substantial way to N.E. Thing Co.'s programme, which complemented Iain's teaching activities in the Centre for Communications and the Arts at Simon Fraser University, a programme he established between 1966 and 1971. It was a formative period, a time when N.E. Thing Co. was to formulate its ubiquitous concept of art and life.

4. Marie L. Fleming, for example, in her catalogue *Baxter? Any Choice Works, 1965-1970*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982, attributes works from the year 1965 to Iain Baxter; from 1966 to IT (Iain Baxter, Ingrid Baxter, and John Friel); from 1966-67 to N.E. Baxter Thing Co. (Iain Baxter and Ingrid Baxter); from 1967-1978 to N.E. Thing Co. (Iain Baxter and Ingrid Baxter).

5. In conversation with the author, June 11, 1995.

Was it the fact that they were able to define their shared interests within the framework of N.E. Thing Co. that makes their collaboration so unique? Probably so, since theirs was one of the more productive associations in post-war Canadian and International art—which anticipated among others Image Bank, Western Front and the notable Toronto-based group, General Idea. It is no coincidence that General Idea was drawn to Vancouver sometime in 1968 when they initiated a close working relationship with Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov of Image Bank, another west coast collective of consequence.⁶ Almost twenty-five years later AA Bronson introduced the catalogue to *Media Works* with the acknowledgement that N.E. Thing Co.'s history comprises "one of the great creative sagas of this country."⁷ This multimedia presentation of company memorabilia, consisting principally of non-art media such as buttons, telexes, letterhead, invitations, chinaware, printed matter and company artifacts, personified N.E. Thing Co.'s spirit. Bronson alludes to Iain's personality and the impact of his ideas, specifically praising the U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery project *A Portfolio of Piles* from 1968. Bronson also instinctively brings to light the importance we attach to the artist's "image", whether fabricated in the media or decoyed under the guise of a public persona or performance ethos. What remains engaging about Iain and Ingrid Baxter is that in their roles as Company Presidents they were frequently the subject of the camera's scrutiny. Perhaps it is because they were able to define their roles symbolically that they could eschew the conventional image of Company President, preferring instead to live both within, and – depending on circumstances – outside the myth. They produced several photographic projects on the subject of the company presidency which, at the most extreme, show theirs to be a satirical image, without compromise pulling faces at the camera, idling the time away, blowing bubbles, lost in thought, prone on a bed of lettuce, or lost under a pile of bodies topped with whipped cream and cherries.

Typical of this early phase are their facial studies from 1969, which set out to erode the assumptions we might harbour about the corporate image – what are we to make of Iain blowing bubbles in *President of a Company Blowing Bubbles*, 1969, and Ingrid's gallery of faces in *President of a Company Face Screwing*, 1969, or *A President of a Company in Ways of Viewing*, 1969?⁸ Obviously these works and those which constitute the later series called the *Restaurant Suite*, 1977, which show the Baxters with their business partners and employees in various parodic poses, are a transgression of what we may hold to be the norm, perhaps even its subversion.⁹ Satirically, one is left to wonder whether the job of Company President is all that it is made out to be; could this be a bucolic plot, or even worse, the trifling of a disaffected employee? Somehow these images, you say, have escaped their grip, that they are the result of the privately confected or deluded moments of one of the company's minions in the basement of the department of obsessive behaviour. And yet these images have the company seal of approval stamped on the corner, which of course affirms their authenticity. We have stumbled here upon an elaborate game, one which Linda

Hutcheon has described at length in her book *A Theory of Parody*. "Parody," she writes, "is one of the major forms of self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse."¹⁰ It would seem that this practice is in keeping with the questioning of the monolithic forms in society: N.E. Thing Co.'s parody is in the best of avant-garde traditions on which to cite the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists. As a practice it allows for a mask behind which the artist may shield while provoking questions about the inherent fallacies within society's established democratic or liberal traditions. As a result art is open to redefinition by its practitioners and to a constant process of re-evaluation by those who mediate both its critical reception and its public consumption; it is a game, in other words, with high stakes for those directly involved, but for others it is a recreation or spectator sport. "In games we devise means of non-specialized participation in the larger drama of our time," writes Marshall McLuhan, whose insights on this particular aspect of human behaviour helped Iain Baxter foster his own understanding of the role games might play in his teaching, or indeed in generating audience response to N.E. Thing Co.¹¹ McLuhan also emphasized the protean function of art, likening its powerful cultural influence to the pervasiveness of today's communications media: "...[it] has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures."¹²

In a relatively short period between 1966 and 1969 N.E. Thing Co. achieved the notoriety and critical interest which many artists of their generation sought, but rarely received. How should we account for their quick and rapid success? Two factors: their high rate of production and the visibility which resulted from their inherent talent to promote and disseminate their ideas. Recently David Silcox has written, "Baxter's centrality in all of this...hinged on his constant preoccupation with two things: what art was and how it affected society."¹³ Iain Baxter was particularly taken by the kinds of paradigm shifts at the level of society which McLuhan had predicted in the area of communications. The idea, for example, that media could bring about new perceptual habits was as applicable to the visual arts in Baxter's mind as it was to technology or science.¹⁴ Bronson has suggested insightfully, "If there is a great Canadian anything, it is the prototypically Canadian infrastructure, carried to a fine obsession, an encyclopaedic approach to media, communications and business deftly cross-pollinated with everyday life."¹⁵ In the case of N.E. Thing Co. the instruments of corporate legitimacy were appropriated in the form of letterhead, business cards, company logo and the telex and telecopier machines – these then, were the practical tools for operating within the competitive worlds of both art and business. This obsession, for it surely was that, for networking from a distance was imposed upon the Baxters by their geographical remove from the cultural centres. But, in reality, no matter where they found themselves, the ciphering of information and the currency in the portability of ideas it engendered were the embodiment of the Information Age.

Vancouver, however, was a city with a distinctive identity and its own particular creative stream to draw from. "The artistic fecundity of Vancouver at that time seemed as limitless as the sea that surrounded it," writes David Silcox.¹⁶

6. See Scott Watson, "Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive," *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies from the Morris/Trasov Archive*. Vancouver: U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery, 1992, *passim*.

7. AA Bronson, "Introduction," in Iain Baxter, *Media Works. N.E. Thing Co. Ltd.* Toronto: Art Metropole, 1992, unpaginated.

8. The parallels with Andy Warhol's multiple self-portraits are instructive, especially *Self-Portrait*, 1964, where he feigns or just plays dumb for the price of a dollar in the photo kiosk. See *Andy Warhol. A Retrospective*, ed. Kynaston McShine. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989, plate 3. Bruce Nauman explores the arbitrariness of physiognomy in his *Studies for Hologram (a-e)*, 1970, see *Bruce Nauman. Prints 1970-89*. New York: Castelli Graphics/Monk Galleries and Chicago: Donald Young Gallery, 1989, plates 1-5.

9. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York: Methuen, 1985, pp. 106-107.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

11. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd ed. New York: New American Library, 1964, pp. 210-211. The relationship between art and games has been entertained elsewhere, not only by Iain Baxter in conversation with the author, but by Alvin Balkind in his introduction to *Another 2 Projects: People|Language and Eye Scream Restaurant*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1978, unpaginated.

12. McLuhan, p. 214.

13. David Silcox, "Remembering the N.E. Thing Company," in *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*. Vancouver: U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery, 1993, p. 61.

14. McLuhan, "Introduction," *Ibid.*, unpaginated.

15. AA Bronson, "Introduction," in Iain Baxter, *Media Works*, unpaginated.

16. Silcox, *Ibid.*, p. 61.

(right and overleaf)
IAIN BAXTER (N.E. THING CO.)
Bagged Place, 1966
mixed media, size varies, installation:
U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery, February
7-16, 1966.
Photo: Courtesy N.E. Thing Co.

17. Robert Linsley, "Landscape and Literature in the Art of British Columbia," in *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City*, ed. Paul Delany. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994, pp. 200-204.

18. For personal recollections of the period, see Marguerite Pinney, "Voices," *Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931-1983*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983, pp. 174-187, and "Personal Perspectives," pp. 256-273. See also Joan Lowndes, "The Spirit of the Sixties," by a Witness," *Ibid.*, pp. 142-151.

19. The statement is attributed to Thomas Wolfe, see Charlotte Townsend, "N.E. Thing Co. and Les Levine," in *Canadian Art Today*, ed. William Townsend. Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1970, p. 78.

20. Claudia Beck, "Through the Looking Glass: Vancouver Photography in the Seventies," in *Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931-1983*, p. 275.

As Canada's third largest city, with two universities, community colleges and an art school, several public and emerging private galleries and long-founded cultural traditions, it had been in the practice of engendering its own intellectual and cultural life since the earlier part of the century. If in the 1950s and 1960s it reflected the broader social and economic changes in North American culture, it was able to develop and harness the kind of natural resources from which it has derived much of its present-day mythological status. With the life of the city so dramatically oriented towards its natural setting and a geography so richly endowed in natural resources, one is left with the impression that its inhabitants could not help but be marked by the forces of nature. Certainly, among artists of this century, it has been the culture/nature dialectic which has proven central to any hypothesis involving the development of a west coast iconography, from Emily Carr onwards.¹⁷

One is also left with the impression from those who have chronicled these early years that the city's cultural activities were sustained by such key intellectual events as the annual Festival of the Contemporary Arts, which was initiated for the first time in 1961. Its objective was to introduce Vancouver to the work of important contemporary artists, musicians, writers and performers. For example, in 1965 Iain Baxter helped organize a festival at U.B.C. with Arthur Erickson, Helen Goodwin, Takao Tanabe and Abraham Rogatnik on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan under the title "The Medium is the Message." As influential as these occasions conceivably must have been, the impetus for change rested with those who could remain directly involved – in other words, the artists and art professionals who lived and worked in Vancouver. Amongst curators, for example, Doris Shadbolt's term as director of the Vancouver Art Gallery was instrumental in helping revitalize the gallery's role within the community by reinvigorating its programming. Tony Emery, who followed as director, similarly was a catalyst for what some criticized as his radical efforts to incorporate Vancouver's younger artists into the life of the gallery's daily operation. Among his important initiatives was his overture to the interdisciplinary group Intermedia, making available the gallery's facilities for their periodic use and experimentation.¹⁸ These initiatives, however, both complemented and paralleled the steps already taken by Alvin Balkind, curator at the U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery, who since 1962, had proven as influential as any other figure in Vancouver. For some, such as N.E. Thing Co., he was to be instrumental in helping to define some of the key moments in the formative years of their career. Two shows by N.E. Thing Co. may well have contributed to the re-examination of art's function within the context of Vancouver's emergent vanguard movements. *Bagged Place*, N.E. Thing Co.'s plastic-shrouded environment shown in 1966 (right), was described by one social critic as the first public celebration of McLuhanism.¹⁹ Two years later, *A Portfolio of Piles*, a combination of photo-documentation and installation, was on the cusp of the conceptual wave which was consuming key Vancouver artists at the time. One important residue of the period was the interest generated among young artists in the uses of photography and its application to the conceptual practices which were evolving.²⁰

Bagged Place, 1966, which was reconstituted in 1987 as part of the exhibition *From Sea to Shining Sea* at the Power Plant in Toronto, is still a potent reminder of how





advanced N.E. Thing Co.'s ideas were relative to the developing notion of installation art. While it appears that the concept for this environment evolved in general isolation, parallels between Claes Oldenberg and Christo, among others, afford *Bagged Place* credible company. Iain Baxter was clear to differentiate between *Bagged Place* and the work of Christo, however, arguing, "Bagging, as opposed to wrapping, is a North American habit that puts things into their own space."²¹ He sanitizes the consumer world by meticulously bagging everything from the coffee grains in the pot to the refrigerator that he imports into the gallery environment. *Bagged Place* borrowed characteristics from the warehouse, department showroom and museum; on loan from Wosk's, a downtown store, furniture and appliances were transported from one environment into another, bagged and assembled to represent a living space. What was most interesting about the project was that it asked the gallery goer to contemplate the world of correspondences – in effect, to ponder on the contents of the four furnished rooms of the gallery and reflect about the consumer traits of a society in which all nature of commodities, be they household, food products, or otherwise, are tied immeasurably to the global economies of scale. *Bagged Place* salvaged the idea that archaeology was also of the present – less about a vision of the future than a sundry accounting of the current state of consumerism. The fact that the premises were advertised as being available to a potential renter for the duration of the installation underscores the concern with further eroding the distinctions between the museum, the gallery and society at large.

As it proved, *Bagged Place* was a prototype for N.E. Thing Co.'s installation at the National Gallery of Canada in 1969. If in 1966 the conceptual moorings of N.E. Thing Co. were in early development, by the time Pierre Théberge invited Iain and Ingrid Baxter to exhibit at the National Gallery in Ottawa the company had incorporated under the Companies Act on January 16, 1969. "The objects," reads the document, "for which the Company is established are:

- (i) To produce sensitivity information:
- (ii) To provide a consultation and evaluation service with respect to things:
- (iii) To produce, manufacture, import, export, sell, and otherwise deal in things of all kinds. "

By transforming the Lorne Building's ground floor into a reception area, with executive offices, a secretarial pool and telex machines, as well as display areas for its various departments, the exhibition salvaged the fact that the gallery originally was an office building. It also played to the idea that their installation could revive the spirit of the structural organization that once characterized the building's original role: this conflation of the building's historical function, and their own future aims to build a corporate entity, was not without its irony.²² There was always the distinct possibility of subversion: that the exterior utilitarian appearance of the Lorne Building in conjunction with N.E. Thing Co.'s installation could temporarily relieve the gallery visitor either of expectations typically associated with this environment, or heighten the intensity of displacement some might feel as a result.

21. Quoted in Marie L. Fleming, *Ibid.*, p. 94, f.n. 22.

22. Linda Hutcheon, *Splitting Images. Contemporary Canadian Ironies*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1991, p. 126.

By 1969, N.E. Thing Co. had achieved what many might describe as the pinnacle of its unorthodox career with its exhibition at the National Gallery. Broadly speaking, N.E. Thing Co. conceived of an installation, a total environment, which was also designed to subsume aspects of the gallery's daily operation. For example, the gallery's hours of operation became company hours and gallery guards became company security. By first transforming the space, and second, by re-orchestrating the public's perceptions, they were able to suspend "reality" – ironically the result of blurring the line between the gallery and the world beyond its doors. Under the banner of its corporate mandala – N.E. Thing Company – it presented a survey of its twelve departments with a mind to obviating the familiar gallery context. If, for example, its early products such as its vacuum moulded, bagged, or inflated objects were inherently commercial, the general eclecticism of the presentation belonged either to commercial showrooms or the trade fairs of industry. It was an eclectic grouping with many diverse idioms of commercial or aesthetic expression: from works which mimicked the New York vanguard to vacuum formed artifacts; from inflatable sculpture to "wearables"; from flow charts to maps; from freezer chests containing mirrors to cibachrome light boxes.

As a sign of its "business" acumen N.E. Thing Co. produced its own bilingual progress report titled *Look/Voyez* whose photographic content was conceived by Iain Baxter as a vehicle to promote the diversity of the company's activities. The report opens with the president's message: "As a company vitally involved with sensitivity information, the N.E. Thing Co. offers this display to the many millions of people who see. It is the visual unknown that challenges the N.E. Thing researchers." Further on, it professes: "These probings of the why and how of visual things and their combinations are efforts to discover distinct properties or effects and the means of putting them into operation." As statements they are intended to appeal to the practical truths of perception, rather than to the visionary soul of people's lives: its purpose, it could be said, was one of curiosity and simple elucidation. For Iain and Ingrid Baxter the artist was not a privileged member of society, but one who was more sensitized to perceiving the world in terms of its visual relationships, an idea they promoted as the formula VSI or Visual Sensitivity Information.²³

Although N.E. Thing Co. conformed to its articles of incorporation its purpose or function was not always easy to define in the wake of the National Gallery exhibition. Sometimes they were the instigators who set into motion a series of events, but whose significance they could not or would not claim, since intrinsically N.E. Thing Co. was the intellectual or cultural property of everyone. At other times they were determined to reveal the intrinsic value of ordinariness; boredom was a state of oblivion which could be overcome by subtle shifts in personal behaviour or of perception. That life is a double-edged sword they could not deny, but their ability to communicate its ambiguities, to flaunt its absurdities and embrace its fate, was almost redemptive.

At odds with the relative ease of acceptance Iain and Ingrid Baxter enjoyed among the bureaucratic or curatorial circles of the Canadian artworld was the public perception of their activities. N.E. Thing Co., like their contemporaries, had to win

acceptance, but not before the issues had been amply aired and their role understood within the popular cultural perception of the artist's place in society. The incredulity which was often expressed in newspaper columns was frequently the result of N.E. Thing Co.'s ability to blur traditionally what for some was the familiar distinction between art and life. Iain Wallace, for example, writing on *Bagged Place for The Ubysey*, could opine knowingly: "Iain Baxter (Bagster), currently having a love affair with plastic, has pulled off a "thing" that will have skeptics wondering what has happened to art." It is fair to say, as with most issues concerning the state of art, that the ironies engendered by the coupling of the artist's fertile imagination either to technology or to non-art media found resistance at first, but with time it too changed. If the public was inclined to resist it was because of its disdain or suspicion, fuelled by the skepticism it often felt towards the alienating intellectual systems of advanced art. *Time Magazine*, for example, embodied this criticism in its brief homily to the artist in 1969, writing: "To Baxter, snobbishness and pretension often hinder the public from enjoying art..."²⁴ To clarify their position, it is necessary to emphasize that N.E. Thing Co. believed in what can be described as an open, flexible approach to the production of art, one which was conceptually broad and rooted in the pragmatist's sensibility. Their objective was to embrace the mundane, sometimes spontaneous, aspects of our lives. Fixed academic ideas about art had little appeal or relevance, for in their minds art was both a process and an empirical tool which could be used to test the broad range of human behaviour and associated cultural practice.²⁵

Endorsement came from an unusual, but critically powerful, place in 1969. The influential American critic Lucy Lippard embraced N.E. Thing Co., but not before it had generated its own support among Canadian critics. Recognized for her insightful interpretation of conceptual art Lippard was to bring the same openness to Iain Baxter and N.E. Thing Co., writing intelligently and enthusiastically about their originality for *artscanada*.²⁶ Impressed by the rigour of their ideas, she invited N.E. Thing Co. (along with Duane Lundun, Iain's student, and Jeff Wall) to participate in the group show *577,087*, which she curated for the Seattle Art Museum in September of 1969 on the subject of conceptual art. The exhibition was dominated by American artists who were associated with minimalism, earthworks, or the conceptual art movement. Notwithstanding the parallels she observed between N.E. Thing Co.'s site-specific projects utilizing mirrors and other protocols rooted in the earthworks movement, she could see the originality of this work. "Baxter has independently had a lot of the same ideas as New York artists, at the same time, without knowing theirs; the reverse is also true."²⁷ Her contention that the world was a place of coincidences was apt in this case, fuelling her conviction that originality could exist outside the mediating authority of New York city. It was essentially the same show, with minor adjustments which travelled to the Vancouver Art Gallery the next year in January under the title *950,000*.²⁸ Later, during the fall of 1969, Lippard helped chronicle *Art Inside the Arctic Circle*, a site-specific project sponsored by the Edmonton Art Gallery in Inuvik, N.W.T. with Lawrence Weiner, Harry Savage, Iain and Ingrid Baxter.

24. Reprinted in Iain Baxter, *Media Works*, p. 49.

25. In addition to the constant flow of projects as part of the company rationale policy statements were issued periodically which defined their objectives. The following statement accompanies *North American Time Zone Photo-VSI Simultaneity*, Oct. 18, 1970, 1970: "The photography department was brought into being to perform qualitative analyses focusing on the influence of the physical environment on human behaviour at individual and global levels."

26. Lucy Lippard, "Iain Baxter: New Spaces," *artscanada*, no. 132/133 (June 1969), pp. 3-7.

27. Lippard, *Ibid.*, p. 6.

28. The catalogue's format, which was printed on white index cards measuring 5 x 3 inches, was in keeping with the informational character as well as with the epistemological premise of many of the works. N.E. Thing Co.'s contribution took the form of *VSI Formula # 5*, 1968.

23. Following the project's conclusion it was the curator's intention to publish a report cataloguing the exhibition. This he did, producing a chronology of events, photo-documentation and a biography, with the notable absence of an interpretive essay. See Pierre Théberge, *Report on the Activities of the N.E. Thing Co. of North Vancouver, British Columbia, at the National Gallery of Canada, and Other Locations, June 4 - July 6 1969*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1971. For his recollections about the project, see Pierre Théberge, "N.E. Thing Company in Ottawa," *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, p. 63.

29. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 208.

30. Wall's revised article on Roy Arden, which originated as a catalogue essay for the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 1993, describes among other canonical correspondences certain affinities between Arden and Dan Graham. Given Arden's images of construction sites and urban development in Vancouver and environs it is surprising that Wall does not speak at least in passing of Iain Baxter's *A Portfolio of Piles*, a precedent which is more than implied in several of these works, but especially with *Plywood Stacks, Vancouver, B.C.*, 1991. See Jeff Wall, "An Artist and his Models: Roy Arden," *Parachute*, no. 74 (April/May/June 1994), p. 9. See also *Roy Arden, Vancouver: Contemporary Gallery*, 1993.

31. See William Wood, "Capital and Subsidiary. The N.E. Thing Co. and the Revision of Conceptual Art," and Nancy Shaw, "Siting the Banal. The Expanded Landscapes of the N.E. Thing Co.," in *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*, pp. 11-23 and pp. 25-35.

Although Lippard emphasizes N.E. Thing Co.'s environmental and ecological sensibilities, their own concept of art, or VSI (Visual Sensitivity Information), as an extension of their own perceptual and technological capability, was fundamentally McLuhanesque.²⁹ It is revealing that N.E. Thing Co. was the only "company" listed under the heading *communications consultants* in the Canadian Telex Directory in 1970, a category newly devised for N.E. Thing Co. If this is an indication of their "posturing" it also draws attention to their desire to integrate the codes and the practices of art and business into their thinking. Their manifesto was couched in the paralegal instruments of incorporation – a legal business entity which paradoxically, if one thinks about it, could also lay claim to vanguard status within the visual arts. Obviously within the context of the broader debate on media and communications McLuhan's influence must again be acknowledged, since the concept of casting themselves in the role of media consultants was consistent with the concern that art could play a defining role within the concept of the "global village." The influence of McLuhan is felt in at least two ways: in their constant emphasis on developing their basic tools of communication and their belief in art as an instrument of amplification.

* * *

Most assuredly, it is the social, artistic and cultural milieu of Vancouver that bears significantly on the work and conceptual orientation of N.E. Thing Co. in the 1960s and 1970s. Although there has been more than adequate discussion about the parallels between N.E. Thing Co. and the influential trends in conceptual art during the 1960s, there has been little or no discussion on what constitutes N.E. Thing Co.'s legacy of influence on those who followed. How it may coincide with some of the important concerns that rise more profusely with photoconceptual art in Vancouver is an important question. While emphasis has been placed on the international success of Jeff Wall, and increasingly on the significance of the individual contributions of Ian Wallace, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham and Roy Arden among others, we must ask what are some of the common attributes, thematic parallels, or ideologies which either characterize the differences or the similarities between N.E. Thing Co. and the photoconceptual element in recent Vancouver art?

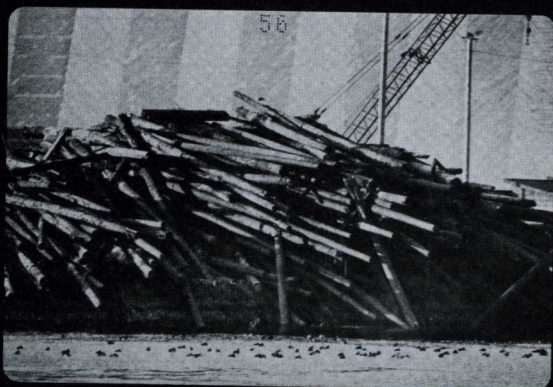
Although their influence over photoconceptual art in Vancouver, which achieved its primacy in the late 1970s and early to mid 1980s is difficult to assess, the contribution of N.E. Thing Co. within the context of Canadian art is better understood. The list is long, but some, like Jeff Wall, have simply left the task to others, preferring to leave the issue of N.E. Thing Co. either dormant or wilfully uninterpreted.³⁰ William Wood and Nancy Shaw, for example, have each authored insightful essays on N.E. Thing Co. in support of an exhibition at the U.B.C. Fine Arts Gallery in 1993. Although the focus of their research was intended first to revive N.E. Thing Co.'s position *vis-à-vis* the canon of conceptual art and second, to discuss the broader trends in their landscape subjects, neither Wood nor Shaw discussed in their respective essays the broader impact of N.E. Thing Co.'s role in the development of Vancouver art.³¹ It may prove that N.E. Thing Co.'s contribution was important for

N.E. THING CO.
A Portfolio of Piles, 1968.
 (selection from a series of 59 images)
 offset lithography
 Courtesy N.E. Thing Co

- Title Page
- 12. Dollarton Highway, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 14. Lynn Terminals, 121 Harbour Avenue, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 16. Harbour Board Burning Dump, Dollarton Highway, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 20. Columbia Street near 2nd Narrows Bridge, North Vancouver, B.C.

A PORTFOLIO OF PILES N.E. THING CO. 1968





N.E. THING CO.
A Portfolio of Piles, 1968.
 (selection from a series of 59 images)
 offset lithography
 Courtesy N.E. Thing Co.

- 24. Deep Sea Terminals, end of Capilano Road, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 30. Deep Sea Terminals, end of Capilano Road, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 39. 1436 Columbia, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 43. Deep Sea Terminals, end of Capilano Road, North Vancouver, B.C.
- 56. Cotton Road, North Vancouver, B.C.

other reasons, namely in pioneering the realm of corporate or company-type projects, but finds acknowledgement within the paradigm that Ian Wallace constructs of Vancouver photoconceptual art, for example. The link Wallace implies between Iain Baxter's *A Portfolio of Piles*, 1968, and Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual*, 1969-70, is a paradigmatic one, mediated principally by the factual photographs Ed Ruscha produced on gas stations (1963), parking lots (1967) and the urban environment, his most notorious the chronicling of every building on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles (1966).³² We must also look either to Charlotte Townsend-Gault or Scott Watson for a fuller accounting.

In an essay that ranges selectively over the subject of contemporary photography, Townsend-Gault promotes Iain Baxter's *A Portfolio of Piles* as a collection of perceptual readymades (left). By singling out this work she also places it within the strategic canon of contemporary photography, an appropriate and acceptable choice since it is part of that urban lexicon which Ed Ruscha, Dan Graham, Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace among others, were so curious about interpreting. In essence, she has argued that "...Baxter's work was a critique of perceptual boundaries using only perceptual strategies." Townsend-Gault continues: "He was not concerned with the politics of agriculture, land use, the dumping of waste, resource management or other endeavours that lead to the piling up of stuff."³³ For me this implies too narrow a definition. There is an inherent risk in negating important considerations of the thematic content of these images, which, in spite of their alleged formal syncretism, are a mapping of the city nonetheless. Lippard in her *artscanada* article of June 1969 stresses emphatically that Baxter had come out of science into art, that his fundamental interest lay in the physical make-up of his surroundings. Watson in an essay focused principally on the characteristics of what he terms "the defeated landscape" in the work of selected Vancouver artists – N.E. Thing Co., Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Christos Dikeakos – treats the topic as thoroughly as his exegesis allows. Although *A Portfolio of Piles* is not addressed, Watson discusses a cibachrome from 1968 by N.E. Thing Co. called *Ruins* which he acknowledges precedes by several years works by Wall and others to which it bears, he says, "a material, but perhaps superficial, resemblance."³⁴ It is this focus on both suburban and urban content which lends credence to the argument Watson advances, that the Baxters "can legitimately be said to have defined the strategy for an urban semiotic, although it was left to others to theorize this strategy."³⁵

Within the cadre of the west coast visual lexicon there may be no more compelling a statement than the one implicit in Iain Baxter's *Ruins*, an image of tiered suburban homes. Does it foretell the future in some diabolical fashion, or is the ruin upon us now, insipid and soul-destroying? The inherent paradox of titling the image of an east-end suburb in this way is to provoke us into thought. How this will happen is not so clear, but within the framework of the ecological and geological debate it was Robert Smithson who, among artists, had defined this process of natural downturn as the result of entropy. In his essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" Smithson entertained the idea that the modern industrial landscapes typified by eastern seaboard communities such as Passaic were nothing if not

32. See Ian Wallace, "Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver," in *Thirteen Essays on Photography*. Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990, pp. 96-97. In a far-reaching essay Germano Celant had made this point earlier, placing *A Portfolio of Piles* among a short but illustrious list of artist's books with references to such seminal projects as Ed Ruscha's *Twenty Seven Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building on Sunset Boulevard*. Germano Celant, "Books as Artwork, 1960-72," in *Books by Artists*, ed. Tim Guest. Toronto: Art Metropole, 1981, p. 95.

33. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Wavelength to Patternity: Epistemology with a Camera," in *Frame of Mind. Viewpoints on Photography in Contemporary Canadian Art*, ed. Daina Augaitis. Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1993, p. 14.

34. Scott Watson, "Discovering the Defeated Landscape," in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, p. 254.

35. Watson, *Ibid.*

36. Robert Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 186.

37. Smithson in Hobbs, p. 92.

38. Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*. Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991, p. 29. Distinguishing between Smithson and Graham further on, he writes: "When Smithson leads the incensed Romantics into the desert, Graham remains in the city and the suburbs."

39. In conversation with Iain Baxter, June 26, 1995.

40. Wallace, *Ibid.*, p. 97.

41. Christos Dikeakos, "Ian Wallace: Selected Works 1970-1987," in *Ian Wallace: Selected Works 1970-1987*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1988, p. 7. *Untitled*, which is illustrated as a single image on p. 8, was recently exhibited as a double panel in *Ian Wallace* at S.L. Simpson Gallery, June 1-July 4, 1995; its overall measurements are 157.5 x 99.1 cm.

predisposed to the industrial revolution's overt principle of planned obsolescence. Consequently, he envisions before him a landscape littered with the monuments of progress – bridges, derricks, pipes and the rusting paraphernalia of heavy industry. Discussing the importance of this essay Robert Hobbs has emphasized Smithson's fascination with the idea of planned obsolescence, which he characterizes appropriately either as "progress in reverse" or "cities rising to ruin."³⁶ Describing before him the stark reality of a landscape on the brink of development, Smithson writes:

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is 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.³⁷

Jeff Wall, for example, has attributed similar, if not antithetical, readings of suburbia to Dan Graham, citing "Homes for America", which appeared in the format of a photo-text in *Artforum* in December-January 1966/67.³⁸ This preponderance of a dystopian view signals the end of the American dream; the loss registered emphatically in the suburban clapboard homes in uniform after uniform row. If one cannot attribute such pessimism to Baxter, however, *Ruins* (right) gives us pause for thought. For contained in the idea of the ruin for Baxter is the conflicted notion of devastation and beauty in one; a dialectical dilemma to be sure, but one which remains characteristically ambiguous in an era defined by increasing pessimism.³⁹

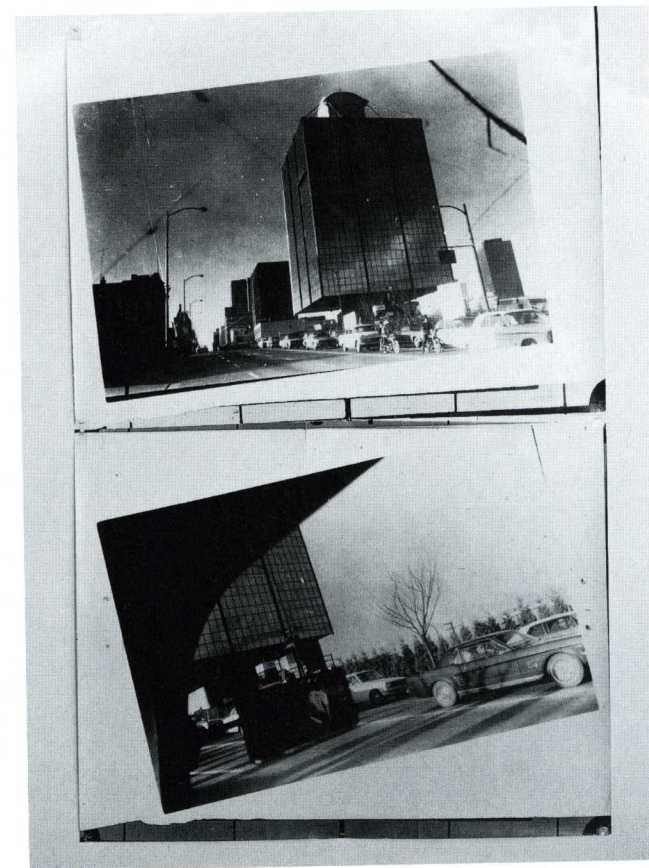
The early thread that binds N.E. Thing Co., Wall, Wallace and Dikeakos, for example, is the congruity between the subject of the urban semiology and the mobility of the car. Ultimately, it is the informational function of photography as a documentary tool which first appeals, only later to be particularized and given the stamp of either a distinct technical signature, or thematic development in the case of these individual artists. While it is important to suggest that none of them had exclusive hold over what amounts to be a broadening trend in developing the lexicon of popular cultural myth in North America, from Walker Evans to Dan Graham, the fact that these concerns were germane to a conceptual remapping of the city of Vancouver and its environs must be regarded with some significance. Correlations, for example, between Iain Baxter's *A Portfolio of Piles*, 1968, and Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual*, 1969-70, as already pointed out, prove this where the emphasis on a particular environment is weighed against the broader traits that define a social context. The industrial suburbs of Vancouver have their distinction, yet, as Wallace himself writes with Wall's *Landscape Manual* in mind: "Like Baxter's *Piles*, it examined the "defeated" zones of the regional suburbs specific to Vancouver yet also typical of any other North American suburb."⁴⁰ However, the "situationist" aesthetic which Wall exploits from the vantage of a car recording his experience by snapping images as he drives the extent of the suburbs is one which Wallace himself fastens onto in an early work, *Untitled*, 1969-70⁴¹ (page 23). Here, the camera fixes spontaneously on the Westcoast Transmission Building located on West Georgia St., the lapsed time between the two photographs he mounts one above the other in the gallery – only a matter of seconds. The perspective is from the front seat, the



N.E. THING CO.
Ruins, 1968/1990
cibachrome transparency, light box
40.6 x 56.8 x 12.7 cm.
Collection of N.E. Thing Co.
Courtesy Morris and Helen Belkin
Art Gallery, Vancouver.



N.E. THING CO.
1/4 Mile Landscape (Prince Edward Island), 1969
detail, silver prints, hand-tinted; map;
watercolour and pencil on paper. 4 parts, each 65.9 x 78.7 cm.
Collection of N.E. Thing Co.



IAN WALLACE
Untitled, 1969-70
2 black and white photographs
157.5 x 99.1 cm. overall.
Photo: Courtesy S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto.



N.E. THING CO.
Inactive Verbs,
Thinking, Sensing, Reflecting, Feeling,
Planning, Pondering, Wondering, 1969
 detail, hand-tinted black and white photographs
 39 x 49 cm. each, 7 in series.
 Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

photographer's impulsiveness evident in the lack of framing and the immediacy of the experience he conveys. The viewer should also realize that these represent photographs within photographs, original documents which in some sense of the word have been archivally treated by the artist.

Baxter had also photographed the landscape from a travelling car. It was, as it turned out, to be a rite of passage for this generation of artists who associated the city, its suburbs and the vast spaces beyond with the vectors of highway travel. Pre-dating both Wall and Wallace is N.E. Thing Co's *1/4 Mile Landscape*, 1968, three hand-tinted photographs and a map combined as a document in support of a site-specific intervention along a stretch of highway in Southern California near Newport Harbour (page 22). In this process N.E. Thing Co. stakes claim to the temporal experience of the highway by erecting signs which announce in quick succession – "You Will Soon Pass by a 1/4 Mile N.E. Thing Co. Landscape" – "Start Viewing" – "Stop Viewing." The idea comments not only on the authority of the sign, but on the authority of the words as well. The highway for all intents and purposes is a regulated system and in the sense that it is patrolled by the police or service authorities, it signifies the watchful eye of authority. As a culture defined by its use of the automobile this work challenges the alertness of the driver and passengers who may be inured to the randomness of the information since it does not appear to conform to the codified convention of traffic signs, nor the compelling visual spectacle of roadside advertising. Signage plays a significant role in informing the driver about the conditions of the highway, when to slow down, when to speed up, even when to stop. What is so compelling about the concept behind *1/4 Mile Landscape* is its ready application to any landscape, anytime and anyplace – similar claims were staked at Cape Spear, Newfoundland, Inuvik in the Northwest Territories, a country pasture on Prince Edward Island and in the Sea of Tranquility on the moon.

Since Ian Wallace was Baxter's student at U.B.C. in 1964/65 one might also ask what hold, if any, did he exert over the younger artist? Are there parallels to be found between Wallace's earlier themes and the culture/nature dialectic which characterizes the work of Ian Baxter and N.E. Thing Co. in the mid to late 1960s? Certainly there is an affinity between *Ruins* and Wallace's 1973 work *La Mélancolie de la rue*, as suggested in the contrast between the central panel's utopian vision of suburbia embodied in the new home and the coastal shanty community in the right panel.⁴² The more didactic exercises in which Wallace presents himself as the subject of his own photographic study in the mid 1970s and early 1980s bear some affinity to the related practice by Ian and Ingrid Baxter. Although the satirical content in N.E. Thing Co.'s photographs from 1969 contrasts with the restraint of the contemplative thinker in Wallace's photographic piece *At Work*, 1983, the frozen theatrical gestures of earlier work such as *An Attack on Literature*, 1975, bear at least superficial comparison. However, in N.E. Thing Co.'s *Inactive Verbs* series of 1969, Ingrid, who is the subject of these seven hand-coloured black and white photographs is shown motionless on a chair, lost in thought, looking beyond the right frame (left). Although her demeanour apparently does not change from photograph to photograph, she was instructed to "enact" the inactive verb for each of the seven poses, her different

42. For a discussion, see Jeff Wall "La Mélancolie de la Rue: Idyll and Monochrome in the Work of Ian Wallace 1967-82," *Ian Wallace Selected Works 1970-1987*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1988, p. 67, plate 22.

(right)
Art in America, cover,
 May-June 1969.
 Photo: Isaac Applebaum.

43. In fact, the top register of four slides was eliminated from the cover to give the mast head "Art in America" its prominence. In this issue N.E. Thing Co. is discussed by David L. Shirley, "Impossible Art—What it is," *Art in America*, v. 57, no. 3 (May-June 1969), pp. 35-36, p. 42. The following year, the *Art in America* cover was appropriated by N.E. Thing Co. which treated it as a source of Visual Sensitivity Information by producing a limited edition lithograph, a slide, and a title sheet, which it titled *P+L+P+L+P=VSI, VSI Formula No. 10*, 1970. The explanation of the formula is as follows: "The cover began as a series of slides (P=Photograph) and became an offset lithograph cover for *Art in America* (L=Lithograph) which in turn was photographed (P=Photograph) by the Lithography Workshop for printing on metal plate lithographically (L=Lithograph). After the edition was printed, in a gesture of complete consciousness of the medium, it was crumpled and placed in a pile on the floor. This pile of crumpled lithographs became a work of the N.E. Thing Co.'s Projects Department and was accordingly photographed (P=Photograph). This series of transformations (P+L+P+L+P) equals the total Visual Sensitivity Information (VSI) available." See Iain Baxter, *N.E. Thing Co.* ("Blue Book"), unpaginated, 1970: Lithograph.

states of mind projected by the subtitle: "Thinking," "Sensing," "Reflecting," "Feeling," "Planning," "Pondering," "Wondering." This is much closer to the *philosophie* of Wallace's contemplator in *At Work*.

It was also about this time that N.E. Thing Co. came to international prominence through their participation in thirty or more exhibitions centred in New York and throughout Europe. This success owes something both to the inherent desire for self-promotion and the instant access that technologies such as the telex allowed by dissolving or surmounting the bureaucratic barriers. The cover to the May-June 1969 issue of *Art in America* (right) reproduced sixteen slide transparencies by N.E. Thing Co. – if it is an example of how successful Iain and Ingrid Baxter had become in their efforts to gain attention by publicizing their ideas, their embrace by one of America's more widely circulated and popular art magazines ensured their fifteen minutes of fame.⁴³ It was also an example of how the slide transparency had come to attain an influential currency as information, easily duplicated and readily injected into the broader economy of the art world. As examples of N.E. Thing Co.'s critical interest in the practical application of slide documentation, they belonged to their on-going project set on classifying the perceived or subjectively nominal world in the palpable terms of photographic documentation, or Visual Sensitivity Information (VSI). Accordingly, photography was also used to document or reproduce, appropriate or denigrate a number of previously acclaimed cultural artifacts which were designated ironically as ART (Aesthetically Rejected Things). Conversely, they drew from the greater resource as yet of the unclaimed world of found aesthetics or chance situations; these they called ACTs (Aesthetically Claimed Things).

The idea of penetrating the boardrooms of either corporations or museums was at hand in N.E. Thing Co.'s networking skills, which utilized the telecopier and telex machine to some strategic advantage from their North Vancouver residence. The notion of the "wired" or "global village" obviously went hand in hand with the multinational corporations who had both the resources and the capability to develop the world's information vectors. Iain and Ingrid Baxter were among the first artists in Canada seriously to contemplate integrating mass communications into the central nervous system of its own activities. Obviously as artists they were still dependant upon the print media for the discursive value of criticism in the form of articles and reviews, but for the purposes of broad dissemination the telex machine, the forerunner to the fax, was a means to explore. At the promotional level their ideas or proposals could be telegraphed between their North Vancouver residence and galleries in Toronto, New York or Amsterdam. At other times the telex was used to penetrate the bastions of the corporate world (one telex communication with Marshall McLuhan instructed him to: "...sit down and with a pair of scissors cut 4 inches off your tie and please mail it immediately to Iain Baxter...") The symbols of the corporate world which reinforced the illusion of power were at the same time acquired in the form of letterhead and statements about company philosophy issued as press releases, usually accompanied by a glossary of terminology: SI Sensitivity Information, VSI Visual Sensitivity Information, ACT Aesthetically Claimed Things, ART Aesthetically Rejected Things. As either a tool for instruction, or as a

Art in America

MAY-JUNE 1969 \$2.50





N.E. THING CO.
Reflected Landscape, 1968-1981
detail, photo transparency
54.3 x 65.1 cm.
Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

technology with the potential to influence broadly, if not radicalize, business communications, the telex in the hands of N.E. Thing Co. became a cipher for art. Perhaps the most successful application of the technology occurred during a three-week period in 1969 when N.E. Thing Co. remained in communication with students as part of a pilot project called *Trans VSI Connection* at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax.

* * *

Do the documentary influences of Iain Baxter's field work carry over into his art practice and his formative projects with N.E. Thing Co.? Although his compelling interest in biology, nature and the environment has never deserted him, his perception first broadened from the empirical approach of science to embrace the process-oriented trends of environmental, conceptual and earth art in the 1960s. The documentary character of photography was applied in recording the artist's interventions or staging of site-specific work. Baxter's various reflected landscapes or mirror displacements from 1968 are instructive in this discussion, as are specific works such as *Approximately 1,200,000 Gallons of Water*, 1967, which utilize photography either to expose the inherent fallacies in calibrating or measuring the systems of nature, or to give the ordinary, subjective process of perception some added credence through the regimen of factual documentation.

By contrast N.E. Thing Co.'s abiding concern with ecology, environment and physical nature is typical of a growing sensitivity to the received ideas about nature in the 1960s. Iain Baxter's training, for example, in zoology at the University of Idaho, where he received a B.Sc. in 1959, helped condition him to the seemingly immutable balances of the eco-system. Indeed, it is a theme that runs with some consistency through many of N.E. Thing Co.'s projects – emphasized first by the treed environment of their North Vancouver home, surrounded by the tall standing pines indigenous to the Seymour river environment. If landscape was emblematic in the pre-Confederation period of colonially-conditioned conventions of viewing, with the rise of site-specific work in the 1960s nature was reclaimed for many different purposes, for personal ritual as well as the place where interventions could be staged, or site-specific projects developed. Although *Reflected Landscape*, 1968 (left) – a back-lit transparency which documents the lush Seymour river environment – shares something in common with the contemplative view of nature, its true intimacy for the Baxters is in its proximity to their Riverside Drive home. For them it signifies also their need to understand the natural environment as an ecological system. Correspondences found among others in *Demonstration Forest*, 1966 (pages 38 & 39) or in the *Art Inside the Arctic Circle* project from the fall of 1969 suggest this to be significant. Photo-documentation was an essential part of this work; some argued it was the work, since at the informational level it was meant to be displayed in the gallery along with maps and other support data, as in the case of *Reflected Landscape*. The focus of this transparency is the reflected mirror image of the treed river bank on the Seymour river, which in reality is beyond the frame. While we may never know that

which is beyond the frame we are reminded that the photograph is bogus too, that it is a substitute, a mere "reflection" of nature caught in the mirror of the camera's eye.

In the winter of 1967 Iain Baxter had visited Peyto Lake, Banff National Park in Alberta, where he placed his tripod in the snow and photographed the rugged landscape from a single vantage point (right). Although this process was itself standard, rather than photographing on the horizontal axis he produced sixty slide transparencies on the vertical axis, rotating 180° from his feet in 3° increments until his camera was straight up in the air. *180° Vertical Landscape (Winter)* comments on both the limitations and the strengths of a scientific approach that documents the phenomenon of nature while revealing the inherent laws of the process too. There are other activities that are quasi-scientific and that bear some comparison, for example, to those which involved painting the shadows cast by fruit trees on to the snow covered ground of their Riverside Drive residence to measure the movement of the earth's rotation, or the recording of approximately 2,500,000 gallons of water from the flow of the Seymour river in the form of photographs. There is either an acknowledged irony or a great pragmatism at work in this process that appears to rethink the laws of physics or of natural science. Art may have secularized, even irrevocably harmed, the symbiosis it once enjoyed with science, but its punch is still in its ability to unravel the world as defined by the orthodoxies of science. This simple act of observation would seem to be about much more, inferring for Baxter at least, that technology is the extension of human need, that the laws of science and of art are inextricably connected.

Singular principally for its focus on Vancouver's industrial north shore sites, the relationship between *A Portfolio of Piles* and the later panoramic views of the city – its downtown core, its industrial areas, its suburbs and its edges – by Wall, Wallace and others, is instructive. Inherent in many of these landscape or urban subjects is the nature/culture dialectic, probably nowhere as pronounced as in Vancouver, given the contrast between its concentrated urban core and the wilderness of the Coast Mountains to the north. It is because of this combination of physical setting and of the adaptation of civilization to the patterns of settlement that Vancouver and its environs is a blend of coastal flats, rivers, inlets, ocean, bay and coastal mountains. Because of its current concentration, land values and the premium placed on development, Vancouver is faced like every other community with difficult choices. An early work by Iain Baxter, *Edge*, 1967-1995, a cibachrome light box, addresses the industrial microcosm of the Port Moody landscape characterized by its boxcars on the Canadian Pacific Railway in the foreground and smoke from milling or refining operations in the air (page 32). The machine appears to co-exist happily with nature in this particular "garden", but closer scrutiny shows the railway cars to contain wood chips and the source of smoke a gas refinery partially obscured by the treed hill to the left. These are the signs of a typical resource-based economy you could say, an image not unusual on the shores of the Burrard Inlet or the banks of the Fraser River. Essentially, it is this character that Wall retains in his much later *Coastal Motifs*, 1989, a cibachrome light box that subsumes in its panoramic breadth a sublime view of nature and industry on the far shore which includes lumber, haulage and extraction operations (page 33). Wall had revisited the subject of the suburbs as well as adding



N.E. THING CO.
180° Vertical Landscape (Winter), 1967
detail, slide projection
Photo: N.E. Thing Co.



N.E. THING CO.
Edge, 1967-1995
cibachrome transparency, light box
76.2 x 121.9 x 15.2 cm.
Collection of N.E. Thing Co.



JEFF WALL
Coastal Motifs, 1989
cibachrome transparency, fluorescent light, display case
Image: 119 x 147 cm., edition of 4.
Photo: Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.



new categories in his chronicle of the urban or suburban landscape. This took him into those marginal areas that fall between housing developments and the vast industrial hinterland along the waterfront or beyond the city's boundaries – places neither well defined nor yet fixed that Wall, for instance, has chosen as the context in which to stage such works as *Bad Goods*, 1984, and *Diatribes*, 1985.⁴⁴

The Vancouver photoconceptual artists continue to demonstrate their predilection for a type of landscape that defines the city within the dialectical frame of nature/culture. Baxter's interest in this type of industrial landscape – in fact, for all forms of landscape – is connected to his curiosity about the forms civilization's interaction with its environment have taken. Equally, he relates to the formal elements in these industrial operations, keyed as much to the open framework of the shed roofs in the middle distance as he might be to the surrounding snowcapped mountains, or, as in *A Portfolio of Piles*, taken by the "minimalist" formal arrangement of milled lumber, stacked concrete or pipes, or sand tips. The relationship to many of the images in *A Portfolio of Piles* is self evident, suggesting that this project was germinal in sustaining N.E. Thing Co.'s interest in the industrial or urban environment. The found aesthetic of these formal relationships in the urban environment is a by-product of Visual Sensitivity Information.

A Portfolio of Piles was as individual a mapping of the city of Vancouver as had yet been endeavoured. The phenomenological interest in piles was in and of itself important; equally compelling was the conceptual inversion of the city on the basis of piles. Ironically, it challenged the more conventional idea of the city as a collection of celebrated historical monuments, tourist destinations, museums or designated green areas gleaned for the purposes of mass consumption. The irony is no more apparent than in the kaleidoscope view of the generic city on the cover of the Imperial Oil road maps of "Vancouver and Vicinity", which accompanied the 555 editions, with their emphasis on the garden city as a place for recreational pursuits such as boating, sports, the beach and the zoo. If *A Portfolio of Piles* is a photographic essay that also shares something in common with the idea of the travelogue, the car was as essential to viewing the various sites as it was to documenting them.

As it turns out, *A Portfolio of Piles* may well have been a prototype for other projects which proved either too ambitious, or too capital-intensive to complete. For example, C-IDEAS (Cultural Information Directing Environmental Attitudes Sensitive), which never went beyond its developmental phase for lack of resources, was conceived in the early 1970s as a visual lexicon documenting the topic of human adaptation to the environment. Company notes refer to C-IDEAS as "Its most challenging project...concerned with making a complete visual inventory of cultural information." The duration of the project was an anticipated five years. The prototype pages (left), organized alphabetically, showing thirty examples each of billboards, fences, gas stations, homes, signwriting and supermarkets, were placed between the covers of the National Film Board's publication *Canadian Picture Index*, a logical precedent, since the purpose of this government project was to reflect in pictures the daily lives of ordinary Canadians.⁴⁵ At least three volumes were projected in which different aspects of the human environment were to be documented by the

44. See Jeff Wall 1990. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1990, no plate numbers.

(left)
N.E. THING CO.
C- IDEAS, (gas stations)
Detail of prototype page.
photographs mounted on paper
22.5 x 28.5 cm each
Photo: Courtesy N.E. Thing Co.

45. The version in Iain Baxter's possession was the 1965 edition published by the Queen's Printer. He was inspired by the archivist's attention to detail, the presentation and the categorizations under which a pictorial history of the country had been developed. Also, see the layout of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972, pp. 43-47, where the Las Vegas Strip hotels, motels, wedding chapels and gas stations, are analyzed using similar pictorial analyses.

46. Wall has discussed the work of Rodney Graham from the ecological perspective, see Jeff Wall, "Into the Forest," in *Rodney Graham. Works from 1976 to 1994*. Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, Brussels: Yves Gevaert, and Chicago: Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1994, pp. 19-21. This essay was originally published in 1988 by the Vancouver Art Gallery. Indeed, both Graham's tree subjects and Wall's own work *The Pine on the Corner*, 1990 (Vancouver Art Gallery) were the subject of a contextual discussion on the occasion of the exhibition *Lost Illusions: Recent Landscape Art* at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1991. See Denise Oleksijczuk, "Nature in History: A Context for Landscape Art," *Lost Illusions: Recent Landscape Art*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1991, pp. 7-11.

47. Wall, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

most efficient technological means: photography and sound being the principal media. Obviously the photograph was an essential tool in this process. A project which had proved more manageable for N.E. Thing Co. was *North American Time Zone Photo-VSI Simultaneity, Oct. 18, 1970*, since its execution was shared among six artists: Harry Savage in Edmonton, Ken Lochhead in Winnipeg, Jack Chambers in London, Gerry Ferguson in Halifax, Christopher Pratt in Mount Carmel, Newfoundland and N.E. Thing Co. in North Vancouver.

By contrast, *Demonstration Forest*, 1966, a work never before exhibited, prefigures in an important way some of the environmental concerns these younger artists, including Wall, Arden and Rodney Graham, have since explored.⁴⁶ Iain and Ingrid Baxter's apparent devotion to ecology is exemplified in this series of twenty four hand coloured black and white photographs which remain as a commentary on one of their rest stops in northern Oregon while driving between Vancouver and Los Angeles. In looking at *Demonstration Forest* the viewer reacts to the ironies inherent in the painted signs bearing the nicknames of the trees, for example, the "Redwood Family", comprising "Junior", "Dad" and "Grandpa" (pages 38 & 39). At one extreme, this is obviously the trivialization of nature, yet at another it is intended to encourage the visitor to overcome the misanthropic associations typical of some roadside attractions and theme parks. This enclave of nature has been fashioned out of the natural habitat; pathways, signage, restrooms and a parking lot conceived as appendages to the *en route* traveller. The idea of a demonstration forest, however, is not foreign to the northwest, whose large wood producers have adopted the idea for environmental reasons as well as for the purposes of public relations. We are left, in the case of Rodney Graham's monumental photographic studies of trees, with an entirely different sensibility (right). His documentation of the tree is more in keeping with the discerning eye of the naturalist who has acquired a dispassionate yet respectful knowledge of the tree as a given member of its species. He photographs the tree with reverence as if to document fully and convey its history.

The pressures generated by the influx of new populations into British Columbia have created a demand for both greater numbers of and for more affordable, housing. Property development has transformed parts of the lower mainland and Vancouver Island into extended satellite or edge communities. Roy Arden among others has commented in his photographs on this irrepressible trend towards subdivision on the city's edges in a recent exhibition. In his photograph *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C.*, 1991, the chain saw has freshly cut what the bulldozer previously razed to the ground, leaving us with a potent image of defilement (page 40). Deliberating on the work of Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall once commented on the ecological impact of unrestrained development: "In this epoch, a tree standing self-consciously alone in the city would, better than any other monument or form of propaganda, evoke the environmental tragedy which indicts our economy, our culture, our social order."⁴⁷ Similarly, Arden's desolate construction sites, beautiful but spare in their abstraction, photographed on Vancouver's east side, in the city's suburbs or on Vancouver Island, are melancholic in what they signal to the viewer.



RODNEY GRAHAM
Stanley Park Cedar, No. 7, 1991
 colour photograph, printed from black and white negative on paper
 264.5 x 180.5 cm.
 Photo: Courtesy National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



N.E. THING CO.
Demonstration Forest, 1966, (2 details)
24 black and white photographs
20.3 x 25.4 cm. each.
Collection of N.E. Thing Co.



ROY ARDEN
Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C., 1991
 "C" print, 65.1 x 75.3 cm.
 Photo: Courtesy the artist.

The preparations that go into the development of the site of a subdivision are essentially about negation. Alexander Wilson, commenting on the defeated nature of the suburban construction site, writes: "A suburban housing development cannot pretend to look like the farm, or marsh, or forest it has replaced...for that would not correspond to popular ideas of progress and modernity, ideas based more on erasing a sense of locale than on working with it."⁴⁸ If such themes retain local significance for west coast artists, their concern with the broader environment confirms the dialectical relationship between nature and the social fabric of the city.

Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum and Roy Arden have each explored different facets of the city in a manner that is mindful of the discourse about art's social and ideological function. For those artists who reside within its limits, Vancouver is not only a tangible social context, but a distinct entity with its own history, geography, politics and culture, whose complexity has since emerged in the content of their work. The spatial dynamics of the downtown street where Wallace often focuses his attention hinge on the crosswalk or on the street intersection where the ebb and flow of pedestrian and automobile traffic is temporarily suspended; chance encounters (some staged manipulations if you prefer) engender their own dramatic force in Wallace's elevation of people in the street to the level of historical myth, as in his continuing series *My Heroes in the Street*. These are preoccupations which can be traced back to Wallace's formative period in the early 1970s. In Wall, this more benign approach is frequently contrasted with the presence of a surprising or arresting incident: within the context of the street a minor gesture is made to seem potentially threatening, while a staged incident takes on the character of melodrama. Amidst the panoramic suburban scene of *Eviction Struggle*, 1988, cibachrome light box, is the commotion of a family's eviction. If tragedy reigns supreme behind this scene of the suburban street, one is left to contemplate how the suburban lifestyle has been dealt a blow by this type of public humiliation.

Ken Lum, who was raised in Vancouver's Chinatown, offers yet another perspective on the city. He locates the heart of the city not in the "picture postcard" neighbourhoods of Shaughnessy Heights or Kerrisdale, but in the east end on Pender and Hastings. Characterized as one of the traditional working-class districts of Vancouver, which derives its reputation from its mix of immigrant population, low-income or itinerant workers and welfare recipients, the east end has risen and fallen with the fortune of the local and national economies. The social fabric of its neighbourhoods has been threatened by waves of unemployment, its storefronts have fallen to semi-neglect, and its inhabitants have become the victims of despair or despondency.⁴⁹ Unlike the explosive development of suburban housing on the fringe areas of the outer city – Richmond, Burnaby, New Westminister, Surrey, White Rock – the heart of the old eastside city is tempered by the struggle for survival. Ostensibly it is this which has been the subject of many recent works, a theme Lum has been mapping in his photographs since the mid 1980s. He continues to stage his photographs in the streets of the east end of the city, if only to dramatize the economically and racially diverse nature of its inhabitants. Although a retrospective look at his urban subjects indicates a critical concern with the effects of good or bad

48. Alexander Wilson, "Nature at Home. A Social Ecology of Postwar Landscape Design," *Border/Lines*, no. 22 (Summer 1991), p. 20.

49. West Hastings, for example, has maintained its stature but East Hastings has gradually declined—today several blocks are the city's Skid Row. See Harold Kalman, et al. *Exploring Vancouver. The Essential Architectural Guide*. Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1993, p. 55.

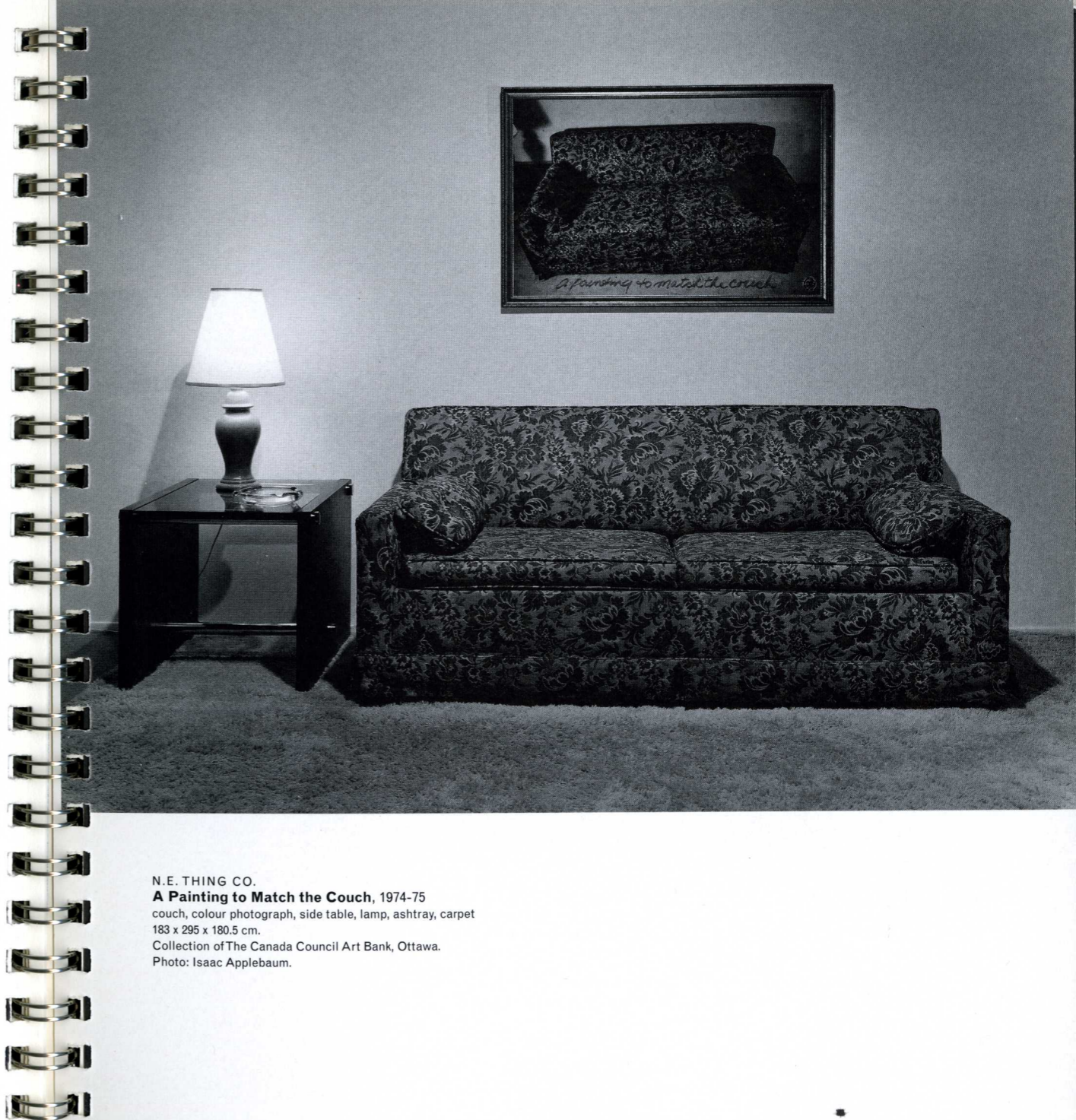
50. Thomas Crow, "Profane Illuminations, Social History and the Art of Jeff Wall," *Artforum*, v. XXXI, no. 6 (Feb. 1993), pp. 63-69.

government, for Lum the venerable traditions of civic mindedness are lost in a social misanthropy masquerading as power before poverty's endless cycle.

As with each of the Vancouver photoconceptualists Lum's production can be situated within the much broader historical debate concerning modernism and the transition to either late-modernism or post-modernism. An affinity exists, for example, between the 19th century genre subjects of the French Impressionists and Lum's concern with the itinerant or marginalized subject such as garbage pickers, Skid Row occupants, sex trade workers, tourists, and the like.⁵⁰ Although locale is important to Lum since he is unequivocal about his preference for staging his photographs in Vancouver's east end, the suburbs have little or no appeal for him. He close-crops his images either to eliminate superfluous background detail or to encourage the viewer to concentrate on the physiognomic traits of his subjects, which he poses in the near foreground. The panoramic landscape that characterizes Wall's repertoire of suburban studies is forsaken by Lum for the more intimate milieu of the street; the deep focus of Wall's lens gives way to the shallow plane of Lum's curbside subjects.

* * *

In contrast with those works which embrace the ecological dimension of their lives, perhaps freshest in their work from the late 1960s, N.E. Thing Co. was to maintain its hold over the serendipitous world of Pop culture. In September 1971 they produced a "Position Statement" in which they discussed the "transitioning" of the company with a greater emphasis on developing a financial base. It pledged itself "to generate funds by legitimate, highly imaginative and profitable business activity, in areas like food, clothing, shelter, liesure (sic.), and consultation, so as to support and accomplish the projects and concepts it wishes to achieve." The most important line was left to the end: "The object is not personal profit, but to develop a structure and method whereby products, functions and power can change directly the value systems of society." Emblematic perhaps of their own curiosity about the value we place in commodities *A Painting to Match the Couch*, 1974-75, comments obliquely on how we even dress our private domestic worlds with public show in mind (right). We might still be reminded that therein lies the ritual of the parlour, which before the modern era defined much of our social behaviour. This work addresses the question not only of art's relationship to kitsch, but the mundaneness of our lives in relation to the dictates of consumerism and the fetishism it inspires. The focus on such prize commodities as the couch (or, for that matter, art itself) is particularly telling about middle-class taste. Conscious of its own collusion in this process *A Painting to Match the Couch* puns the notion by replacing the painting with a photograph that slavishly reproduces all the elements within the installation: the couch, glass-topped side table, lamp, ashtray and off-white rug. If this type of self-reflexivity is territory previously visited in the work of Joseph Kosuth – *One in Three Chairs*, for example – conceivably the Baxters also ponder the reality of their own tastes in the pattern of the furniture before them. As with *Bagged Place* it is the act of consumption they foreground, but the irony in the



N.E. THING CO.
A Painting to Match the Couch, 1974-75
couch, colour photograph, side table, lamp, ashtray, carpet
183 x 295 x 180.5 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa.
Photo: Isaac Applebaum.



KEN LUM
Untitled Sculpture, 1987
 sofas, lamps, tables, size varies with installation.
 Installation view, Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago,
 May 6-June 7, 1987.
 Photo: Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

practice of buying art to match the furniture is undoubtedly connected to a conceit which runs the risk of "faux", or a cheapened, sense of luxury.

Interestingly, it is Ken Lum who recalls specifically that it was his mother's desire to furnish the family's Chinatown apartment after the model furniture displays in the city. This he recalls as an instrumental, if endearing, influence on his own furniture sculptures. In his earliest work, the "Furniture Sculptures" dating to the late 1970s, Lum began to reject the notion of art as a convention of the studio.⁵¹ In his new formal configurations using furniture the gallery became paramount for it enabled him to substitute one set of tools for another. He appropriated from the pool of mass-produced furniture units what amounted to be found elements for his minimalist-inspired configurations. He negates the furniture's practical function in favour of the formal synthesis which results from the display of repeated elements within his installation. If Lum's furniture sculptures at first appear marginal, they succeed within the tautology of art referencing as they do the canon of minimalist art. A simple concern with exchanging function for objectification allows Lum to displace furniture – couches, coffee tables, lamps – from the showroom into the gallery (left). Couches are rendered dysfunctional, upended or configured together in such a way as to become formal elements in a much larger assemblage of props in a minimalist arrangement. The spectacle of their modern lines, machine-like replication and uniform patterns is both celebrated and reviled – in the gallery these objects exchange one kind of commodification for another. The furniture store display is discomfiting because its familiar function is denied us – Lum's closed configurations are also designed to resist the viewer's temptation to see the work primarily in terms of "furniture", to get him or her beyond this essential reading.

If *A Painting to Match the Couch* posed the question of taste, it also talked about utility. There was something empowering about dislocating one set of criteria for another. The idea of exchanging the furniture showroom for another in the form of the gallery was N.E. Thing Co.'s way of punning middle-class propriety. The logical outcome is found in the *Eye Scream* Restaurant, which was conceived and designed by the Baxters as a restaurant-gallery. The restaurant's modern art deco design was complemented by displays from its other departments – Visual Sensitivity Information principally in the form of drawings, photographs, or cibachrome light boxes. Co-owners and employees alike were subsumed into the broader mythmaking enterprise. Although the *Restaurant Suite* series, notably *Co-Presidents of a Company with Egg on Their Faces*, 1977, promote the kind of self-effacing humour we often associate with "mugging" before the camera, Iain and Ingrid are again parodying the corporate image. In the process they debunk an entrenched system of hierarchical codes, public image-making, and, historically, even the conventions of portrait painting.

That photography is also one of the staples of advertising is not to be overlooked in the reading of both the restaurant's decor and the *Restaurant Suite*. For example, the presentation of large illuminated transparencies in wall-mounted frames suggests a keen awareness of how the advertiser's medium seduces the ordinary or mundane notion of the still life, as in the case of the enlarged image of "sunkissed"

51. Ken Lum, "On Furniture Sculpture," *Ken Lum*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Arts, 1990, unpaginated. Ken Lum was one student who came under the direction of Wall while studying biology at Simon Fraser University in the early 1980s; after completing an undergraduate degree in fine arts he later followed Wall to U.B.C., where he completed his M.F.A. in 1985.

52. Iain Baxter produced cibachrome light boxes which he mounted in customized steel frames as early as 1968; some of these were the subject of a small but instructive retrospective of photography from the year 1968 at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto in 1990. Although the cibachrome light box has been the trademark handle most readily associated with Jeff Wall's photo-based production since 1977, it is important to note that the Baxters were the founders in 1974 of N.E. Professional Photographic Display Labs Ltd., the largest cibachrome laboratory west of Toronto. Operated today as Key Colour Photo Labs by David Honey—with whom the Baxters had set up the original laboratory—and John Dunkley, it caters to Jeff Wall and many of Vancouver's artist/photographers.

(right)
N.E. THING CO.
Lunch in the River, 1976,
1st. version
cibachrome transparency, light box
Image: 152.4 x 121.9 cm.
Photo: Collection of N.E. Thing Co.

tomatoes that ran the length from floor to ceiling near the bar. Whether intended to rival the large mural photographs in the supermarket grocery display or the spectacle of the advertiser's illuminated boards found throughout North America, they both glorify and rupture the visual codes.⁵² Perhaps, the most unusual was the large-format *Lunch in the River* light box, 1976, a lush ode to the epicurean delights of nature in a rugged North Vancouver setting (right). Staged outdoors adjacent to their Riverside Drive home in the shallows of the Seymour river it shows the principal owners of the restaurant seated at a large banquet table – wine flows as freely as the water which cools their feet. There are sonorous echoes here of the sensuousness of nature, of earth, water and air coalescing before our eyes. The themes of the banquet, the picnic and outdoor pleasures resonate from across history in paintings from Giorgione to Watteau, Courbet to Manet, as they do here. The overtones of a counterculture, a legacy of the sixties, may still be felt in this quintessential image of secular communion. Installed originally on the ceiling of the *Eye Scream* restaurant it contributed to the spectacle of the restaurant environment with its size and the radiance of its backlit image. So too, the menu with its ironic references to Oysters Michelangelo, Cubist Shrimp and Group of Seven Snails.

On the walls of the restaurant were hung a rotating collection of images by N.E. Thing Co. including photographs from the *Restaurant Suite*. With titles such as *Owners of a Restaurant Piled High and Topped with Whipped Cream and Cherries*, 1977, (page 48) *Owners of a Restaurant Topped with Whipped Cream and Cherries* 1977, or *Co-President, N.E. Thing Co., Garnished with Fruit*, 1977, these challenge the cachet of food as pure nutrition, treating it in some cases as a sensuous extension of human nature, infused with the eroticism of worldly pleasure. How else should we read these figures who languish openly on beds of lettuce, or piled one on top of each other smothered in whipped cream and garnished with candied cherries? If there are parallels to be excavated from art history they are – as with Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, or Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1881 – inherently satirical. The perverse pleasures of Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Delights* would seem more in keeping with the underlying eroticism of *Lunch in the River*, yet conceivably the satiric elements also derive from Surrealism or the realm of cinema. The absurdity is carried to another extreme in the *Restaurant Suite* in the very literal interpretation given works such as *Co-Presidents of N.E. Thing Co. with Egg on Their Faces*, 1977, *Co-President, N.E. Thing Co., Wrapped with Bacon*, 1977, or *Co-President, N.E. Thing Co., as an Open Faced Sandwich*, 1977. Underscoring the satire is the contrast these images draw between business protocol and iconoclasm. In lampooning the convention of the corporate image the *Restaurant Suite* works find parallels with Ken Lum, who began his own process of mimicking commercial photography in the late 1970s; by the early 1980s Lum's efforts at deconstructing the corporate advertising image could be seen in his major series *Portrait Logos*.

If in the end *Eye Scream* failed the ultimate test, both the financial and personal drain also meant the demise of N.E. Thing Co. Blurring the line between art and business was one of N.E. Thing Co.'s goals, since it was consistently challenged by the prospect of achieving both critical and commercial success. The parody that





N.E. THING CO.
**Restaurant Suite—Owners of a
Restaurant Piled High and Topped with
Whipped Cream
and Cherries, 1977**
colour photograph, 39.5 x 50 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

surfaces in such photographic works as *Co-President*, *N.E. Thing Co.*, *Wrapped with Bacon*, 1977, or *Co-President of a Company Decorated with Fruit*, 1977, is indicative of the self-effacing humour the Baxters had thrived on through much of their career; it is doubtful that this attitude carried over into the commercial side of their operation since the Baxters were shrewd in the belief that they could market themselves no matter the concept.

* * *

But what of Ingrid's role specifically? Press clippings suggest that they were both equally articulate about their objectives. Although the perception remains that Iain was the principal spokesperson for N.E. Thing Co., Ingrid was a frequent contributor at press conferences, as when she participated with Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub and Pierre Théberge on the subject of "Visual Sensitivity Information, Communications and Ramifications" at the National Gallery in 1969. The fact is that, while she is listed as Vice-President at the time of the National Gallery exhibition it was only later, after N.E. Thing Co. incorporated in 1969, that both could legally assume the shared title of Co-President. Her inherent ability to engage and at times direct the proceedings is felt in the shrewdness and rigour of her views. Ingrid, who had excelled in the competitive world of synchronized swimming at the University of Idaho had put her efforts first into coaching and second, into teaching. A gifted pianist she completed her honours degree in Music with a mind to continuing her studies, but not before a year in Kyoto, Japan, and the challenge of raising two children. It was only later, after their return, that she was able to take up her studies again and certify as a teacher. In the late 1970s she completed a Master of Physical Education at U.B.C. which enabled her to capitalize on her interest in physical education, allowing her to develop swim programmes for the physically challenged in the City of Vancouver.

Ingrid Baxter was by her own account and to Iain's credit, an equal partner in N.E. Thing Co. at a time when equality between the sexes and opportunity was even rarer than it is in North American society today. Society may have viewed their working relationship differently, given the pressures she took on in raising their two children, but in her view the supporting role of mother was as significant as the role of artist. She could be fulfilled by either role. By the late 1960s her activities within N.E. Thing Co. were more apparent. Although it is surprising she is not credited in the report N.E. Thing Co. generated on the occasion of their National Gallery show in 1969, her involvement was clear enough. She modelled some of the "wearables" which N.E. Thing Co. had devised for the public. She conducted interviews and could be found in the executive suite offices. Importantly, she is acknowledged later in the same year as having participated in the project which took them to the Arctic Circle in the Northwest Territories, when she is credited with having documented a 3 1/4 mile walk around the town of Inuvik.⁵³ Lucy Lippard recalls one of the works executed on the afternoon of September 26 as by Ingrid, who was busy exchanging water between the Seymour river and the Mackenzie, "adding the first, subtracting the second." She

53. Iain Baxter, *N.E. Thing Co. Ltd* ("Blue Book"), unpaginated, see 1969: *Circular Walk Inside Arctic Circle Around Inuvik, N.W.T.*

54. Lucy R. Lippard, "Art Within the Arctic Circle," *The Hudson Review*, no. 22 (Winter, 1969-70), p. 668.

also painted a tree white to simulate the fall of early snow. If many of these activities were executed in the vein of spontaneous interaction, their approach was informed by sound ecological practices. There is much evidence to suggest that they were pioneers in the types of activities which researched the intricate balances between living organisms and the natural environment.⁵⁴ If Iain generated many of their concepts, Ingrid assisted in bringing the larger project to fruition and participated in its execution or completion. There is every evidence to suggest that their collaboration flourished once the pressures of raising children had lessened, after all this was the responsibility which society had handed to her. It was not unusual for the whole family, the children too, to be included in either the process or the production of works. They also travelled as a family unit. Perhaps no project states their view about the symbolic value of family more clearly than *And They Had Issue*, an installation in which they exhibited their son Tor and daughter Erian on pedestals as part of an N.E. Thing Co. exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University in 1973. With a renewed mandate the Co-Presidency evolved to the point where they could take on different challenges, including the pursuit of genuine commercial interests such as N.E. Professional Photographic Display Labs Ltd., the *Vancouver Magazine*, and *Eye Scream* Restaurant. By 1976-77 they were devoting much of their energy to the development of their business project at the *Eye Scream* Restaurant. This strengthens the author's conviction that Ingrid's role intensified with time, and likely benefitted from a general shift in attitude which brought about the greater acceptance that the collaboration was genuine, that she was regarded as an equal partner. Their company model evolved with time as no doubt did their collective and individual roles within the course of its varied events. If its transformation away from a conceptually-driven entity motivated by success in the art world demanded her fuller participation, then the added responsibilities of handling such a diverse career would have been met. A letter dated October 4, 1977, to members of the public who were chosen at random from the Vancouver telephone book begins: "On December 11, 1977, we (Iain and Ingrid Baxter of the N.E. Thing Co.) will be opening an important exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which will be concerned with the subject of 'people and language.'"⁵⁵ In many respects this shift back to working with individual people in a group dynamic could be attributed to her influence, since that aspect of N.E. Thing Co. appealed to her warmth, her humanity and her genuine appreciation of interacting with people on their own level. These are some of the attributes which remain as a legacy from her interest in general human nature, or the schooled equivalent of knowledge gained in areas such as sports psychology or human motivation as part of her formal education.

In fact, their enterprising ways were most often anchored in the routine of their daily lives, and the entrepreneurial vision which later found them motivated to develop businesses under the aegis of N.E. Thing Co. came out of a strong instinct for survival. The adroit nature of their approach to communications was a reflection of its universal appeal, accepting as they were of their daily lives and an undying commitment to eliminating the codified distinctions between high and low culture. It exerted a profound influence on the subsequent generation of Vancouver artists, both in

spirit and in practice. N.E. Thing Co. challenged the *status quo* with its modes of cultural or commercial exchange, it also showed the advantages of embracing art and technology. The confusion may well have been about how to read or interpret the activities of N.E. Thing Co. – the self-effacing public persona of the artist and the private entrepreneur have, over time, become fused in the case of the Baxters.

Derek Knight

55. See *N.E. Thing Co. Another 2 Projects*, unpaginated.



Installation view of the exhibition at Oakville Galleries (Centennial Gallery)
Photo: Issac Applebaum.

EXHIBITION LIST

WORKS BY N. E. THING CO.

(Height precedes width.)

Demonstration Forest, 1966.
24 black and white photographs
20.3 x 25.4 cm. each.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

180° Vertical Landscape (Winter), 1967.
Slide projection, 60 35mm. slides, map,
pencil on paper
91.4 x 61 cm
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

Edge, 1967-1995.
Photo transparency, light box
76.2 x 121.9 x 15.2 cm.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

View, 1967-1995.
Photo transparency, light box
76.2 x 121.9 x 15.2 cm.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

A Portfolio of Piles, 1968.
Photo-offset lithographs
framed 99.5 x 241 cm.
Collection Art Gallery of Ontario,
Toronto. Gift of David P. Silcox and
Linda Intaschi, 1990.

A Portfolio of Piles, 1968.
Photo-offset lithographs
16.5 x 24 cm. each.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

Ruins, 1968-1990.
Cibachrome transparency, light box
40.6 x 56.8 x 12.7 cm.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

Reflected Landscape, 1968-1981.
Map, hand-tinted silver print, watercolour
and graphite on paper 96.2 x 91.1 cm.
Cibachrome transparency, 64.4 x 22 cm.
Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
Purchase 1980.

**1/4 Mile Landscape
(Prince Edward Island)**, 1969.
Hand-tinted silver prints, map, watercolour and
pencil on paper. 4 parts, each 65.9 x 78.7 cm.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

**Inactive Verbs – Thinking, Sensing,
Reflecting, Feeling, Planning, Pondering,
Wondering**, 1969.
7 hand-tinted black and white photographs
39 x 49 cm. each
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

**A President of a Company in Ways of
Viewing**, 1969.
Colour photographs
93.5 x 112.5 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

A President of a Company Blowing Bubbles,
1969.
Kodak type "C" prints
151 x 107 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

**Trans-VSI No. 10,
(Five minutes of paper from this line on to
where paper is torn from machine)**, 1969-70.
Telex paper and plexiglas
33 x 26.7 x 7.6 cm.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

**North American Time Zone Photo VSI
Simultaneity, Oct. 18, 1970**, 1970.
18 photo-offset lithographs
44.5 x 44.5 cm. each.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

**Art in America
(P+L+P+L+P=VSI-VSI Formula No. 10)**,
1970.
Photo-offset lithograph on wove paper, printed
text on calendered wove paper in a plastic
envelope, 35mm. slide in a plastic envelope
75.4 x 52.7 cm.
Collection Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Milrad, 1975.

A Painting to Match the Couch, 1974-75.
Installation: couch, colour photograph, side
table, lamp, ashtray, carpet
183 x 295 x 180.5 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

Lunch in the River, 1976, 1st version.
Cibachrome transparency, light box
152.4 x 121.9 x 17.8 cm.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

**Restaurant Suite – Co-Presidents of N.E.
Thing Co. with Egg on their Faces**, 1977.
Colour photograph
50 x 39.5 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

**Restaurant Suite – Co-Presidents of N.E.
Thing Co. on a Bed of Lettuce**, 1977.
Colour photograph
39.5 x 50 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

**Restaurant Suite – The Owners of a
Restaurant Piled High with Whipped Cream
and Cherries**, 1977.
Colour photograph
39.5 x 50 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

**Restaurant Suite – Owners of a Restaurant
Topped with Whipped Cream and Cherries**,
1977. Colour photograph
50 x 39.5 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

**Restaurant Suite – Co-President,
N.E. Thing Co., Wrapped with Bacon**, 1977.
Colour photograph
50 x 39.5 cm.
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank.

SUPPORT MATERIAL

Pierre Théberge, *The N.E. Thing Co.: Take
Anything*, 1969. Original black and white 16mm.
film transferred to video tape, approx. 9 mins.
duration. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Original slides from *Art in America* cover,
May-June 1969.
Collection of N.E.Thing Co.

For a full bibliography and resumé on N.E.Thing Co. consult Marie L. Fleming, *Baxter? Any Choice Works, 1965-70*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1982.
For a compilation of contemporary writings about N.E.Thing Co., see *You Are Now in the Middle of a N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*. Vancouver: U.B.C.
Fine Arts Gallery, 1993. Additional archival material can be found at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and at Art Metropole in Toronto.

Oakville Galleries Acknowledgements

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Derek Knight is an Assistant Professor at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario. He has been on faculty in the Department of Film Studies, Dramatic and Visual Arts since 1985, where he teaches 19th and 20th-century European, Canadian and American art history, contemporary art theory, and interdisciplinary studio with a focus on communications, television and video culture. Knight has also developed a profile as an independent curator whose recent projects include *Utopia: Islands* for Rodman Hall National Exhibition Centre, St. Catharines and *Franc Petric: The Abattoir Project* for Galerie Optica, Montreal.

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